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Difficult Circumstances: Situationism and Ability

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Abstract

Certain aspects of our situations often influence us in significant and negative ways, without our knowledge (call this claim “situationism”). One possible explanation of their influence is that they affect our abilities. In this paper, we address two main questions. Do these situational factors rid us of our abilities to act on our sufficient reasons? Do situational factors make it more difficult for us to exercise our abilities to act for sufficient reasons? We argue for the answer ‘sometimes’ to both these questions. We then explore the consequences of this view for moral responsibility.

Keywords

Situationism, Circumstances, Abilities, Moral Responsibility

1. Introduction

It is now widely recognized that the presence of different situational factors can affect our behavior in surprising, and sometime negative ways. Often, we are not aware that our behavior is so influenced. What’s more, situational factors cause us to act in certain ways without providing us with *reasons* to act in such ways (or, at most, they provide only weak reasons). These claims capture what we mean by the thesis of *situationism* (other definitions of this term may have stronger claims in mind than ours). The relationship between situationism and various important philosophical topics has been explored by many thinkers. For example, Doris (2002) and Miller (2013, 2014) argue that the situationist data cast doubt on the idea that humans have virtues or vices. Further, Nelkin (2005), Nahmias (2007) and Vargas (2013) explore the extent to which the situational factors affect, respectively, our freedom, autonomy and moral responsibility. In Herdova and Kearns (2015) we link situationism with an interesting type of moral luck, and in Herdova and Kearns (2017) we examine how our situations may affect the extent to which we are reasons-responsive.

In this paper, we explore how situationism affects *agents’ abilities*. In particular, we shall address the following two questions. Do situational factors (such as those studied in situationist experiments) *rid* us of our abilities to act on our sufficient reasons? Do situational factors make it *more difficult* for us to exercise our abilities to act for sufficient reasons?

We structure the paper as follows. In section 2, we present some relevant data concerning the impact of situational factors on our acting for sufficient reasons. In essence, there is good evidence that the majority of people fail to act on their sufficient reasons when exposed to certain situational factors. In section 3, we introduce two main ways in which appealing to agents' abilities may explain the situationist data: situational cues may *eliminate* our abilities or make them *harder to exercise*. In section 4, we argue that situational factors do *not* render agents *generally unable* to act on their sufficient reasons, but that certain agents may not be *free* to act on their sufficient reasons. In section 5 we argue that situational factors sometimes make it *more difficult* for us to exercise our abilities to act on our sufficient reasons. After considering the consequences of this for moral responsibility in section 6, we end on a somewhat brighter note in section 7, with the suggestion that some situational factors make it *easier* to exercise our abilities to act on sufficient reasons.

2. Situationist Data

There are many different types of situationist experiments. Below we introduce the results of some such significant experiments which feature sufficient reasons (seeing as it is the abilities to act on those reasons with which we are concerned).¹ By "sufficient reasons" we understand those reasons which entail obligations: if S has a sufficient reason to A, S *ought* to A.

One notable group of experiments documents the so-called *bystander* effect, according to which the likelihood of one's intervening in an emergency situation depends, in part, on how many other people witness this emergency situation. Specifically, the more people present in an emergency situation, the less likely it is that any of those people will intervene. For instance, Darley and Latané (1968) conducted an experiment where the participants witnessed an (apparent) medical emergency (they overheard a staged epileptic attack). Out of those who believed that the attack was overheard also by *four* other people, only 31% offered assistance in the relevant timeframe (before the person having the apparent attack was cut off after 125 seconds). However, the number of subjects who intervened was significantly higher in a condition where the subject believed he was *the only one* to overhear the attack; in this experimental condition, 85% of the subjects intervened.

1. In section 3, we explore why such abilities are particularly interesting from a philosophical perspective.

Latané and Darley (1968) also tested for the bystander effect in a non-medical emergency situation (smoke filling up a room). Out of those who witnessed the smoke *on their own*, 18 out of 24 subjects reported the smoke. In trials where the experimental subjects were accompanied by *two* passive confederates, only one in 10 subjects reported the smoke. In both of the above experiments, whether the subjects helped or otherwise intervened largely depended on their being accompanied or not.

Whether one provides help or intervenes in pressing situations seems to be influenced by situational factors other than the number of people present. For instance, in the *Good Samaritan* experiment conducted by Darley and Batson (1973), seminary students were asked to give a talk in a nearby building. On their way to give the lecture, they came across a person in apparent need of medical attention. Some students were told they were running late; only 10% of the students in this group offered assistance. On the other hand, out of those subjects in a low-hurry condition, who were told they had enough time, 63% of the subjects helped. The students did also differ, aside from how much time they had, in the content of their lecture: some were going to talk on the parable of the Good Samaritan and some on job prospects. However, unlike the hurry factor, the lecture content did not to make a significant difference with regards to whether they offered assistance or not.

One final set of experiments we will mention here is *Milgram's obedience experiments* (1963, 1974). These focused on studying subjects' behavior under the influence of authority. Subjects, however, believed that they were taking part in a learning experiment and were asked to deliver apparent electric shocks to "learners" upon them providing wrong or no answers to the relevant questions. The experimental subjects used a range of 30 levers for this purpose, each associated with a different degree of shock (the highest apparently being 450 volts). In Experiment 1, approximately two-thirds of the subjects complied with the instructions of the experimental confederate, and continued to deliver shocks *all the way* (that is, pulling all the levers, including the one delivering the highest degree of shock). The subjects continued to increase the voltage despite the fact that after the 20th question, the confederate apparently receiving the shocks would bang on the wall and then stop providing answers.

In Milgram's Experiment 11, subjects were free to choose what levels of shock to deliver (the confederate emphasized that they could use any such levels). The vast majority of the subjects delivered the lowest shocks when the choice of shock severity was left up to them. This indicates that the presence of the experimental confederate acting as an authority figure played a significant part in whether subjects delivered high

degrees of shocks to the learners. The obedience experiments were partially replicated by Burger (2009) who found that “obedience rates in the 2006 replication were only slightly lower than those” in Milgram’s original experiments (2009, 1).

While the above list only provides us with a relatively small sample of the situationist experiments, it gives us a good indication of the impact that some (normatively irrelevant) situational cues may have on our behavior. What we may do (or refrain from doing) in different scenarios largely depends on the presence of arbitrary situational factors (such as being in a hurry, being accompanied by people, or being asked by authority figures to act in certain ways, and many others).

3. Situationism and the Ability to Respond to Sufficient Reasons

The situationist data suggest that, due to the influence of situational factors, people very often fail to act on their sufficient reasons (i.e., those reasons which entail obligations to perform actions). *No one* should pull all the levers in the obedience experiments, and yet many do (because they are firmly asked to do so). *Everyone* who witnesses the apparent emergencies in the bystander experiments should alert someone, yet many do not (because they are accompanied). *Every* seminarian should help the stranger in the Good Samaritan experiment, yet almost all of those in a hurry do not. These results very plausibly generalize to people outside experimental scenarios, given the strength of the data, the fact that the experimental subjects were assigned their groups on a random basis, and the fact that these subjects were not chosen for the experiments on the basis of their susceptibility to situational factors. That is, the data above (and myriad other data from the situationist literature) strongly suggest that all of us are very often significantly affected by the presence of various situational factors. These factors frequently *prevent* us from acting in ways we *ought* to act.²

But how might the situational factors often prevent us from acting on our sufficient reasons? Most obviously, we may wonder whether situational factors such as those above affect agents’ *abilities*. One explanation of why people *don’t* respond to sufficient reasons is that the presence of certain situational factors makes it *more challenging* for them to do so (resulting in, ultimately, many people failing to do so). Even more worrying is the possibility that due to situational factors, people *can’t* act on

2. Some may claim that the subjects of the above experiments do *not* have sufficient reasons to help/alert authorities/etc., because no one is *really* in medical need, there is no fire, etc. This claim is highly questionable (shouldn’t we act in the face of *possible* medical need, potential danger, etc.?), but even if it is right, the experiments show us how people would act when faced with actual sufficient reasons.

their sufficient reasons. That is, perhaps situational factors *take away* our ability to act on our sufficient reasons.³ This is in part what concerns Dana Nelkin (2005):

many of [the experimental results] seem problematic because the subjects in them don't seem to be acting for good reasons, or at least their behavior raises a question about whether they are. And further, the way in which the subjects seem to proceed raises a question about whether they *can* act for good reasons—in some important sense of “can.” (Nelkin 2005, 200-201)

Manuel Vargas suggests (2013) that situationism shows that we have various *capacities* (to act on reasons, to assess reasons, etc.) only in certain situations—situational factors can rid us of such capacities (and thus related abilities). Vargas contemplates the suggestion that, while this may be so, our *basic* capacities (to respond to reasons, etc.) remain constant across situations. To this he says:

Even if our basic capacities are stable across contexts, our abilities to exercise them vary by circumstance... (Vargas 2013, 334)

This certainly seems to be an explicit commitment to the idea that situational factors may rid us of abilities (Vargas later concludes that it is at least a significant possibility that some subjects in certain experiments, such as the Good Samaritan Experiment, “suffered a loss of free will” (2013, 339) precisely because the relevant situational factors may undermine subjects’ reason-related abilities).

Indeed, the idea that this is what situational factors do is worth exploring in detail. One reason to take these hypotheses seriously is that they are relevant to questions of moral responsibility: if situationism shows that some of our abilities are strongly affected by situational factors, perhaps we ought to reassess our moral practices of praise and blame. Susan Wolf thinks of both freedom and responsibility as requiring the ability to act on the True and the Good. Wolf takes this to entail that “an agent is responsible if and only if the agent can do the right thing for the right reasons” (Wolf 1990, 68). If situational factors strip us of our ability to act on sufficient reasons (which we take to be at least roughly equivalent to “right reasons”), then, on Wolf’s

3. Of course, the data do not suggest that agents influenced by situational factors are unable to do otherwise than *any* action they perform (or that every ability of the agents’ is harder to exercise). For all the data show, a subject in the Milgram experiment is free to pull the lever with his left hand, or instead with his right; a hurrying seminarian may be able to run to his destination or merely walk quickly. What is of interest is whether situational factors adversely affect agents’ abilities to act on sufficient reasons.

picture, they also strip us of our freedom and our responsibility. A plausible extension of Wolf's view is that, the more difficult it is for an agent to exercise her ability to act on her sufficient reasons, the less morally responsible she is for failing to do so. In what follows we argue that situational factors do indeed sometimes rid agents of the ability to act on sufficient reasons (section 4), and that situational factors sometimes make exercising these abilities more difficult (section 5). We examine the implications of these claims for moral responsibility in section 6.

4. Do Situational Factors Eliminate Abilities?

Let us start with the worry that we might lack the relevant abilities altogether. Take, for instance, the ability to respond to a sufficient reason to help. One extreme version of the worry is that situationism shows that *everyone* lacks the ability to respond to sufficient reasons to help in what may be a wide range of circumstances—those which involve certain salient environmental factors. However, the data do not support this concern. The response of any select group of people in the aforementioned experiments, and indeed in situationist experiments across the board, is far from uniform. Consider, again, the Good Samaritan experiment. The data for this experiment do not show that *all* agents lack the ability to respond to their sufficient reason to help. Recall that even in the high-hurry condition, there are still agents (10% of the group) who *do* offer to help. So, it is not the case that the relevant situational factors in this scenario erase everyone's ability to respond to such sufficient reasons.

A more plausible worry one might have is that the data support the claim that a *significant number* of people, in certain situations, lack the ability to respond to sufficient reasons, due to the influence of situational factors. If this is true of *experimental subjects*, it is most likely true of *us*—many of us lack the ability to respond to sufficient reasons in certain situations.

4.1 Situational Factors and Accounts of Abilities

Though the above hypothesis, if true, would explain why many people don't respond to sufficient reasons, it is not obviously the best explanation available. The situationist data, in essence, highlight that people's behavior in the face of similar situational factors often conforms to certain patterns—the data do not on their own imply that these patterns track the limits of our abilities. Indeed, there is some obvious evidence that subjects who fail to act on their sufficient reasons due to situational factors *can* act on such reasons. For example, subjects who do not help are not

thwarted in their attempts to help—they don't even try to help. They are not physically incapacitated by their situations, nor overcome with irresistible desires. The evidence concerning what they ought to do is not cleverly hidden from them—for example, the seminarians have a clear view of the person sitting at the side of the road; the Milgram subjects receive sufficient auditory and/or visual feedback indicating the learner's distress. Though we cannot *conclusively* rule out that many subjects are unable to respond to sufficient reasons in specific situations, the evidence for this (from the situationist data) initially seems lacking.⁴

We should not dismiss the claim that situational factors rid us of our abilities to act on our sufficient reasons simply on the basis of the above considerations. After all, the thesis that situational factors render many of us *unable* to act on our sufficient reasons can be adequately assessed only once we are clear what we mean by "able". Few would deny that we retain (in the face of adverse factors) the *general ability* to act on the sufficient reasons we have. Just as a person locked in a small room may still have the skill, know-how, physical capacity, and willingness to drive a car, and thus in some sense *is able* to drive a car (i.e., has the general ability to drive a car), there is a clear sense in which she currently *cannot*. Given our interest in moral responsibility, and whether situationism undermines it, the most obvious way to interpret the claim that situational factors eliminate the *ability* to act on sufficient reasons is that they eliminate the *freedom* to act on sufficient reasons. Certainly the person locked in her room is not *free* to drive a car.

Do situational factors rid a significant number of us of the freedom to act on sufficient reasons? The considerations we mention above (e.g. these factors do not physically incapacitate us, nor produce irresistible desires in us, etc.) is not conclusive evidence that they do not rid us of such freedom. Perhaps—some might say—these factors leave us with our *general* ability to act on sufficient reason, but eliminate our *freedom-level* ability to do so. In what follows, we examine various understandings of freedom-level ability, with the aim of understanding whether situational factors may strip us of the freedom-level ability to act on sufficient reasons.

One popular understanding of the freedom to do otherwise is the so-called "conditional analysis" (see, for example, Ayer (1954), Bok (1998)). Though the details differ, this analysis states:

4. Indeed, that some people *do* respond to sufficient reasons in situations where most don't is some evidence that even the people who do not respond to the relevant reasons *could have done so*.

S has the (freedom-level) ability to A if and only if S would A if S tried/
chose/intended to A.

Though this analysis has become less popular since its heyday, similar analyses in terms of dispositions (rather than counterfactuals) have recently been propounded. Thus Michael Fara (2008) claims:

S has the ability to A in circumstances C iff she has the disposition to A when, in circumstances C, she tries to A. (Fara 2008, 848)

Kadri Vihvelin proposes a similar account of ability, but also believes that a counterfactual analysis of dispositions, along the lines of the one defended by David Lewis (1997), may be given. Combining her dispositional account of ability with a Lewisian account of dispositions, Vihvelin (2004) arrives at the following analysis of ability:

Revised Conditional Analysis of Ability: S has the ability at time t to do X iff, for some intrinsic property or set of properties B that S has at t, for some time t' after t, if S chose (decided, intended, or tried) at t to do X, and S were to retain B until t', S's choosing (deciding, intending, or trying) to do X and S's having of B would jointly be an S-complete cause of S's doing X. (Vihvelin 2004, 438)

The details of Vihvelin's account (or indeed Fara's) need not concern us here. The pertinent point is that such accounts share an important similarity—they understand the ability to do something as related to a (hypothetical) *attempt* to do it. Very roughly-speaking, on each of these accounts, an agent is free to perform an action if (but not only if) it is true that, if the agent were to *try* to perform this action, the agent would successfully manifest her disposition to perform it.

At first blush, it seems clear on these accounts of (freedom-level) ability that many of those situationist agents who do not act on their sufficient reasons to help someone *could have* so acted. For instance, it seems plausible that (many) subjects in Milgram's experiments would have refrained from (seemingly) shocking someone *had they tried*. Many or most (if not all) seminary students in a hurry would have helped the prone figure *had they attempted to do so*. After all, the situations that the subjects find themselves in do not feature obstacles which would likely make such attempts

unsuccessful—acting in these ways in such situations does not require unsurmountable amount of either physical or psychological strength.⁵

May we conclude, then, that on such accounts of freedom-level ability, situational factors do not remove agents' abilities to act on their sufficient reasons? There is reason to be cautious about concluding this. Recall that our main question is this: are agents who are adversely affected by situational factors free to act on their sufficient reasons? Given the above analyses of freedom to do something, this question becomes (roughly): would agents who are adversely affected by situational factors manifest a disposition to act on their sufficient reasons were they to try to act on their sufficient reasons? Even though it may be true that subjects would, for example, help someone were they to try to do so, it does not follow that they would act on their sufficient reasons were they to try act on their sufficient reasons (even if what they had sufficient reason to do is to help someone). To illustrate this point, consider the following possibility. Situational factors (sometimes) render us unaware of our sufficient reasons (and of the fact that we are unaware of them). Thus were we to try to act on our sufficient reasons, we would (sometimes) fail to do so (because we would instead unknowingly act on the basis of things which are *not* sufficient reasons). This is so even though, were we to try to help the person in need, we would succeed in so doing (because, were we to try to help the person in need, we would perforce be aware of his existence!). In essence, then, given that we accept the above accounts of freedom-level ability, if situational factors prevent us *knowing* our sufficient reasons, then they also render us unfree to act on them (whereas, if situational factors do *not* prevent our knowing our sufficient reasons, they do *not* render us unfree to act on them).

The above dispositional/conditional account at best leaves it open, then, whether situational factors remove our freedom to act on our sufficient reasons (depending on whether such factors render us ignorant of our sufficient reasons). But we may, of

5. Might someone claim that the subjects adversely affected by situational factors lack the *disposition* to, for example, help someone in need? Thus, though the subjects *would* help were they to try, this is only because the closest possible world in which they try is also one in which they have the disposition to help. If this is right, then on dispositional accounts such as Fara's and Vihvelin's, they are *not* free to act on their sufficient reasons to help. But we have already argued that the subjects have the *general* ability to help. This general ability is, in essence, a disposition to help on the basis of sufficient reasons. On dispositional accounts of (freedom-level) ability, an agent is *free* to help if they are thus disposed and are placed in the right circumstances. Roughly-speaking, a circumstance is right if, were the agent to try to help, they would manifest their disposition to help. Such circumstances obtain, we have argued, even when agents are adversely influenced by situational factors.

course, reject such accounts. One obvious reason we might worry about these accounts is that situational factors may render agents unable to even *try* otherwise than they do, in which case they plausibly cannot *do* other than they do either (an implication such accounts seem to deny). Another worry is that the above accounts are clearly compatibilist-friendly—that is, these accounts allow that *determinism* does not rule out the ability to act otherwise.⁶ This is, to say the least, a controversial assumption. Let us now consider, then, an incompatibilist account of ability and its relation to the situational data.

One who rejects compatibilism (i.e., an incompatibilist) is more likely to accept something like the following account of freedom-level ability:

S has the (freedom-level) ability at t to A if and only if it is compatible with the laws of nature and past up until t that S As.

Do the situationist data cast doubt on our ability to act on sufficient reasons conceived in this way? Not as far as we can see. It is entirely consistent with the data that the choices the subjects make, the best judgments they make, and the considerations that occur to them, are all undetermined. (In other words, it is compatible with the laws of nature and the past up until the relevant time (e.g. the time of choice, judgment, etc.) that subjects make *different* choices, best judgments, etc.) Thus even those subjects who fail to act on their sufficient reasons might act on those sufficient reasons in a possible world with the same past and laws of nature as this world, which is (according to the above incompatibilist account) sufficient for them having the freedom-level ability to act on a sufficient reason.

This is easy enough to see. Take, for example, the Darley and Latané (1968) bystander experiment, in which subjects overheard an apparent epileptic-like fit. Someone who believes the subjects' choices were undetermined in these experiments may hypothesize that there was around an 85% objective probability of the unaccompanied subjects choosing to help, while the probability of the subjects who believed that the attack was overheard by four other people choosing to help was around 31%. This would nicely explain why 85% of the former chose to help, and only 31% of the latter so chose. Of course, it is far too simplistic to judge the objective probabilities of a subject helping from the percentage of those in his group that helped. Still, the point is that the hypothesis is perfectly consistent with the data (indeed, not simply *consistent* with it, but one possible explanation of it).

6. Determinism is the thesis that the past and the laws of nature entail every truth.

We should not, however, conclude from the above that the incompatibilist can unproblematically accept that situationist factors pose no threat to our freedom. First, such considerations simply show that the situationist data are *in harmony* with the presence of indeterminism—it does not (and cannot) show that situational factors do not in fact determine agents' behavior. Second, and more importantly, there is good reason for incompatibilists to reject the simple account of freedom-level ability given above. Even if the performance of a certain action is compatible with the past and the laws, it does not follow that the agent is free to perform this action. If, at *t*, an agent has no idea how to *A* and is unable to voluntarily or intentionally discover how to *A*, she is not free at *t* to *A* after *t*. It may still be compatible with the past and the laws up until time *t* that she *As* after *t*, however, because it may be compatible with the past and laws that she *accidentally* learns, after *t*, how to *A*. This suggests that the incompatibilist account of freedom-level ability must be modified roughly as follows:

S has the (freedom-level) ability at *t* to *A* if and only if it is compatible with the laws of nature and past up until *t* that *S As* and *S* knows at *t* how to *A* (or is able intentionally to discover how to *A*).

Just as with the dispositional/conditional account of freedom-level ability, epistemic considerations prove relevant to determining whether situational factors remove our freedom to act on sufficient reasons *as this freedom is thought of by the incompatibilist*. If situational factors render us unaware of our sufficient reasons (or that we have them), they plausibly also prevent us from knowing how to act on them, and thus render us unfree to act on them.

Indeed, these kinds of considerations suggest an argument that is independent of whatever account of freedom-level ability we accept that situational factors can and do prevent our being free to act on our sufficient reasons. To this argument we now turn.

4.2 Situationism, Abilities, and Ignorance

In this section we present what we take to be the best argument for the claim that situational factors remove our freedom to act on sufficient reasons. Roughly, the idea is that situational factors (sometimes) render us *unaware* of our sufficient reasons. If an agent is unaware of her sufficient reasons, she cannot act on them. So, though she may have the *general* ability to act on her sufficient reasons, she is not *free* to do so (i.e., she lacks the freedom-level ability) due to lacking certain relevant knowledge (of her sufficient reasons). What should we make of this argument? This initial version has two premises. First, that situational factors prevent our being aware of sufficient

reasons. Second, when we are so unaware, we are unable to act on such reasons. We shall explore each premise in turn (and, in so doing, formulate a more sophisticated version of the argument [in 4.2.2]).

4.2.1 Awareness and Unawareness of Sufficient Reasons

Are the subjects in the discussed situationist experiments aware of their sufficient reasons? For obvious reasons, we shall focus on those subjects who *fail* to act on their sufficient reasons due to the influence of situational factors. These include subjects who do not offer medical assistance when it is needed (due to their being in a hurry), fail to report an emergency (due to their being accompanied by others), and deliver apparently lethal electric shocks (due to their being asked to do so by an authority figure). Do these subjects fail to *recognize* their sufficient reasons, or do they recognize but fail to *react* to these reasons? Two extreme hypotheses are available. One is that the situationist subjects who, due to the relevant factors, fail to act on their sufficient reasons, do so because they *always* fail to recognize their sufficient reasons. The other is that such agents *always* recognize their sufficient reasons, yet fail to act on them regardless. Below we suggest that the available data, based on agents' subjective reports, do not support either of the extreme hypotheses. In essence, sometimes situational factors affect our *recognition* of reasons, and sometimes they affect our *reacting* to them.

First, it should be noted that whether or not experimental subjects recognize their sufficient reasons is difficult to settle due to methodological issues. Not all situationist experiments have relevant post-experiment interviews, and those that do are often not detailed enough. This is particularly important (and problematic) given that a failure to recognize a reason might occur in different ways. It may be the case that the subjects fail to recognize the relevant reason as a *fact*. For example, subjects might fail to recognize a slumped person who appears to be in distress as *needing help*. Further, subjects may fail to recognize that the relevant fact is a *reason* to act; for example, they might fail to recognize that the fact that a man is in need of medical attention is a reason for the subject to help. Lastly, it may be that while the subjects do recognize a certain fact as a reason to act, they do not recognize this as a *sufficient* reason to act. So, while the subject might recognize that the fact that there is someone who appears to be in need of medical attention is indeed a reason to help, the subject might not recognize that it is a *sufficient* reason—as something she *ought* to act on.

Another problem concerns the reliability of self-reports. We might expect some unintentional confabulation (given that subjects are asked to report on their attitudes

after—possibly highly charged—events). Intentional confabulation is a problem too since subjects may attempt to rationalise or hide what could be viewed as a socially unacceptable behavior (neglecting to offer help, delivering apparently painful shocks etc.).

While keeping in mind the problems concerning reliability, we can extrapolate a number of hypotheses about subjects' recognition of their sufficient reasons from the data. In the bystander experiment that concerned reporting the presence of smoke, some subjects seemingly failed to interpret the relevant reason as even a fact. When the subjects were asked by the interviewer if they encountered any difficulties while in the waiting room, most subjects mentioned the smoke. They were then further prompted to explain what happened. Latané and Darley state that:

Subjects who had not reported the smoke ... *uniformly* [italics added] said that they had rejected the idea that it was a fire. Instead, they hit upon an astonishing variety of alternative explanations, all sharing the common characteristic of interpreting the smoke as a non-dangerous event. (Latané and Darley 1968, 219)

If this is indeed how the subjects who failed to report the smoke viewed the situation, then this suggests that they failed to be appropriately receptive to reasons—they failed to recognize that there was a potentially dangerous event occurring which needed to be reported. What is striking about this particular case is that, according to the experimenters, *all* of the subjects who failed to report the smoke interpreted the situation in a similar fashion: as something not dangerous. (Still, as noted previously, we need to be cautious regarding the accuracy of such subjective reports—some subjects were, perhaps, trying to save face.)

Not all the experiments are like the one above, however. There are other experiments where it is relatively clear that subjects who failed to act on their sufficient reasons were indeed aware of such reasons. Take the obedience experiments, for example. It is already very plausible that many of the subjects recognized that a) the shocks apparently caused extreme pain to someone, b) this fact is a reason to stop causing pain to another person, and c) this reason is *sufficient*, but these subjects decided regardless to act in line with the requests of the confederate urging them to carry on with the experiment. Some evidence for this comes from observations about how the subjects behaved during and after the experiment. Milgram explains that the procedure created "extreme levels" of nervous tension:

Many subjects showed signs of nervousness in the experimental situation, and especially upon administering the more powerful shocks. In a large number of cases the degree of tension reached extremes that are rarely seen in sociopsychological laboratory studies. Subjects were observed to sweat, tremble, stutter, bite their lips, groan, and dig their fingernails into their flesh. These were characteristic rather than exceptional responses to the experiment. ... Fourteen of the 40 subjects showed definite signs of nervous laughter and smiling. ... Full-blown, uncontrollable seizures were observed for 3 subjects. (Milgram 1963, 376)

After the experiment, when the maximum shocks had been delivered:

many obedient subjects heaved sighs of relief, mopped their brows, rubbed their fingers over their eyes, or nervously fumbled cigarettes. Some shook their heads, apparently in regret. (Milgram 1963, 376)

This level of distress can plausibly be explained by the conflicting reasons that the subjects had. Even if they did not recognize the relevant fact as a sufficient reason to stop delivering the shocks, their distress levels indicate that they, minimally, recognized it as a reason—as something deserving further consideration. Presumably, if the subjects did not recognize the learner's (apparent) distress as a reason for (altering their course of) action, creating a conflict with other reasons they had (stemming from the requests of the confederate), they would not have displayed such tense behavior. In other words, if they had viewed the learner's reactions as morally irrelevant, and as something that did not clash with other reasons they had, they would not have reacted in such a strong way.

In sum, then, it seems to be the case that sometimes agents fail to recognize their sufficient reasons due to situational factors, and sometimes they fail to act on their reasons due to situational factors. Both extreme hypotheses mentioned above are false—situational factors may affect us epistemically or non-epistemically.⁷

How does this affect the argument that situational factors strip agents' abilities to act on sufficient reasons because they render agents unaware of these sufficient reasons? In effect, the above considerations show that this argument is somewhat limited in scope. Not all situational factors render subjects unaware of their sufficient

7. See Herdova 2016 for further discussion of the evidence that subjects in situationist experiments are often unaware of their sufficient reasons.

reasons, and even those that (arguably) do, often affect only a subset of subjects in that way. Still, we may ask the question whether those subjects who *are* unaware of their sufficient reasons are able to act on these reasons. To this question we now turn.

4.2.2 Unawareness and Ability

Let us assume, then, that some agents are rendered unaware of their sufficient reasons due to the influence of situational factors. Are at least *these* agents unable to act on their sufficient reasons? To answer this question, we need to answer another, namely: is it true that one cannot act on a sufficient reason if one is unaware of it? There is perhaps a reading of this claim on which it is true but relatively uninteresting and irrelevant (for our present purposes). That is, it is no doubt true that one cannot *act on a sufficient reason while at the same time remaining unaware of it* (in acting on a sufficient reason, one is also thereby aware of the sufficient reason). An agent may lack *this* ability, however, but still have the ability to act on a sufficient reason (even if the agent is ignorant of her sufficient reasons). Consider the following example. In some sense it is true that one cannot drive a car *if* one is not in a car. We can spell out this sense as follows: one cannot *drive a car while at the same time not being in car*. Still, even if one is not in a car, one might still be able to drive a car. This is straightforwardly true of having the *general ability* to drive a car (one might have the requisite skills, know-how, etc., without being in a car), but it is also true of the *freedom-level* ability to drive a car. Even if one is not currently in a car, one may still be free to drive a car given that one has access to a car, the ability to get into it, the ability to drive it, access to a road, etc.

Similarly, then, one may be free to act on one's sufficient reasons even if one is unaware of them, given that one has ready epistemic access to these reasons, the (freedom-level) ability to seek out, discover, and reflect on these reasons, the ability to act on them once they are known, the opportunity to perform the relevant action, etc. Consider an agent who does not know her sufficient reasons but is perfectly free to figure out what they are (and knows she is so free). This agent is also free to *act* on her sufficient reasons. Of course, she cannot do so *right away*, given her epistemic position, but she can after she has changed this position (which she is free to do). The second premise (that if one is unaware of one's sufficient reasons, one cannot act on them) is, in the relevant sense, false.

The situationist challenge has not ended, however. Consider the following case. A person walks by a dumpster. Unbeknownst to her, someone is inside the dumpster in desperate need of medical attention. The person, however, has no reason to suspect

this is so, and carries on walking. Assuming that there is a sufficient reason for her to help the person, is she free to do so?⁸ Well, she is free to open the dumpster and check for people in medical need, and, if she so acts, she is then free to help the person. However, she is free to help the person *only if* she checks the dumpster. She can't help the person precisely because she is unaware that the person is in need. Thus ignorance of one's sufficient reasons can indeed, in certain cases, rid one of the ability to act on one's sufficient reasons. Perhaps the situational factors rid us of abilities to act on sufficient reasons in the same way the person's being hidden in a dumpster does.

Why does the fact that the person in medical need is hidden in the dumpster prevent the agent from being able to act on her sufficient reasons? An initial answer is that this fact prevents the agent from knowing what her sufficient reasons are. But this is not the entire story. For imagine she knew that by searching the dumpster she would discover what her sufficient reasons are. In that case, she would be indeed be free to act on her sufficient reasons. A fuller explanation of why she cannot act on her sufficient reasons seems to be that she is unaware *both* of her sufficient reasons *and* of how to discover them. She is even unaware *that* there *are* hidden sufficient reasons around to be discovered.

We may then, present the following argument that some agents in situationist experiments are not free to act on their sufficient reasons:

1. There are agents in situationist experiments who (a) do not know their sufficient reasons, (b) do not know that there are such sufficient reasons of which they are unaware, and (c) do not know how to figure out their sufficient reasons (because of the specific circumstances they find themselves in).
2. If (a), (b) and (c) apply to an agent in such an experiment, this agent is not free to act on her sufficient reasons.

8. Some might object that, in this case, the agent does not have a sufficient reason, or *any* reason, to help the person in need. After all, she is entirely blameless for not helping, and she can justify her omission on the basis that she had no way of knowing about the person in the dumpster. However, there is surely some sense in which she has a reason to help. By performing certain actions (which are within her capabilities), she could help someone in desperate need. We might say that she objectively ought to help the person—doing so is what is objectively best. Another tempting way to put the point is that there *is* a sufficient reason for her to help, even if she does not *have* this reason.

3. Therefore, some agents in situationist experiments are not free to act on their sufficient reasons (because of their situations).

What should we make of this argument? It is better (though much more limited in scope) than the argument with which we started. The subjects who, due to situational factors, fail to realize that (for example) there is a person in need of medical attention nearby, or that a potentially dangerous event is unfolding, may well also be unaware of the need to look out for such facts, and, indeed, fail to *know how* to discover their sufficient reasons. Indeed, it is extremely plausible that this is so. Subjects, who, for instance, are in such a hurry that they do not realize that a person nearby them is in medical need, or who are caused by the presence of passive bystanders to interpret their situation as involving no emergency situation, are not simply unaware of their sufficient reasons, but also unaware of the fact that they are ignorant of their sufficient reasons. Indeed, the evidence that would provide them with knowledge of their sufficient reasons (were they to attend to it in the correct manner), is the same evidence that would provide them with the knowledge that they are ignorant of their sufficient reasons. Similarly, those subjects who interpret the smoke in a non-dangerous way are ignorant of the fact that there *are* sufficient reasons to act of which they are unaware.

Given this, such subjects also fail to know how to figure out their sufficient reasons. We must treat this claim carefully. Just as we may distinguish general ability from specific (freedom-level) ability, we may make the same distinction regarding knowledge-how. Someone may *in general* know how to figure out their sufficient reasons (attend to their evidence carefully, reflect on whether they might be missing something, etc.) without knowing *on a particular occasion* how to figure out their sufficient reasons. If a subject does not even suspect that they are ignorant of their sufficient reasons (and, indeed, may actively believe that they know them full well), then he is not in a position to know how to figure his reasons out. Though he may have the general cognitive capacities to work out his reasons, he does not know how to direct these capacities in his current situation.

It is very plausible, then, that there are *certain* subjects, influenced by *certain* situational factors, who are unaware of their sufficient reasons, or that there *are* such reasons to be discovered, and these subjects further do not know how to discover their sufficient reasons. Given premise 2, any such agents are not free to act on their sufficient reasons.

Premise 2 is hard to dispute. How might a person be perfectly free to act on her sufficient reasons without even knowing these reasons and without knowing

how to find out what those reasons are? As far as we can tell, the only viable way of questioning premise 2 is the following—an agent may be free to act on her sufficient reasons even when she neither knows them, nor how to discover them, if she *does* know how to come to know how to discover them. Consider an analogy: an agent may be free to unlock a box even if she does not know how to open it, provided that she knows how to come to know how to unlock the box (perhaps she knows that, by reading the provided instructions, she will come to know how to unlock the box). We may even iterate this line of thinking: an agent may be free to A without knowing how to A, nor how to come to know how to A, as long as she knows how to come to know how to come to know how to A. We might thus question premise 2 as follows: even if subjects do not know their sufficient reasons, nor how to discover them, may they not still be free to act on their sufficient reasons if they *do* know how to *come to* know how to discover their sufficient reasons?

In answer to the question we may admit that *if* the relevant subjects know how to come to know how to discover their sufficient reasons, they are free to act on their sufficient reasons (though, it must be said, we do not feel compelled to admit this contentious claim). Premise 2 remains true, however, because exactly the same considerations that rule out the subject's *knowing how to discover* their sufficient reasons also rule out the subject's *knowing how to come to know how to discover* their sufficient reasons (etc.). The subjects fail to know how to discover their sufficient reasons in part because they are unaware that they are ignorant of their sufficient reasons. Accordingly, such subjects *also* fail to know how to come to know how to discover their sufficient reasons, as having such know how also involves (at the very least) knowing that there are sufficient reasons out there to discover. Thus premise 2 stands—if a subject does not know their sufficient reasons, nor how to discover them, she is not free to act on them. We may conclude that there are indeed agents whose (freedom-level) ability to act on their sufficient reasons is stripped by certain situational factors. Indeed, we may generalize our conclusion to agents outside of situationist experiments—*any* situational factor that prevents an agent's knowing that she is ignorant of her sufficient reasons also prevents her from knowing how to discover such reasons (and from knowing how to come to know how to discover them, etc.), and thus removes her (freedom-level) ability to act on such reasons.

Proponents of this argument can concede that many situational factors do *not* strip us of our awareness of our sufficient reasons, or our abilities to act on them. They merely think that some agents (perhaps a small minority) are rendered unable to act on their sufficient reasons. This raises the question of how subjects who are *not*

stripped of their (freedom-level) ability are affected by their situations. In the following section we shall suggest that situational factors often make it *more difficult* for agents influenced by situational factors to act on their sufficient reasons than it is for agents not so influenced (all other things being equal).

5. Do Situational Factors Make Abilities Harder to Exercise?

Above we argued that those situational factors highlighted in situationist experiments sometimes eliminate agents' freedom-level abilities. However, our argument applies only to a subset of those subjects adversely affected by situational factors. What of those agents who retain their freedom to act on their sufficient reasons, but who, nevertheless, do *not* act on their sufficient reasons? We propose that the data suggest that such agents find it *more difficult to exercise* their ability to act on various sufficient reasons. Take, as our test case, the bystander experiments. First, many more people in the "alone" condition help than those who are part of a group of observers. Also, given the subjects are assigned to their experimental condition on a random basis, it is likely that if we were to swap the experimental conditions for the subjects, we would still get somewhat similar results. This suggests that most of those people who fail to help the person in need of medical assistance or fail to report the smoke would intervene in the "alone" condition. Given that many of the subjects in each condition retain the relevant freedom-level abilities to act on their sufficient reasons, and assuming that all subjects share their sufficient reasons (which, by design, they *do* in the aforementioned experiments), it is notable that the vast majority of "alone" subjects act on their sufficient reasons and the vast majority of "accompanied" subjects do not. If the difference in situational cues does not alter the groups' sufficient reasons, nor render most of one group unable to act on such reasons, nor, indeed, alter the longstanding moral values of either group, then we cannot account for the differences in behavior by pointing to any of these properties of the agents. Indeed, given that the majority of subjects in one group does help, while the majority in the other group doesn't, and that we cannot point to a moral difference, or a difference regarding the abilities subjects possess between these groups (either or both of which could explain the difference in the majority behavior between the groups), it is very plausible that the relevant situational factor (presence of other people) makes it *more difficult* for people to exercise their ability to respond to their sufficient reasons (to help/react to an emergency). If the experimental subjects would, most likely, act on sufficient reasons in the absence of the pertinent situational cues (as indicated by

the data), and they have the ability (and are generally willing) to act on the relevant sufficient reasons, this suggests that something in their current situation *obstructs* this ability.

If a situational factor obstructs an ability without *eliminating* it, the factor makes the ability more difficult to exercise. But how should we understand the idea that an ability is harder to exercise in one situation than in another? The answer to which we are attracted appeals to the thought that, in one situation, more *mental effort* is required from the agent to exercise this ability than is required in the other situation. A situational factor makes it harder for us to exercise our abilities to act on sufficient reasons, then, if the situational factor influences us in such a way that we must expend greater mental effort in order to exercise these abilities.

What is mental effort? As we understand it, expending mental effort amounts to mobilizing energy for the purpose of meeting either *cognitive* goals (Gaillard (1993)) or *executive* goals. Cognitive goals relate to attaining knowledge, learning and comprehension (e.g., understanding a passage of text). Executive goals relate to formulating and carrying out action plans (e.g., decision-making, deliberation, resisting temptation, etc.). Mental effort includes both “task effort”, which needs to be invested in response to the computational demands of a given task, and “state effort”, which one needs to expend in order to shield one’s performance from potentially disrupting factors, such as fatigue (Mulder (1986); see also Fairclough & Houston (2004), Fairclough & Mulder (2012)). How much mental effort an agent needs to expend to meet any individual goal thus depends on the interplay of a variety of factors, including those internal to the agent (such as mood, desires, intentions, emotions, skills, psychological afflictions, etc.) and those external to the agent (for example, time pressure, task complexity, disrupting external factors such as noise and other distractions). When we speak of one’s ability as being harder to exercise, then, we can understand it in the following way. If agents A and B both have the same (relevant) abilities, it is harder for A to exercise her abilities than it is for B to exercise *his*, just in case it requires more mental effort from A to exercise her abilities than it does B. Let’s say Alice and David both possess the ability to suppress laughter in an inappropriate situation. However, let us also assume that it is harder for Alice to employ or exercise this ability (and suppress her laughter) than it is for David (perhaps because Alice has problems with self-control generally). We suggest that Alice must expend more mental effort than David in order to exercise her ability—she must fend off greater distractions, attend to serious matters with sharper focus, close her mind to funnier thoughts, etc.

In other words, exercising this ability is *more taxing* on Alice—doing so drains more of Alice’s (mental) resources.

We may account for the situational data, then, by positing that certain situational factors give rise to various obstacles (e.g., perceived peer pressure, desire to conform or to obey the authority figure, etc.) to the agents’ acting on their sufficient reasons. While these obstacles are not (always) *insuperable*, it takes mental effort to overcome them—an amount of mental effort, indeed, that would not be required were those obstacles absent. There are, roughly-speaking, two relevant kinds of abilities to respond to sufficient reasons which might be adversely affected by situational factors—an agent’s *epistemic* abilities to recognize these reasons, and her *actional* abilities to translate such recognition into action.

Take the latter kind of abilities first. Consider a subject in the Milgram experiment who is aware of his reasons to refrain from increasing the level of shock the person in the other room (apparently) receives. While, we argue, he retains his freedom-level ability to thus refrain, the fact that an authority figure insists he continues with the experiment makes it very difficult to exercise this ability, and thus act on his sufficient reasons. He may, for example, feel considerable pressure to obey the experimenter’s commands; he may be somewhat overwhelmed by the novelty of his situation; he may feel less responsible for his actions, as someone else is taking charge.⁹ These facts are obstacles to him acting on his moral obligations even though he is aware of his moral obligations. This means that refraining from further shocking takes more mental effort—he must not only expend the effort needed to refrain from shocking someone period (i.e., the amount of effort he would need to expend were there no one ordering him), but he must also put effort into defying an authority figure, readjusting himself to the novelty of his situation, and taking responsibility for his actions. Exercising the relevant actional abilities thus may be more difficult when one is faced with pertinent situational factors.

The same applies to the former (epistemic) kinds of abilities which concern agents’ *recognition* of reasons. In the previous section we argued that if an agent is unaware both of her sufficient reasons and that there are sufficient reasons of which she is unaware, she does not know how to discover such reasons, and is thus not free to act on them. There may be cases, however, in which an agent is unaware of her sufficient reasons, but due to being presented with certain evidence, comes to believe that there

9. See Burger 2009 for explanations along these lines (and others) as to why people increase the level of shock so high in the obedience experiments.

are (or might be) sufficient reasons of which she is unaware. In such a case, the agent may know how to discover these reasons and thus be free to act on them. Even so, situational factors may make it more difficult for her to discover such reasons. Consider the seminarian who walks past the prone figure because he is in a hurry to deliver a talk. Suppose this particular seminarian is not aware that he should help the person in medical need, but is aware (at least in some dim way) that *something* is afoot that may warrant further attention. In such a case, the situational factor (in this case, being in a hurry) may still be an obstacle to the subject exercising his ability to recognize reasons. It is easy to see why this might be—the fact that he is in a hurry focusses his attention on other matters; his agreement to arrive on time may provide him with a sense of obligation to do so, which may in turn lead him to ignore other evidence concerning what he ought to do. Again, such obstacles to recognizing his sufficient reason to help are not *insurmountable*. Rather, it would take more mental effort than usual for the agent to recognize his sufficient reasons—he must not only interpret the evidence before him as providing a sufficient reason to act (as must anyone), he must divert his attention away from his current task, and reassess what he takes to be his pressing obligation at the time. All of this may take considerable mental effort.

6. Consequences for Moral Responsibility

How do the above considerations impact moral responsibility? A plausible line is this—subjects who are aware of their sufficient reasons for action, but do not act on them due to the influence of certain situational factors, are still morally responsible for their actions. After all, they know that they are not acting on their sufficient reasons, yet they are free to so act. That said, because *acting on* these sufficient reasons is *harder*, more *effortful*, because of the presence of situational factors, these subjects are thus *less* responsible (in particular, less blameworthy) than subjects who fail to act on their sufficient reasons without being influenced by adverse situational factors (other things being equal). Perhaps something similar is true of those subjects who are unaware of their sufficient reasons (because of certain situational factors), but are (perhaps dimly) aware that something is afoot. First, they are still morally responsible for their actions. After all, they fail to act on their sufficient reasons despite being able to seek out and discover such reasons (and then act on them). Second, they are less morally responsible for their actions than those not subject to situational factors. This is because it is *harder*, more *effortful*, for them to *recognize* their reasons than someone not subject to the relevant situational factors (again, keeping everything else equal).

Situational factors can thus be obstacles to both one's *acting* on one's (recognized) reasons and one's *recognizing* reasons, and as such can reduce one's responsibility in similar ways.¹⁰

What of those agents who, due to situational factors, are unaware of their sufficient reasons *and* of the fact they are out there to be discovered, and thus do not know how to discover or act on their sufficient reasons? We argued in 4.2.2 that such agents are not free to act on their sufficient reasons. Similarly, we think that such agents are not *directly morally responsible* for failing to act on their sufficient reasons (by "directly morally responsible" we mean, roughly, responsible in such a way that this responsibility does not rest on the agent's responsibility for earlier actions). One way to argue for this is by appealing to the following principle: an agent is (directly) responsible for failing to do something only if she could have done it (i.e., only if she was free to do it). Though this principle resembles the notorious and controversial Principle of Alternative Possibilities (an agent is morally responsible for doing something only if she could have done otherwise), the philosophical consensus is that (something like) the former principle is far more plausible than the latter (see van Inwagen 1983, Sartorio 2016). Still, we do not need to appeal to either of these principles. Indeed, it is already overwhelming plausible that agents who are not free to act on their sufficient reasons because they do not know them nor even how to discover them are not responsible for failing to act on them. Examples further confirm this. The agent who unknowingly passes the dumpster which contains a person in medical need is neither free to act on her sufficient reason to help the person nor directly responsible for failing to help. Similarly, a blind person who obliviously passes a prone figure without aiding the person is not free to help, nor directly responsible for failing to help. The lesson generalizes (more cautiously—we see no reason why it does not generalize): agents who are rendered unaware both of their sufficient reasons, and how to discover them, are not only unable to act on sufficient reasons, they are also not (directly) responsible for failing to act on their sufficient reasons.

There is a case to be made, however, that such agents may yet be *indirectly* responsible for failing to act on their sufficient reasons. The seminarian in a hurry

10. One's responsibility when under the influence of situational factors is arguably even further reduced since one is not typically responsible for the circumstances (and thus situational factors) with which one is presented. Consider a case where an agent is free to choose whether she is in a situation in which it is relatively easy for her to do the right thing, or a situation where doing what one should is difficult. If she knowingly chooses the latter, and fails to do the right thing, then she is more responsible than someone who fails to do the right thing due to equally adverse situational factors which he did not choose.

who fails to process the situation as one in which someone needs help, or even one in which further investigation is necessary might still be blameworthy for failing to help because part of the explanation of *why* he fails in these ways is that he weighs too heavily his reasons not to be late. Such weighing leads him to fail to be sensitive enough to other reasons he might encounter which *outweigh* his reasons not to be late. His failure to reflect on his reasons, or even see the need to, when faced with the prone figure may thus stem from his earlier judgments and actions. These judgments and actions involve a lack of attention to other normative reasons for action. In short, then, though it is true that the seminarians do not recognize their sufficient reasons to help, nor their reasons to reflect on their reasons, these facts do not necessarily render them blameless for failing to help. This is because it is *they* who weight the importance of not being late very highly, shift their attention from other moral considerations, dismiss too quickly courses of action that diverge from their plan to arrive on time, etc. Their epistemic failings, like their actional failings, are their own. It is still possible, then, to hold the hurrying seminarians who fail to help indirectly responsible (indeed, blameworthy) for failing to do so.¹¹

A brief summary is in order. We have argued that agents presented with adverse situational factors, but who are nonetheless free to act on/discover their sufficient reasons, are less responsible for failing to act on their sufficient reasons than they otherwise would be, precisely because it is more difficult for them to act on such reasons. We have also argued that those agents who are not free to act on their sufficient reasons are not directly responsible for failing to do so, but may still be indirectly responsible at least in part because they are responsible for the judgements and actions that led to their being so unaware.

7. A Happy(ish) Ending

Above we discuss how different situational cues may hinder exercising our abilities to act on sufficient reasons. Not all situational factors may impact such abilities negatively though. Some studies show that situational factors may, in fact, make them easier to exercise. Consider, for instance, a study by Bateson et al. (2006) in which the experimenters tracked the amount of 'honesty box' contributions for refreshments in relation to the type of picture presented on the instruction sheet placed above the

11. This said, the way in which situational factors influence people seems relatively universal (i.e., they influence the majority of us in similar ways). Perhaps this fact speaks in favor of further mitigating our seminarians.

honesty box. People contributed to the honesty box, on average, 2.76 times more in those weeks when the information sheet had a picture of a pair of eyes rather than a picture of flowers. Given the results, it seems that being exposed to the images of eyes had significant influence on whether people acted on their sufficient reason (not to steal). Comparable results were found in a littering study by Ernest-Jones et al. (2011), where the odds of littering were halved in the presence of posters containing images of eyes, as opposed to posters containing images of flowers. Here too, arguably, situational factors (images of eyes) positively impacted people's ability to act on their sufficient reasons (not to litter).

Such positive effects have been observed even in experiments which did not feature sufficient reasons. For example, Baron (1997) tested, on a sample of passersby in a shopping mall, how pleasant smells affect helping behavior. Subjects were asked to provide change for \$1 which gave them a reason to help—although they did not have a *sufficient* reason to help (providing change would be best described, in normal circumstances, as *supererogatory*).¹² It was found that helping behavior was significantly greater in the presence of pleasant fragrances than in their absence. For instance, in one of the conditions, it was found that 60% of the women exposed to pleasant smells helped, as compared with only 16% of the women not subjected to such smells. This indicates that normatively irrelevant situational factors may sometimes be beneficial with regards to our ability to act on supererogatory reasons.

While, in some ways, it is a desirable result that situational factors may have a positive impact on our abilities to act on reasons (sufficient or supererogatory), the above data further illustrate just how sensitive such abilities may be to different circumstances (often without us being aware of them being so sensitive). This raises a general worry about agents *consistently* and *reliably* exercising these abilities, across different situations. From the point of view of moral responsibility, it is a cause for concern that the exercise of our abilities is (too) dependent on luck—in other words, it is undesirable that one's abilities being easier or harder to exercise (significantly) depends on whether one (luckily) faces favorable situational factors.¹³

To sum up, then: situational factors sometimes strip agents of their abilities to act on sufficient reasons, while situational factors often make it harder to exercise such abilities. This in turn suggests that agents thus influenced by situational factors are

12. Supererogatory actions are those above and beyond the call of duty. If you have a supererogatory reason to A, your Aing would be admirable, but not obligatory.

13. We explore the connection between situationism and moral luck in Herdova & Kearns 2015.

less morally responsible for their actions than those agents who are not so influenced. Lastly, however, it seems there are *also* situational factors which enhance the agents' abilities to act on their sufficient reasons (and even on their supererogatory reasons)—such situational factors make it *easier* for agents to exercise their abilities to act on their reasons (sufficient or otherwise). There is some reason to worry, then, that we are *unable* to do the right thing given the subtle influence of our situations. We should be even more wary, however, that doing the right thing, and consistently so, might be more challenging than previously thought.

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