Virtue Ethics, Situationism, and the Filipino Business Leader’s Compassion for the Poor

Jacklyn A. Cleofas

Abstract. In this paper I discuss the relevance of the debate between defenders of virtue and their situationist opponents for understanding and resolving the Filipino business leader’s difficulty on behaving compassionately towards the poor. Evidence gathered by researchers show that Filipino business leaders are not sympathetic towards the poor or inclined to give them substantial help. I argue that the foregoing problem stems from a kind of problematic emphasis on virtue that takes it to be the sole achievement of the individual who is impervious the negative effects of her situation. Unlike the situationist, I suggest that the solution is not to abandon virtue but to put an emphasis on virtue in a way that appreciates its dependence on complex and uniquely Filipino forms of interpersonal processes.

Catholic social teaching prominently features virtue. For instance, the Vocation of the Business Leader tells us that the virtues of compassion and responsibility towards the poor are necessary for living out the Gospel. Consequently any challenge against virtue ethics has implications for Catholic social teaching. Recent debates among philosophers working in moral psychology features one such challenge from philosophical situationists. Situationists believe that evidence from social psychology demonstrates that virtue or character is neither robust nor reliable in producing morally desirable behavior. In this paper I discuss the situationist challenge against virtue vis-à-vis a difficulty among Filipino business leaders to behave compassionately towards the poor. I argue that this difficulty about compassion stems in part from a tendency to put primacy on character-based explanations for both poverty and prosperity.

In his defense of virtue in business ethics against situationism, Robert C. Solomon makes a claim similar to mine. He says that a certain type of emphasis on virtue amounts to an overestimation of one’s own goodness and a condemnation of the poor and other sufferers of oppression. According to Solomon,

Too often preachers of the virtues praise (in effect) their own sterling personalities without bothering to note how little there has been in their lives to challenge their high opinion of themselves. Too often, people are blamed for behaving in ways in which, given the situation and their personal backgrounds, it is hard to see how they could have acted or chosen to act otherwise. In contemporary politics, in particular, the renewed emphasis on character is prone to bullying and even cruelty … a way of condemning the victims of poverty and racial oppression for their behavior and insisting that such people ‘boot-strap’ their way to respectability.

2 Following De Swaan I take the poor to be those who possess neither economic means nor political resources compared to others who have access to both (Elite Perceptions of Poverty p. 184). Ricardo Abad and Elizabeth Eviota say that there is a consensus about the Philippine poor being “ill-fed, badly nourished, inadequately-housed, under-educated, and unorganized.” See the introduction to their Philippine Poverty: An Annotated Bibliography 1970-1983 (Quezon City: Institute of Philippine Culture, 1985).
Here we see that there is a kind of emphasis on virtue that inhibits compassionate behavior. Those who are in a position to help the poor become preoccupied with their own putative virtues and the supposed viciousness of others. In this discussion of the Filipino business leader’s problem about compassion I show that the problematic kind of emphasis on virtue can be avoided without abandoning virtue altogether. The key is to recognize the relationality of virtue or its dependence on complex forms of interpersonal processes. Like Solomon, I use ideas from situationism to articulate a problem about being virtuous while at the same time developing ideas that could be used for a defense of virtue. In what follows I describe the problem about compassion, provide a précis of situationism, and then present an analysis of the problem about compassion which is supplemented with a proposed solution.

A problem about compassion

There is a stark contrast between the ideal characterized in The Vocation of the Business Leader and the description of actual business leaders from Gerard Clarke and Marites Sison’s investigation of elite perceptions of poverty and inequality in the Philippines. Even though this investigation is focused on Filipino elites in general and not business leaders in particular we can take it as indicative of Filipino business leaders perception of and attitude towards the poor because Filipino elites move in the same social circles. These social circles create family and other interpersonal connections that are further strengthened by speaking the same language, living in the same walled neighborhoods, and having the same kind of education. Business leaders belong to the elite of Filipino society

4 See their “Voices from the Top of the Pile,” in Elite Perceptions of Poverty and Inequality, ed Elisa Reis and Mick Moore (London: Zed Books, 2005), 57-90.

Clarke and Sison’s study is a contribution to a volume which also contains chapters focused on Brazil, Haiti, Bangladesh, and South Africa. They obtained interviewed 65 Filipino elites; the names of the interviewees, which are listed at the end of the chapter, read like a veritable who’s who in Philippine society. According to the investigators their sample represents the Christian Filipino majority: “The respondents occupied prominent positions in institutions that help frame policy and discourse with respect to poverty and inequality: representative elective bodies, the bureaucracy, the armed forces, the private sector, the media, academia, the Catholic Church, and civil society organizations, including business associations, professional bodies and non-governmental organizations (59).”

5 The distinction between the elite and business leader isn’t always clear. Clarke and Sison report that some of their respondents “belong to a distinct status elite because of a series of alternating posts in the public and private sectors (e.g. businessmen who have served as ambassadors overseas)” (Ibid., 59). Filipino elites are not a monolithic group however. Some of Clarke and Sison’s respondents belong to traditional Filipino families or clans that have significant rural property interests. In contrast, business leaders in their sample expressed antagonism towards the old landed elite. Hence I make it a point to cite only those responses that are representative of Filipino elites in general or specifically come from individuals who Clarke and Sison identify as business leaders.

6 “Many rich people commute between … private estates and the business districts, and live their social and professional lives with minimal contact with Manila’s urban poverty and decay (Ibid., pp. 73-74).”
who are separated from the majority of the population not just in terms of income and occupation but also in terms of ancestry, culture, and sense of national identity. Clarke and Sison, together with some of their interviewees, recognize that rich and poor Filipinos have no sense of shared culture and national identity (71-72). Historical connection with the USA is cited as a reason for Filipino elites’ relative apathy towards poverty (Ibid.).

The *Vocation of a Business Leader* depicts the ideal business leader as someone who does not forget to respond to the needs of the poor and the vulnerable. She is one who is guided by the ethical principles of Catholic social teaching and lives out the virtues of practical wisdom, justice, discipline, generosity, prudence, and many others. Of these virtues practical wisdom and justice are of central importance. Although the principles of respect for human dignity and pursuit of the common good constitute the foundation of the Church’s social teaching it is not possible to abide by these principles without “the seasoned and intelligent judgments of virtuous business leaders who can wisely manage the complexities and tensions arising in particular cases.” Practical wisdom, which involves prudential understanding of unique and complex situations, enables the virtuous business leader to translate and concretize the ought of principles from Catholic social teaching into plausible and realistic solutions for problems that arise in these situations. By implication, the ideal Catholic business leader is able to manifest, say, compassion across a wide variety of situations. For instance, she is compassionate not only towards the beneficiaries of the company’s outreach programs but also towards subordinates experiencing difficulties or former clients in distress across different kinds of situations. Similarly, she is sensitive to the demands of different situations that she faces everyday and is capable of formulating and implementing complex solutions for the problems of the needy.

Now let us turn the description of Filipino elites among whom business leaders are included. Clarke and Sison discovered that compared to their counterparts in countries such as South Africa and Bangladesh Filipino elites are not sympathetic towards the poor and feel a great distance from them. Fifty-eight of their respondents said that the poor bear at least some responsibility for their predicament. Some respondents even expressed harsh moral judgments about the poor’s lack of virtue. A prominent businessman expresses such a judgment as follows:

> The poor are not really nice people. They’re ignorant, they’re distrustful, they’re the biggest snobs one can find, they are ungrateful …And they’re *balasubas* [rogues] …*Matumal* [slow] and they take advantage … They feel they’ve a right; they have a mendicancy attitude … That’s their attitude and it prevents them from raising themselves up.

This businessman expresses a familiar pattern of explanation for poverty: it is created and sustained by the poor’s vicious character. Clarke and Sison note that Chinese-Filipino businesspeople are especially inclined to make such harsh judgments while extolling the virtues of the rich. Abad and Eviota report that some social scientists take poverty to be a function of a pathological condition, namely having anti-development attitudes, values, and traits. See their introduction to *Philippine Poverty: An Annotated Bibliography.*

---

7 Clarke and Sison, together with some of their interviewees, recognize that rich and poor Filipinos have no sense of shared culture and national identity (71-72). Historical connection with the USA is cited as a reason for Filipino elites’ relative apathy towards poverty (Ibid.).


9 Ibid., 22.

10 “Voices from the Top of the Pile” 70.

11 Ibid. 69.

12 This kind of explanation for poverty is prevalent among other Filipino elites. Abad and Eviota report that some social scientists take poverty to be a function of a pathological condition, namely having anti-development attitudes, values, and traits. See their introduction to *Philippine Poverty: An Annotated Bibliography.*
virtues of those among them who are especially prosperous. A prominent Chinese-Filipino businessman expresses the sentiment as follows:

John Gokongwei was not a rich man. He didn’t have a rich father. So was Lucio Tan. He was unemployed [early in his business career]. So was Henry Sy. These are some of the richest people today. What will you say? ‘My father is poor, so I cannot go to a good school?’ But look at all these taipans, they went to the [worst] schools. Some of them didn’t even graduate. So who’s supposed to take responsibility for what they are? [It’s] so easy to blame others.13

Here the interviewee implies that the poor are unable to improve their own situation because they do not have or work at trying to have the virtues that the most successful Chinese-Filipino businessmen in the country possess. If only they were enterprising and hardworking like Gokongwei and others, the poor could bootstrap their way to prosperity. The conclusion is that those who remain poor only have themselves to blame and that attribution of responsibility for alleviating poverty on others is misplaced.14

Such perception and attitude towards the poor is not conducive for compassionate behavior towards them.15 People are usually not strongly motivated to help those who they take to be blameworthy. Those who explain the predicament of the poor in terms of characterological flaws such as laziness, ingratitude, and fatalism would have positive reasons for not helping. They would say that helping the poor by giving money and other forms of assistance will not contribute to the cultivation of virtues such as discipline, enterprise, and perseverance. Given the prevalence of these beliefs and attitudes Filipino business leaders would have difficulty in embodying the ideal described in the Vocation of the Business Leader. Because of a certain type of emphasis on character these leaders do not feel a sense of solidarity with the poor or sufficient motivation to find and implement systematic solutions to the problems created by poverty. Clarke and Sison’s investigation uncovers just such a sense of social distance from the poor and lack of motivation to help them. The investigators also note that Filipino elites are not committed to ‘redistributive action’ to alleviate poverty or the creation of ‘elaborate social safety nets’ that guarantees the provision of basic goods for everyone.16 In other words, Filipino business leaders are not inclined to alleviate poverty through public policy and institutional design. Clarke and Sison offer a number of explanations for this inclination. They talk about a prevalent tendency among Filipino elites to think of poverty as political problem, to pass on the responsibility to groups to which they don’t belong, and to put too much faith in NGOs. Here I add that the problematic kind of emphasis on character is implicated in most of these obstacles to helping. For instance, belief in the capacity of NGO’s to help the poor depends on endorsement of empowerment discourse, which is often understood as providing the assistance that could

13 Ibid.
14 Clarke and Sison report that Chinese-Filipinos are nevertheless involved in helping the poor through formal philanthropic endeavors. Chinese-Filipinos also make it a point not to help by giving handouts (74).
15 Antonio Meloto, founder of a well-known poverty alleviation and nation-building movement in the Philippines could be an exception. In a speech given at the 40th Anniversary Fiesta of the Center for Philippine Studies (CPS) at the University of Hawaii in April 2015, Meloto characterized the Filipino poor as hopeless and violent. See the statement of the CPS on social media [https://www.facebook.com/UHM.CPS/photos/pcb.871626419575245/871625919575295/?type=1&permPage=1].
16 Clarke and Sison, “Voices from the Top of the Pile,” 81.
allow the poor to bootstrap their way out of poverty. Such a feat would only be possible by being enterprising, hard working, resilient, etc. And failure to accomplish this feat reflects absence of these prized traits.

Even where poverty is not exclusively explained in terms of vicious character awareness of situational factors such as lack of access to education and opportunity is likely to be counteracted by attribution of negative traits to the poor. Motivation to change the existing system (or lack thereof) that nearly makes it impossible for the poor to gain access to tools for a better life would most likely be diffused by the thought they are opportunists with a misguided sense of entitlement. If some impetus for compassionate behavior remains, it tends to be directed towards helping specific individuals—those with less problematic character—instead of towards engineering large-scale reform that could help large sections of the population gain access to basic necessities such as healthcare and education.

The situationist challenge against virtue

Situationists favor solutions to the problem about compassion that exclude the concept of character. John M. Doris, one of the most vigorous defenders of situationism, argues that since most people are only capable of having localized or fragmented character traits we would be better off in deploying other strategies for good behavior. In this section I will give a brief précis of situationism. Before doing so it’s worth noting that the problem of fragmentation is not unheard of in Catholic social thought. The *Vocation of the Business Leader* cites the temptation to compartmentalize faith and daily business practice into disconnected sections of one’s life as a significant threat to a business leader’s effort to live out the Gospel. “Dividing the demands of one’s faith from one’s work in business is a fundamental error that contributes to much of the damage done by business in our world today.”17 The kind of fragmentation mentioned here, however, is different from the one that Doris talks about. Fragmentation or compartmentalization of one’s life such as what we find in the so-called split-level Christians or Sunday-religious involve traits that have a wide scope of application. For instance, behaving compassionately towards family, close friends and neighbors while behaving ruthlessly at the workplace. What Doris calls fragmented character involves traits with a very narrow scope of application; for example, helpfulness when not in a hurry or in quiet environments.

The problem posed by the compartmentalized life of a business leader is exacerbated by situationism. Situationism implies not only that the business leader could engage in socially irresponsible business practices while being involved in some philanthropic activities on the side, but also that such philanthropy is subject to the vicissitudes of being in a good mood, not being in a hurry, or in a quiet environment, etc. So attaining the right kind of evaluative integration appears doubly difficult; it’s not just that business leaders should allow social concern to permeate their behavior at the workplace, they should also guard against seemingly insignificant variables that could derail other regarding behavior in general.

Doris’s situationism is comprised of the following claims:

(S1) Situations are powerful determinants of behavior. Behavior more consistently varies with persons’ situation, not their character traits. Individual differences in trait are not decisive in producing differences in behavior. As a rule persons behave according to the population norm, e.g. if most subjects in an experiment do not help a seemingly distressed man slumped on a doorway when they are in a hurry, then any given person

---

17 *Vocation of the Business Leader* 6.
will most likely not help under those circumstances either.

(S2) Only narrow or localized traits are temporally stable. People do not consistently behave according to the demands of a specific character trait, say compassion, across a wide variety of situations. Temporally stable and consistent behavior in highly similar situations could however be expected. E.g. Someone helpful towards a next-door neighbor on a quiet Sunday afternoon would most likely not be helpful towards a stranger in a hot and packed train carriage after a long and difficult day at the office. But the same person may be relied on to help a next-door neighbor under the same or very similar circumstances over and over again.

(S3) As a rule, people do not possess evaluatively integrated traits or dispositions; conflicting dispositions usually “cohabit within the same personality”. For instance, someone inclined to be helpful towards strangers as a weekend volunteer in feeding program operations will most likely not help a new colleague who appears to need assistance in learning the ropes of the profession and settling down in a new city.\(^{18}\)

Doris cites many experiments to support S1. Most of the findings in these experiments are similar to Darley and Batson’s classic Good Samaritan experiment,\(^ {19}\) which looks into the influence of both situational and character variables on behavior. The subjects, who were students at the Princeton Theological Seminary, came across a shabbily dressed man in apparent distress on their way to deliver a speech on a topic assigned by the experimenter. Darley and Batson’s chief finding is that subjects in a hurry are significantly less likely to help the man slumped on the road compared to subjects who are not in a hurry (10% vs. 63%). The topic assigned for the speech and the subject’s type of religious personality did not have significant effect on helping behavior. According to Ross and Nisbett the Good Samaritan experiment demonstrates that channel factors are more important than we appreciate. To help us understand what this means they say, “When we find an apparently small situational circumstance producing a big behavioral effect … we have identified a channel factor … a stimulus or response pathway that serves to elicit or sustain behavioral intentions with particular intensity or stability.”\(^ {20}\)

Situationists such as Doris believe that it is these channel factors, rather than virtues, that more decisively determine behavior. Consequently, we must focus on identifying and managing such channel factors instead of on cultivating virtue.

The channel factors that proved decisive in the Good Samaritan experiment are the ‘early’ and ‘late’ conditions created by the experimenters. The seminarians in the second condition were told that they were late because the people recording their speech “were expecting them a few minutes ago” while those in the first condition were told “it will be a few minutes before they’re ready for you but you might as well head on over.” Interestingly the topic of the speech to be delivered did not significantly affect behavior. Some seminarians were asked to give a speech on the parable of the Good Samaritan while others were asked to

\(^{18}\) In *Lack of Character* Doris characterizes situationism in terms of these three claims which he presents as the repudiation of the core features of the traditional conception of virtue (22-26). (1) Cross-situational consistency— the virtuous do the right thing across widely diverse situations that require, say, compassionate behavior. (2) Temporal stability—the virtuous reliably manifest trait-relevant behavior over extended periods. (3) Evaluative integration—one who possesses a specific virtue, say compassion, has a great likelihood of possessing related traits, e.g. respect for others, generosity, etc.


speak on topics unrelated to compassion; subjects in these two conditions did not significantly differ in terms of helping. This particular finding indicates that not all situational interventions elicit the right kind of behavior. Darley and Batson also hypothesized that subjects with Samaritan-like religiosity will help more frequently than those who are more similar to the priest or the Levite; this hypothesis was falsified by the experiment. It showed that morally irrelevant factors affect behavior more significantly. More specifically, character-based predictions of behavior usually fare significantly worse compared to those based on situational factors. Doris reinforces the foregoing point by discussing experiments which show that the absence of pleasant smells, sunshine, or fine weather significantly decreases other-regarding behavior. Conversely, the presence of pleasant smells and sunshine increases the likelihood of helping while moderate temperatures are associated with decrease in interpersonal violence. Doris also cites an experiment done by Mathews and Canon which demonstrates that passers by are less significantly less likely to help someone to pick up dropped books when exposed to 85 decibels of noise.

Doris and other situationists support S2 by discussing more experiments and drawing attention to the fundamental attribution error, which is the tendency to explain behavior almost exclusively in terms of character while discounting the impact of the situational variables on the person. Skepticism about the claim that only very narrow traits have temporal stability is partly explained by the fundamental attribution error. For instance, when someone refuses to administer high-voltage shocks to a co-participant in an experiment we tend to attribute prosocial character traits such as compassion to this person. Different variations of Milgram’s experiments belie such an attribution. These experiments show that it’s situational variables such as closeness to the victim, disagreement among two experimenters, and presence of rebelling peers that influence people to disobey the order to administer further shocks to an innocent person.

Unlike Doris, the situationist Peter Vranas discusses experiments that feature good behavior. He astutely points out that research in social psychology does not depict an entirely bleak account of human nature by discussing simulated theft and electrocution experiments. In the latter almost all participants come to the aid of a technician who apparently suffered from electrical accident. In the former 65%-100% of the unwitting

---

21 Other findings suggest that being asked to think of religious ideals is not impotent in shaping behavior. Some experiments conducted by Dan Ariely suggest that being asked to recall the Ten Commandments motivate honesty. See his Predictably Irrational (New York: Harper Collins, 2009), 290-301.

22 See Darley and Batson pp. 102-103. The experimenters categorized Samaritan-like religiosity as one that takes religion to be intrinsically good and as the appropriate “response to and quest for meaning in one’s everyday life” (106). The other type of religiosity takes religion as a means to an end, e.g. religion as a means for gaining the admiration of others and the approval of God.


The relevance of Milgram’s experiments for everyday life has been validated by obedience experiments real life situations. Vranas reports that investigators discovered that 95% (21/22) nurses at two hospitals nearly administer what they know to be an overdose of an unknown drug after being told to do so by a physician (“The Indeterminacy Paradox” 27).

participants in different settings (beach, restaurant, library, etc.) prevent a thief from carrying off somebody else’s belongings. Vranas argues that it does not make sense to attribute virtue to the subjects in these experiments because evidence from other experiments indicates that people behave deplorably in other situations. He discusses the Stanford prison experiment which showed that sadistic behavior can be elicited from individuals who are not sadistic types by putting them in a prison environment.\textsuperscript{27} Vranas notes that in the theft experiments the investigators found that subjects did not intervene when they were not explicitly asked by the victim to watch his or her belongings.\textsuperscript{28} He could have also added that in the case of those who participated in the electrocution experiments it is unclear whether they would have still helped if other people witnessed the apparent electrocution but did nothing to help. Research on bystander intervention in laboratory and field experiments has consistently shown that the presence of others significantly inhibits helping; Ross and Nisbett report that in about 90% of comparisons lone bystanders were more likely to help than people in groups.\textsuperscript{29} Vranas then concludes that most people have indeterminate character because they behave deplorably in certain situations and behave admirably in others.

S3 is drawn as an inference to the best explanation from the experiments. There is no direct evidence for the situationist claim that most, perhaps virtually all, people have and can only posses conflicting dispositions (e.g. compassion when not in a hurry and indifference when in a hurry). Even Doris admits as much; he concedes that the kind of longitudinal studies that would count as direct evidence for lack of evaluative integration is still unavailable.\textsuperscript{30} Nevertheless, Doris argues that the pronounced effect of situational factors on prosocial behavior in general and helping in particular, combined with the highly plausible speculation that most people would find themselves in situations with varying degrees of conduciveness for prosocial behavior makes it highly likely that people will typically behave inconsistently. From S1-S3 situationists conclude that strategies for good behavior based on situation-management would be significantly more effective than those that are focused on cultivation of virtue.

Defenders of virtue have responded by arguing that situationists have misunderstood character and showing that it’s possible to develop an empirically grounded account of virtue. Some philosophers have taken situationists to task for their inaccurate understanding of virtue.\textsuperscript{31} Robert Adams, Maria Merritt, and Nancy Snow, among others, have done work towards developing an empirically adequate account of virtue. It’s worth noting that despite the liveliness of the debate on situationism there are now emerging points of agreement between situationists and some defenders of virtue.

First, most participants in the debate now agree that ethical theorizing must be predicated on realistic or empirically grounded conceptions of human psychology. This methodological realism or empiricism entails insightful appreciation of our deep ongoing

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{28} Vranas, “The Indeterminacy Paradox,” 15.} 
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{29} Ross and Nisbett, The Person and the Situation, 41-44.} 
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{30} Lack of Character 38.} 
dependence on social cues and other aspects of our social environment. Second, it is necessary to be aware of and to correct for the fundamental attribution error; the latter involves the careful consideration of small and seemingly insignificant situational pressures or channel factors to which people are susceptible. Lastly, there is a need to carefully manage situations. However, it remains controversial what such situation management amounts to. Defenders of virtue are interested in incorporating situation-management into the cultivation of character. For instance, Adams talks about building evaluatively integrated composite wholes by bringing together narrow or modular traits with the help of strategies that involve situation management. Doris casts doubt on the plausibility of such a strategy and says it remains to be seen whether such composite wholes can be instantiated in actual human lives. For him situation management is a remedial measure that is inconsistent with virtue. In the next two sections I discuss an analysis of the problem about compassion and a proposed solution that feature some of the lessons from the debate on situationism.

An analysis of the problem and a proposed solution

The fundamental attribution error exacerbates the problem about compassion. It inclines both the business leader and the poor to prioritize character-based explanations for poverty. Consequently they both fail to appreciate the importance of non-characterological determinants of poverty. Teresa Tuason’s qualitative investigation on Filipinos born into poverty reveals that those who remained poor and became rich are very similar. Virtually all of Tuason’s informants had the same experience of deprivation, deployed similar ways of coping, and possessed similar cultural characteristics. The crucial difference proved to be the occurrence of chance events such as having a wealthier relative who happens to live near a university or friends with better education and higher aspirations. According to Tuason her informants favored characterological explanations for their poverty such as having the tendency to quit jobs frequently or having parents who lacked ambition and perseverance. Virtually all these informants underappreciated the impact of situational factors such as lack of access to affordable housing, efficient public transportation, quality education, or jobs that provide a living wage on their efforts to improve their lives.

In one case Tuason talks about a man who says he was unable to raise himself out of

33 This is a widely documented error in social psychology. It consists in the tendency to underestimate the significance of situation and role determinants of behavior while explaining observed behavior in terms of traits and dispositions. See Ross and Nisbett, *The Person and the Situation* 126-138.
37 Ibid., p. 109.

In a separate work the sociologist F. Landa Jocano describes someone who was born poor but became rich partly because of chance event. ‘Rosing’ moved from being a street child into a successful entrepreneur partly because the fishmonger she originally worked for left one day and never came back. Interestingly, Jocano favors a characterological explanation for Rosing’s successes and presents her as the embodiment of the successful Filipino with the right kind of values and virtues. See *Work Values of Successful Filipinos* (Manila: Punlad, 2000), 7-12.
poverty because he did not get an education. According to Tuason this man failed to notice that good education in the Philippines is not affordable for many. Perhaps the very thing this man lacks—education—could have enabled him to understand poverty from a broader point of view. However, it is unclear whether a good education and an ability to take a broader point of view can by themselves correct the fundamental attribution error. The prominent businessman who called the poor ‘ignorant and ungrateful rogues’ is a good example of someone who appreciates the systemic nature of the poverty problem but still thinks about the poor in characterological terms. After expressing the harsh judgments about the poor he also says the following about them: “But it’s not all their fault; the whole system works against them because there’s a lack of resources. They don’t have the kind of education that they should have; don’t have the connections they should have and therefore no opportunities. They really can’t do much by themselves.”

The tension between the foregoing businessman’s beliefs allows us to see the problematic kind of emphasis on virtue better. On the one hand he believes that undesirable character traits such as laziness and mendicancy prevent the poor from improving their lives. On the other, he acknowledges that the poor cannot do much by themselves because ‘the whole system works against them.’ The latter implies that drastic changes in the system must be made so that the poor can raise themselves up. These changes can only be made by investing large amounts of time, energy, and money on efforts to create a more just society. If a business leader is not inclined to participate in such efforts, then she will most likely put greater importance on the characterological explanation for poverty. In this way her beliefs and behavior would be aligned. Psychologists have shown that such a strategy for resolving dissonance between belief and behavior is fairly common. Such a strategy for the resolution of dissonance pushes the business leader’s attention away from dismantling unjust structures that do not allow all people to have access to basic necessities. It also encourages a self-sufficient conception of virtue according to which it is the sole achievement of admirable individuals who are able to rise above their circumstances by resisting the negative influence of certain aspects of their situation. Closely related to this is the belief that virtue is both necessary and sufficient for overcoming poverty and/or becoming prosperous.

Thinking of virtue as an accomplishment of an individual who is impervious to the negative effects of her situation prevents the Filipino business leader from thinking of poverty as a form of social injustice. The latter kind of thinking is necessary for sustained acts of compassion that dismantle the societal arrangements and institutional policies that prevent large sections of the population from gaining access to tools and resources that could help them raise themselves out of poverty. Should we then abandon virtue as the situationists suggest? I think that an alternative worth exploring before taking such an extreme step is to think of virtue as something that depends on complex support systems; something that a person can only attain with substantial help from others. Filipino business leaders could shift into this relational conception of virtue by recalling the proverb ‘Kapag bukas ang kaban, natutukso kahit santo’ (When the coffers are left open even the saints are tempted). The

---

38 Tuason, “Those who were Born Poor” 109.
39 Clarke and Sison, “Voices from the Top of the Pile” 87.
40 Ross and Nisbett, The Person and the Situation 16.
41 Thinking that poverty is primarily a function of viciousness is also consistent with helping only the ‘deserving poor,’ which was already mentioned above. Clarke and Sison report that 54% of their respondents thought it was possible to distinguish the deserving from the undeserving poor and that some of these respondents accept patron-client relationships as a means for fulfilling social obligations to the poor (“Voices from the Top of the Pile” 69-70, 74).
proverb expresses a warning about the susceptibility of the virtuous person to temptations that arise in specific contexts and the need for vigilance on everyone’s part. The achievement of the virtuous person then crucially depends on being attentive to the kind of situations to which they are exposed. And it’s not just that they must pay attention to these situational pressures themselves, other people must pay attention too for their sake.

Space constraints do not permit a longer discussion of the worldview that comes with the Filipino proverb. Suffice it to say, however, that Filipinos put a premium on social harmony, value strong interpersonal relations with leaders, and conceive of agency along communal instead of individualistic lines. In all these respects the Filipino point of view resonates with those that prevail in many parts of East Asia. Evidence from social and cross-cultural psychology indicate that it is easier to correct the fundamental attribution error among East Asians. Even Doris accepts a similar position in Lack of Character when he says that Westerners have good reason to adopt ways of seeing and patterns of explanation that are more common in the East. An appreciation of the relationality of virtue can serve as a basis for a more robust response to the situationist challenge against virtue if a more comprehensive account of the Filipino understanding of character or virtue is developed. Here relationality means dependence on complex forms of interpersonal processes.

When the dependence of virtue on complex interpersonal processes is acknowledged, thinking about the traits of those who are poor or prosperous no longer goes against recognizing the situational determinants of poverty because one’s gaze does not become too narrowly focused on the individual. Thinking about virtue in this way also means looking closely at the socio-cultural structures, configuration of relationships, and operative social norms that make virtuous behavior possible. Moreover, a Catholic Filipino business leader who understands that whatever virtue she possesses depends on the systematic solicitude of those around her to help her along the path of goodness would probably be less inclined to condemn those who are not fortunate enough to have the right kind of social support. In turn, her effort to help those who are less fortunate than her would be focused on both the cultivation of virtue and careful attention to crafting policy and designing institutions that promote social justice. Finally, acknowledging that whatever virtue one possesses depends on the help of others goes some way in enabling the Filipino Catholic business leader to appreciate that virtue is a gift of nature, of grace, and of people whom one works with and serves.

---

44 Doris, Lack of Character 105-106.
45 In her paper on the interpersonal aspect of character Merritt shows that the very interpersonal processes that help us to do the right thing could also disrupt our efforts to become virtuous. Relational virtue must then be supplemented and possibly corrected by forms of support that do not depend on such interpersonal processes. Merritt thinks that virtue ethics must be supplemented with a decision procedure for those situations in which a supportive social environment could blind us to certain kinds of bad behavior. It’s worth noting, however, that the form of social support implied by the Filipino proverb is very different from the one that Merritt discusses in her paper. The former involves dealing with others as a fellow human being who is not only the recipient of support but also the focal point of one’s conscientious vigilance.
46 What I say here is partly borrowed from Adams who says: “In view of the deep and pervasive involvement of moral luck in the acquisition and persistence of virtue, it is inappropriate and misleading to think of virtue primarily as an individual achievement. But
Biography: Jacklyn A. Cleofas is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Philosophy of the Ateneo de Manila University. She earned her Ph.D. in Philosophy at the National University of Singapore. Her research interest is in ethical theory, especially metaethics and moral psychology. She has taught a course on normative ethics for undergraduates and courses on Virtue Ethics and Virtue Epistemology for graduate students. She may be reached at jcleofas@ateneo.edu.

that is no tragedy. We may well have a richer as well as less self-centered view of virtue if we regard it largely as gift—a gift of nature or of grace, or both, and normally also of people with whom one has lived.” See A Theory of Virtue, 165.