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What You Don't Know *Can* Hurt You: Situationism, Conscious Awareness, and Control

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Biography

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Abstract

The thesis of situationism says that situational factors can exert a significant influence on how we act, often without us being consciously aware that we are so influenced. In this paper, I examine how situational factors, or, more specifically, our *lack of conscious awareness* of their *influence* on our behavior, affect different measures of *control*. I further examine how our control is affected by the fact that situational factors also seem to *prevent* us from becoming *consciously aware* of our *reasons* for action. I argue that such lack of conscious awareness *decreases* the degree of control that agents have. However, I propose that while being influenced by situational factors in such ways may impair and diminish one's control, it (typically) does not eradicate one's control. I further argue that being influenced by situational factors, in the way set out above, also *decreases* one's degree of moral responsibility.

Keywords

Situationism, Conscious Awareness, Control, Moral Responsibility, Bystander Experiments

1. Introduction

The thesis of situationism says that situational factors can have a significant influence on how we act, *often* without us being *consciously aware* that we are so influenced. Some have discussed how being affected by situational factors impacts our (having) character and virtues (e.g., Doris 2002, Miller 2013). Others have focused on what situationism tells us about autonomy (Nahmias 2007), freedom (Nelkin 2005), moral responsibility (Vargas 2013), and how situationism relates to moral luck (Herdova & Kearns 2015).

In this paper, I examine how situational factors, or, more specifically, our *lack of conscious awareness* of their *influence* on our behavior, affect our *control*. I further examine how our control is affected by the fact that situational factors also seem to *prevent* us from becoming *consciously aware* of our *reasons* for action. (I refer here to *normative* reasons—those reasons which *justify* actions). I argue that such lack of conscious awareness *decreases* the degree of control that agents have. However, I propose that while being influenced by situational factors in such ways may impair and diminish one's control, it (typically) does not *eradicate* one's control.

In the concluding section of the paper, I consider how my arguments about situationism and control affect considerations about moral responsibility. I propose that being influenced by situational factors, in the way set out above, also *decreases* one's degree of moral responsibility (in virtue of decreasing one's degree of control). This is not to say that that being influenced by situational factors exonerates agents *altogether*—situationist agents (i.e., agents influenced by situational factors) may still be held responsible (and, in some cases, blameworthy) for their actions.

Before I proceed to support my main theses, some clarifications are in order. Below I set out some assumptions about the nature of conscious awareness, control and moral responsibility.

1.1 Conscious Awareness

Because much of the discussion below concerns cases in which agents lack conscious awareness of various things, it is a good idea to start with a note on how I shall understand the idea of *conscious awareness*. My aim is to make remarks about its nature that are relatively uncontroversial, and that do not commit me to any specific theory of conscious awareness.¹

How, then, should we think of conscious awareness? Though perhaps not *universal* or *essential* features of conscious awareness, I take it the following generally hold if S is consciously aware of X:

S can *reflect* on X (S is able to form states that are *about* X).

S can *report* the existence or obtaining of X.

X can easily and readily serve as the basis for S's non-automatic overt behavior, reasoning, inference, and other related *personal* (i.e., not unconscious) processes.

S's being aware of X has a distinctive phenomenal feel—*there's something it's like to be* for S to be aware of X.²

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1. Given the purpose of this paper, committing to one (controversial) theory over others would be to unnecessarily alienate those who hold different theories. I wish to remain neutral between such theories (e.g., between the different higher-order theories of consciousness, access theories of consciousness, phenomenal theories of consciousness, etc.).
 2. All of the above features correspond to different theories of conscious awareness, according to which being

Though, as I say, it may be true that some of these features may be absent in genuine cases of conscious awareness (e.g., we can conceive of a case when *S* cannot report that *X* because *S* is coerced into silence), in the vast majority of normal cases, all such features will be present. Conversely, in cases of unconscious awareness, the above features are (almost always) *absent*. So when one is, for example, consciously aware of a certain situational factor, one will be then, typically, able to reflect and report on it. Being consciously aware of this situational factor will also allow one to make use of this factor in non-automatic processes; for instance, one can formulate plans to utilize this factor or plan to avoid its influence, etc. Further, being aware of this situational factor will usually have a certain phenomenal feel—there will be something what it's like for the agent to be consciously aware of that situational factor.

1.2 Conscious Awareness, Control and Responsibility

How are conscious awareness and control related? Plausibly, an agent's conscious awareness of the relevant things can often *enhance* her control of her behavior. In a nutshell, if an agent is consciously aware of *X*, she can much more easily and straightforwardly formulate plans that incorporate *X*. Thus, for example, if an agent is consciously aware of a physical obstacle *O* to her performing an action *A*, she can plan her behavior in such a way that she avoids or overcomes *O* in executing her intention to *A*. Her conscious awareness of *O* helps the agent exercise greater control in translating her plans into action.

On the other hand, if the agent is *unaware* of *O* altogether, she cannot formulate plans that incorporate *O*. If she is *aware* of *O*, but not *consciously* aware of *O*, she will either not be able to formulate such plans at all, or not be able to do so with the ease and flexibility that she can when consciously aware of *O*. One can further expect that plans formed on the basis of unconscious awareness might lack the required complexity and detail, making them less effective. This is because, if an agent is merely *unconsciously* aware of *O*, *O* is not ready to serve as the basis of *S*'s non-automatic personal behavior, such as reporting, conscious reasoning, and so forth, all of which equip agents with more multifaceted or sophisticated means of control over their behavior.

In essence, conscious awareness often increases an agent's control. Such awareness enhances the agent's control over her putting her plans into action, which I have

consciously aware of something simply *amounts* to (one of) those features. One might hold, for example, that being consciously aware of *X* *just is* *X* being available for reports, etc. I do not wish, for the reasons set out above, to commit to any such strong claims.

illustrated by the example of an agent's conscious awareness of a *physical obstacle* to her action. There are other things, however, of which one might have (or lack) conscious awareness, and other ways in which one's control might be increased (or decreased) as a result.

Of particular interest to us, given the topic of this paper, is the idea that conscious awareness of (a) certain relevant causal influences on one's actions, and (b) some of one's reasons for action can enhance one's control over one's behavior. I shall argue for the related claim that *lacking* conscious awareness of (a) or (b) can *decrease* our control over our behavior (and can do so in more than one way). Certainly, the claim that a lack of conscious awareness of and due to situational factors can decrease control has been considered before. Mele and Shepherd, for instance, entertain the hypothesis that:

... people have very little control over their behavior ... [behaviour] is largely driven by the situations in which people find themselves and the effects these situations have on automatic behavior-producing processes. (2013, 68)³

In this paper, I investigate in depth the ways in which our lack of conscious awareness of the influence of situational factors, and of the reasons which these factors obscure from us, can decrease the control we exercise over our behavior.

One important reason to explore this topic is the fact that control is connected to other significant notions—most obviously to *moral responsibility*. Moral responsibility is typically thought to *require* control—an agent is responsible for her action only if she exercises sufficient control over it. One worry is, then, that, by decreasing an agent's control, the agent's lack of conscious awareness both of and due to the influence of situational factors *also* decreases the agent's moral responsibility.⁴ This worry comes in two varieties. First, we might worry that an agent's control is reduced to such an extent that she is entirely exculpated—that she bears no moral responsibility for her actions at all. Second, we might worry only that the agent is *less* responsible than she otherwise would have been, but is nonetheless responsible. In the moral responsibility section, I shall defend the latter claim.

It is worth noting that the claim that moral responsibility requires control is not uncontroversial. So-called non-volitionists reject this requirement, and, instead, insist

3. Mele and Shepherd do not, in the end, endorse this thesis.

4. This further presupposes that both control and responsibility come in degrees: i.e., we can have less or we can have more of either.

on other requirements that do not focus on control (for instance, Angela Smith [2008] proposes a *rational relations* view, according to which “To say that an agent is morally responsible for something ... is to say that that thing reflects her rational judgment in a way that makes it appropriate, in principle, to ask her to defend or justify it” [369]). In this paper I shall assume that non-volitionism is false, and that control is indeed central to moral responsibility.⁵

1.3 Outline

The paper proceeds as follows. In Section 2, I provide evidence from situationist experiments to the effect that agents lack conscious awareness of certain significant phenomena. In particular, I argue, in Section 2.1, that agents are often unaware of the *influence* of situational factors on their behavior. In Section 2.2, I establish that situational factors often make agents unaware of their *reasons* for action. I do not mean to suggest that agents subjected to powerful situational factors are *always* consciously unaware of the influence of these factors, or of their reasons for action. Indeed, in Section 2.3, I provide evidence that situational factors can affect us adversely even when we *are* consciously aware both of how they influence us and of our reasons for action. My point is simply that on *many* occasions, we lack such conscious awareness.

In Section 3, I show how this lack of conscious awareness can affect various measures of control. A measure of control is, roughly, something such that, if one *has* it, one’s overall amount control is higher than if one lacks it. I argue, in Section 3.1, that lacking conscious awareness of our reasons adversely affects our *ability* to act on reasons. In Section 3.2, I propose that lacking conscious awareness of the influence of situational factors on our behavior adversely affects our *ability to directly combat* such influence. In Section 3.3, I argue that our *reasons-responsiveness* is decreased by our lacking either of these kinds of conscious awareness. In Section 3.4, I suggest that the effectiveness with which we translate our values into action is also decreased by our lacking either of these kinds of conscious awareness.

In Section 4, I conclude by addressing the implications of the above arguments for moral responsibility. In essence, I argue that moral responsibility is somewhat diminished

5. Given this assumption, one possible reaction to some of the results I adduce (that agents are less responsible than we might think) may be to reject the idea that control is so central to responsibility. However, there are plausibly ways in which lack of conscious awareness of and due to the influence of situational factors may threaten moral responsibility other than by affecting one’s control. It is, however, beyond the scope of my paper to entertain this hypothesis.

in those agents who lack conscious awareness of the influence of situational factors, or of their reasons. Though reduced, however, responsibility is not eliminated.

2. Situationist Experiments and Lack of Conscious Awareness

As mentioned above, there are two ways in which we might lack conscious awareness when subject to certain situational factors. First, agents are often unaware of the ways in which these factors may or do influence their behavior. Second, situational factors may hinder agents from becoming consciously aware of their normative reasons for action. In this section, I examine both of these ways in more depth, and provide evidence that many situationist agents indeed lack such types of conscious awareness.

2.1 Lack of Conscious Awareness of the Influence of Situational Factors

Oftentimes we *are* indeed consciously aware of the different situational factors in our environment and how such situational factors affect our actions. For instance, I may want to cross the street but there is a red light for pedestrians, so I patiently wait for it to turn green. Once it does, I start walking across. Even though I may not explicitly think, in that very moment, about the fact that I started to cross the road because the light turned green, I will, most likely, be able to explain why I did so when I did (and point to the light turning green) *if* prompted to give an explanation (and report on the light being green, etc.). I am thus consciously aware of the green (and the red) pedestrian light and its impact on my actions. Examples similar to these are quite usual and abundant. However, various situationist experiments show that we in fact often lack conscious awareness of the (sometimes rather subtle) influence that situational factors have on our behavior. In the words of Matthew Lieberman:

All of the most classic studies in the early days of social psychology demonstrated that situations can exert a powerful force over the actions of individuals...people are largely unaware of the influence of situations on behavior, whether it is their own or someone else's behavior. (2005, 746)

Take, for example, the *bystander experiments*, which show that the number of people one is accompanied by often makes a difference with regards to whether one offers assistance in an emergency situation. According to the so called *bystander effect*, the likelihood of helping in an emergency situation *inversely correlates* with the number of people present in that situation. In other words, the bystander experiments show that *the more* people

present in an emergency setting, *the less likely* it is that any of the individuals present will intervene. In an experiment conducted by Latané and Darley (1968), subjects witnessed smoke filling up a room. Out of those subjects who witnessed the smoke *on their own*, most of the subjects—18 out of 24—intervened in light of this (apparent) emergency. However, the number of intervening subjects was significantly smaller in a condition where the subjects were *accompanied* by two passive experimental confederates. In this condition, only one out of 10 experimental subjects intervened.

Similar results were observed by Darley and Latané (1968) in another bystander experiment concerning a medical emergency. In this experiment, the subjects overheard an (apparent) epileptic attack. Out of those who thought they were *alone* to witness this attack, 85% intervened in the specified timeframe (125s). In a condition where *four* other people also overheard the attack, only 31% of the subjects intervened in the said timeframe. Given the structure of the experiments, with the experimental conditions differing only in the number of people present, it is plausible to assume that whether the subjects intervened largely depended on their being accompanied or not.

Now, it is very likely that most (if not all) subjects in the above experiments were consciously aware of the salient situational factor (being accompanied/number of people present). However, the post-experiment debriefing interviews suggest that at least some of the subjects *lacked* conscious awareness of the *influence* of the relevant situational factor. With regards to the smoke experiment, Latané and Darley note that the majority of the experimental subjects claimed not to have paid any significant attention to the reactions of the people who accompanied them:

Despite the obvious and powerful inhibiting effect of other bystanders, subjects almost invariably claimed that they had paid little or no attention to the reactions of the other people in the room. (1968, 220)

If that is indeed the case, it is implausible to conclude that the experimental subjects were consciously aware of how the presence of other people affected them, since this would require that they paid enough attention to those people and their reactions in the first place. There is, of course, a possibility that at least some of the subjects were indeed consciously aware of such an influence, but they did not want to disclose this fact to the experimenters (perhaps they were embarrassed about their reaction or, more precisely, lack thereof). Latané and Darley thus conclude that:

Although the presence of other people actually had a strong and pervasive effect on the subjects' reactions, they were either unaware of this, or unwilling to admit it. (1968, 220) [italics added]

One certainly ought to be cautious about taking any such post-experiment interviews at face value. However, despite the fact that some experimental subjects might have been dishonest about what they took notice of (and thus about what influenced their actions), it is highly unlikely that *all* of the experimental subjects were lying in this manner.

The experimenters observed similar debriefing responses in the medical emergency experiment. Darley and Latané explain that they:

asked all subjects whether the presence or absence of other bystanders had entered their minds during the time that they were hearing the fit. Subjects [accompanied by other people] ... reported that they were aware that other people were present, but they felt that this made no difference to their own behavior. (1968, 381)

Again, while one may be somewhat (and rightly) concerned about the reliability of these subjective reports (and intentional or unintentional confabulation), it is implausible that all of the experimental subjects were dishonest about the perceived situational influences (or lack thereof) on their behavior. The post-experiment interviews in the bystander experiments thus provide evidence to the effect that at least *some* subjects in these experiments lacked conscious awareness of being influenced by the relevant situational factors.

Other situationist experiments also support the thesis that agents often lack conscious awareness of the influence of situational factors. 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 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, in comparison to when it had a picture of flowers. Given the results, it seems that being exposed to the images of eyes had significant influence on whether people paid for the refreshments or not.

Were the experimental subjects consciously aware of the fact that the images on the instruction sheet had this kind of impact on their behavior? Due to the lack of post-experiment interviews in this case, it may seem more difficult to establish what the subjects were consciously aware of, at the time they had the opportunity to contribute to

the honesty box. However, given the findings on how sensitive our perceptual system is to different social cues such as faces (see, e.g., Emery 2000; Haxby et al. 2000),⁶ Bateson et al. (2006) entertain the hypothesis that the subjects were *not* consciously aware of how the images impacted them:

it is therefore possible that the images exerted an automatic and unconscious effect on the participants' perception that they were being watched. (2006, 413)

When discussing how such situational cues may enhance cooperative behavior—by inducing a feeling of “being observed”, and, subsequently, triggering “reputational concerns”—the experimenters further build on the thesis that the aforementioned situational cues affect agents on an unconscious level (with agents lacking conscious awareness of this influence):

If even very weak, subconscious cues, such as the photocopied eyes used in this experiment can strongly enhance cooperation, it is quite possible that the cooperativeness observed in other studies results from the presence in the experimental environment of subtle cues evoking the psychology of being observed. The power of these subconscious cues may be sufficient to override the explicit instructions of the experiment to the effect that behaviour is anonymous. (2006, 413)

There are other experiments in this paradigm, involving even more subtle face/eye-based situational cues, which demonstrate that people often lack conscious awareness of the impact such cues have on their behavior. In the dictator game experiment, Rigdon et al. (2009) tracked the amount of contributions in relation to the arrangement of three dots on a sheet, which the subjects used for noting down their contributions. The experimenters found that, on average, male players whose sheet of paper contained three dots arranged in the shape of a face contributed \$3.00; while those in the neutral dots condition contributed \$1.41. Given that the experimental conditions were relevantly similar except for the arrangement of the dots on the contribution sheet, it seems that the shape of the dot arrangement largely contributed to the amount of one's donations.

The above experiment (and other similar experiments in this paradigm) shows that even extremely subtle cues in the form of a face or a pair of eyes can have a rather strong impact on what people do (in this case, how much money [or whether] they contribute

6. These references are taken from Bateson et al. 2006.

in the dictator game). More importantly, within the context of the current debate, it is highly unlikely that the experimental subjects were consciously aware that they were being so influenced. Rigdon and colleagues agree with this diagnosis when explaining the mechanism through which such cues likely influence the agents' behavior:

Processing the stimulus ultimately activates the fusiform face area of the brain, making the environment seem—at a pre-conscious level, perhaps accessible to the decision-making process but not to introspection... (2009, 363).

Aside from appealing to the workings of the human perceptual system, there are at least two other points which reinforce the conclusion that many subjects in the above experiments lack conscious awareness of the influence of the situational cues.⁷ In the first instance, in many of the experimental situations (and *similar* situations outside the experimental setting), being consciously aware of the influence of situational cues on one's behavior requires that one *knows* that the relevant situational cues *can* indeed have such an influence (or, in some cases, one needs to have knowledge about the mechanisms in virtue of which these cues might influence one's behavior). However, most people do not know the relevant research, and are not likely to be familiar with the pertinent facts: people do not typically know how seeing faces or eyes (or subtle cues in the shape of faces or eyes) might affect them. Similarly, not many people are educated about the bystander effect and the potential influence of the presence of other people on their behavior. This applies to many other documented effects of situational cues. Some of these show that a mood boost, resulting from, for example, the agent being subject to pleasant fragrances (Baron 1997), or the agent finding a small amount of money (Isen and Levin 1972) is often conducive to her helping others. Again, this is not something that the general public is (well) educated about. It is thus unlikely that people are, typically, consciously aware of the effect that the different situational cues have on their behavior because they lack knowledge they could be potentially so influenced.

Secondly, many people are likely to find being influenced by such arbitrary situational factors as *undesirable*—typically, we value our decisions and our actions being based on reasons and other relevant facts. For instance, it is valuable if our decision to intervene in a medical emergency is based on the fact *that* there is someone who needs medical attention, *that* we are able to provide the relevant kind of assistance, *that* helping

7. A good case can be made that, sometimes, subjects are not even consciously aware of the situational cues *themselves*. I do not, however, need to establish this point for my purposes here.

someone in need is the moral or virtuous thing to do, etc. On the contrary, it is somewhat troubling if our decision to help were to be largely based on situational factors like the ones outlined above (for example, how many other people one is accompanied by, whether there are posters with faces in our immediate surroundings, etc.). Such decisions or actions would seem to lack the appropriate motivation. Now, if it is the case that many people would find the influence of such arbitrary and normatively irrelevant situational factors undesirable, it seems reasonable to expect that—if they were, at the same time, appropriately aware of such (potential) influence—they would attempt to combat it. However, the situationist data suggest that people often do succumb to such influences (and, at the same time, the subjects often do not appear to try to combat those either). Then, given the perceived undesirability of this type of influence, it thus makes it unlikely that people are consciously aware of it. This is further supported by the observation that people who are educated about the influence of situational factors, such as the bystander effect, are less likely to be adversely affected by it (for a more extended discussion on this see, for example, Mele and Shepherd 2013).

2.2 Situational Cues and Lack of Conscious Awareness of Reasons

Aside from agents lacking conscious awareness of the situational influence, it may be that, in some cases, the situational factors prevent agents from becoming consciously aware of the relevant normative reasons. First of all, agents may be unaware, due to their being influenced by situational factors, that a certain fact which is a reason obtains. Second of all, agents may be unaware, due to the situational influence, that a reason is a *sufficient* or a reason for action (i.e., the kind of reason that determines what one ought to do). Let me expand on and illustrate these points with different situationist experiments.

What does it mean to say that a subject may not be consciously aware that a certain fact, which is a reason to act, obtains? Simply that there is a fact or a state of affairs which also is a reason for the subject to act in a certain way, and the subject is not consciously aware of this fact/state of affairs. Take, for instance, the bystander smoke experiment. The relevant fact, which is also the subject's reason to act, is that there is a potentially dangerous situation occurring (there is smoke filling up a room). That there is such a potentially dangerous situation is a reason for the subject to do something about it—to alert the authorities, to try to locate the source of the smoke (or whatever else one may do in such circumstances to avert the potential danger). To lack conscious awareness of this fact amounts to failing to consciously become aware that one is facing

a potentially dangerous situation. This is, indeed, what seems to happen in the smoke bystander experiment. When the subjects were asked in the debriefing interviews if they encountered any difficulties while in the waiting room, most subjects did mention the smoke. However, when further prompted to explain what happened, Latané and Darley state that:

Subjects who had not reported the smoke ... *uniformly* 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. (1968, 219) [italics added]

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. This means that they failed to consciously recognize or consciously become aware that there was a potentially dangerous event occurring which needed to be reported. Of course, as explained in the previous section, one may be concerned about the reliability of these debriefing reports. However, it is unlikely that all such reports, or even a large proportion, were unreliable.

Another good example to illustrate a lack of conscious awareness of reasons is the *Good Samaritan* experiment, conducted by Darley and Batson (1973), in which seminary students were asked to give a talk in a nearby building. Making their way to the lecture hall, the seminarians came across a person in apparent need of medical help. 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 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, while the hurry factor did make a significant difference with regards to whether they offered assistance or not, their lecture content did not.

In the post-experiment interviews, all subjects mentioned the victim—on reflection—as possibly needing help. However, Darley and Batson suggest that some of the participants seem not to have worked this out when they were near the victim, either (i) failing to interpret the situation in a timely fashion as that of someone requiring help, or (ii) being delayed in their empathetic reaction. According to the experimenters, it would be inaccurate to claim, about at least some of the subjects, that they:

realized the victim's possible distress, and then chose to ignore it; instead, because of the time pressures, they did not perceive the scene in the alley as an occasion for an ethical decision. (1973, 108)

This suggests that at least some participants failed to interpret the relevant reason as a fact (that someone needed help) and/or that they failed to recognize the fact as something that gives them a reason to help (in those cases where their empathetic reaction might have been delayed).

This is, however, not true for all of the subjects in the Good Samaritan experiment. For some, it is more accurate to say, according to the experimenters, that they *decided* not to help. This choice was presumably a result of a conflict between stopping to help and fulfilling the duty to carry out the experiment. In these cases, then, it seems more fitting to say that subjects recognized the relevant fact as a reason to act, but decided to act in line with a conflicting reason. This may suggest that these subjects were unaware of the *strength* of the reason they had to help (and the comparative *weakness* of the reason they had to get to the talk on time)—they were not aware that their reason to help was *sufficient*. Both of these sets of judgments and attendant behaviors (failing to interpret a reason as a fact and failing to recognize that a reason is sufficient) may be ascribed to the influence of the relevant situational factor (being in a hurry).

It should be noted that the above remarks about a lack of conscious awareness do not apply solely to the subjects in the situationist experiments. Given the structure of the experiments, it is reasonable to assume that the experimental results generalize to the population at large. After all, the experimental subjects were assigned their experimental conditions randomly, and the subjects were not chosen for the experiments on the basis of their susceptibility to situational factors. That is, the data above (and other data from the situationist literature) strongly suggest that all of us are very often significantly affected by the presence of various situational factors. In other words, what we may do (or refrain from doing) in different scenarios largely depends on the presence of arbitrary situational factors, and, what is more, we often *lack conscious awareness of this dependence*.

2.3 Situationism and the Presence of Conscious Awareness

It needs to be noted, however, that in some situationist experiments, the subjects do seem to be consciously aware of the influence of situational factors, and, at the same time, these situational factors do not seem to prevent people from becoming consciously aware of their normative reasons for action. Consider, for instance, the obedience

experiments conducted by Stanley Milgram (1963, 1974). The experiments focused on studying subjects' behavior under the influence of authority. Subjects, who believed that they were taking part in a learning experiment, were asked, by a figure of authority, to deliver apparent electric shocks to "learners", upon the learners providing wrong or no answers to the relevant questions. Since the subjects were strongly encouraged (by the authority figure) to keep delivering the shocks despite the learners' apparent discomfort (which, in some experimental conditions, was rather graphically displayed), it is likely that the subjects were consciously aware of the authority's influence on their decision to keep going on with the experiment, and to keep delivering what appeared to be increasingly higher and higher shocks.⁸ (This assumes, of course, that the subjects did not have other reasons to stick with the experiment, such as that they would enjoy causing pain to the learners).

It is extremely plausible that many of the subjects in these experiments were not just consciously aware that (a) the shocks apparently caused someone extreme pain (given the nature of the auditory and/or visual feedback they received), but also that (b) this fact is a reason to stop pulling the levers, and (c) this reason is *sufficient*. Despite this, these subjects acted in line with the requests of the confederate. Milgram notes that the experimental procedure created "extreme levels" of nervous tension in the subjects, many of which:

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. (1963, 375)

8. 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 (i.e., pulling all 30 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 learner apparently receiving the shocks would bang on the wall and then stop providing answers.

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. (1963, 376)

Such levels of distress are indicative of the fact that the subjects were conflicted about their actions and about continuing with the experiment, and that they were appropriately consciously aware of their reasons to stop delivering the apparently lethal shocks.

Not every case of being influenced by situational factors is thus of a kind where people lack the relevant conscious awareness, yet those kinds of situations seem to be abundant nonetheless. In the following section, I explore the implications of lacking such conscious awareness on considerations about agents' control.

3. Lack of Conscious Awareness and Measures of Control

In this section, then, I shall examine four different measures of control and how an agent's lacking conscious awareness, resulting from the influence of situational factors, can affect these measures of control. Recall that by "measure of control" I mean a feature such that the greater degree to which an agent has this feature, the greater degree of control the agent exercises over her behavior (all other things being equal). The features I examine below include the ability to act on one's sufficient reasons, the ability to directly combat pernicious influences on one's behavior, reasons-responsiveness, and the effectiveness with which one translates one's long-term values into action. Each of these is a measure of control—having these features (or having them to greater degrees) enhances one's control, while lacking them decreases one's control. I shall argue that a lack of conscious awareness (either of the influence of situational factors on one's behavior or of one's reasons) adversely affects *each* of these measures of control.

3.1 Ability to act on (sufficient) reasons

The first measure of control we shall consider is the ability to act on sufficient reasons. In my terminology, having a *sufficient* normative reason to perform an action entails having an *obligation* to perform it. In many of the experiments I discuss in section 2, agents have sufficient reasons—for example, the seminarians *ought* to help the person at the side of the road; the subjects in the smoke bystander experiment *ought* to alert someone of the potentially dangerous situation. In this subsection, I shall set out why

agents' lacking conscious awareness of their sufficient reasons rids them of their ability to act on such reasons.

Before this, however, it is worth mentioning why such an ability is a measure of control in the first place. One simple reason is that *abilities in general* are measures of control. Broadly-speaking, an agent has more control the more she is able to do. Another reason is that the ability to act on sufficient reasons is a particularly *significant* ability—it is the ability to be guided by reason—by what one ought to do. If someone *lacks* this ability—be it a psychopath, someone who is severely schizophrenic, etc.—we judge that she is also *less in control* of her actions—rational considerations simply cannot move her.

Why does an agent's lacking conscious awareness prevent her from being able to act on her sufficient reasons? Roughly put, in order to act on one's sufficient reasons, one must know about these reasons (one must know, at the very least, that they are facts). If one does *not* know about one's sufficient reasons, then, one cannot act on them. The blind person who walks obliviously past a person in medical need cannot help this person because she has no idea at all that there is anyone near her who needs help. Of course, should the blind person become aware of the person in need (perhaps because the person manages to shout for help), *then* she is able to act on her reasons to help. But, up until this time, she is not able to help.

Similarly, then, an agent who, due to the influence of situational factors, is not consciously aware of her sufficient reasons to act, *cannot* act on these reasons. She lacks the ability to act on her sufficient reasons because she is not conscious of these reasons. The seminarian who, due to being in a hurry, fails to (consciously) notice that the person at the side of the road (apparently) needs help, cannot act on the basis that the person needs help. The subject who is not consciously aware that there is a potentially dangerous situation cannot act on this fact.

Perhaps, one might argue, an agent need not be *consciously* aware of her sufficient reasons to be able to act on them, but rather simply *aware* of them—consciously *or* unconsciously. It is, however, deeply unlikely in the cases that we are considering that being merely unconsciously aware of sufficient reasons would enable the agent to act on these reasons. When a person unconsciously acts on a reason, she cannot say why she is doing what she is doing (indeed, she may not even be conscious of *what* she is doing). Situationist experiments such as the bystander studies and the Good Samaritan experiment concern actions that one can *only* perform for a reason *if* one is consciously aware of this reason. Those subjects who *do* help someone in need, or alert people of a potentially dangerous situation, can *of course* say why they are doing so. Consider how strange it would be if someone were unable to tell you that they were helping a person

because this person needed help, or how bizarre it would be if someone could alert the authorities after seeing smoke, but simply could not report that the smoke (and potential fire) were *why* she alerted them. In the kinds of cases relevant to our discussion, then, agents are unable to act on reasons unless these agents are consciously aware of these reasons. Because situational factors can block such conscious awareness (as section 2 spells out), situationist agents are often not able to act on their sufficient reasons.

3.2 Ability to directly combat pernicious influences

Another measure of control affected by the undue influence of situational cues is one's ability to *directly* combat or counter pernicious influences on one's behavior. This may affect those situationist agents who lack conscious awareness of being influenced by situational factors (rather than of their reasons for action). This is because directly (and effectively) combating negative influences on one's behavior requires that one is consciously aware of such influences—otherwise one does not (consciously) know *that* there is anything to combat or counter in the first place. Consider, for example, combating the bystander effect. In order to be able to directly attempt to eliminate this effect on an agent's behavior, the agent must be consciously aware that she is (or can be) so influenced. This enables her to undertake direct measures to counter this effect. For example, she may purposefully direct her attention away from other people, exert more effort in overcoming any social pressure she might feel, or remind herself that the presence of other people ought not to make a difference to what she should do/what the right thing to do is, etc. Without conscious awareness of the effect bystanders may have on one's behavior, one cannot directly employ any such strategies which eradicate (or at least lessen) this effect on one's behavior.

Even if we assume that being *unconsciously* aware of the potential negative influence of situational factors might *too*, indirectly, allow the agent to employ some strategies against this influence, such strategies will be certainly less effective. Being consciously aware of the pernicious influences of situational factors gives an agent more, and more effective, ways in which she can combat this influence. Given that some situationist agents do indeed lack conscious awareness of this influence (as set out in Section 2), we can conclude that their ability to directly combat pernicious influences is eliminated. Such an agent thus only retains an indirect ability of this kind (which is arguably a lot less effective).

3.3 Reasons-Responsiveness

Ascertaining how responsive an agent is to her reasons is another way by which we might measure the control an agent has over her behavior. Roughly-speaking, the more responsive an agent is to her reasons, the more she is in control of her actions. This is because to be so in control is, in part, to be *guided* by one's reasons.⁹ Exactly how the idea of reasons-responsiveness should be spelled out is a difficult and interesting question.¹⁰ For our purposes, however, we do not need to rely on a particular theory of reasons-responsiveness. It will suffice to say that an agent is more reasons-responsive in a particular situation the greater her capacity to recognize, understand, deliberate about, reflect on, and act on the basis of her reasons.¹¹ Thus, for example, a psychopath who is simply unable to grasp moral reasons for action is (far) less reasons-responsive than the average person—she does not recognize the moral reasons she has, she does not understand the idea that they *are* reasons, she does not act on their basis, etc.

Reasons-responsiveness obviously comes in degrees (one can recognize more or fewer reasons, one can have greater or lesser understanding of them, etc.). In this subsection, I shall present two arguments that situational factors, and the lack of conscious awareness they bring about, *decreases* agents' reasons-responsiveness (I do not claim, however, that agents' reasons-responsiveness is eliminated entirely).

As stated above, situational factors can cause agents to lack conscious awareness of at least two things—first, agents might be rendered unaware of their normative reasons for action (such as when the bystander effect leads agents to interpret smoke as harmless, and thus causes them to be unaware of their reasons to alert someone), and second, agents might be made unaware of the very fact that these situational factors are influencing them (agents subject to the bystander effect are often not conscious of the fact that their actions are highly influenced by their being accompanied). *Both* of

9. Fischer and Ravizza 1998 spell out their notion of *guidance control* as an agent's being reasons-responsive, while Wolf 1990 conceives of the type of control required for freedom as being tightly connected to an agent's ability to be guided by her reasons.

10. The most influential such account is that of Fischer and Ravizza 1998. See Herdova and Kearns (MS) for a close study of how the influence of situational factors affects agents' reasons-responsiveness as conceived of by Fischer and Ravizza.

11. Reasons-responsiveness does not simply amount to the *ability* to act on one's sufficient reasons. An agent may have the above-mentioned capacities without being able to act on her sufficient reasons because, for example, external obstacles prevent her from exercising these capacities. In such a case, the agent may count as reasons-responsive without being able to act on her sufficient reasons. The measure of control considered in this subsection is thus different from the measure of control considered in 3.1.

these ways in which agents can lack conscious awareness can decrease agents' reasons-responsiveness. Let us consider them in turn.

Why does the fact that an agent lacks conscious awareness of her reasons make her less reasons-responsive? Simply put, an agent's lacking conscious awareness of her reasons is at least partly *constitutive* of her having a lower degree of reasons-responsiveness than someone who *has* such conscious awareness. In subsection 1.1, I highlighted various features of conscious awareness. These included the fact that when an agent is consciously aware of X, X can readily serve as the basis for her overt behavior, reasoning, inferring, etc.—X can be incorporated into the agent's plans with ease and flexibility. They also included the fact that the agent can reflect on X, and the fact that she can report on X. If an agent is *not* consciously aware of X, she does not have all of these capacities. But it is exactly these capacities, amongst others, that make up an agent's reasons-responsiveness. The more easily an agent can base her behavior on her reasons, can reflect on them, deliberate about them, report them, etc., the more reasons-responsive she is. Thus having conscious awareness of reasons increases the degree to which one is reasons-responsive.

A *lack* of conscious awareness of one's reasons, then, results in a lower degree of reasons-responsiveness. And because, as I have argued in Section 2, certain situational factors often *cause* such a lack of awareness, these factors thereby reduce agents' reasons-responsiveness. In so doing, these situational factors reduce the control agents have over their behavior.

Why might the fact that an agent lacks *conscious* awareness of the influence of situational factors make her less reasons-responsive? The idea is simple enough. If we are not consciously aware of the influence of situational factors on us, then, partially *because* of this lack of awareness, many such factors can (and do) make us worse at forming beliefs about reasons on the basis of evidence. Being worse at this is *itself* one way of being less reasons-responsive. Thus when we are not consciously aware of the influence of situational factors on us, we are less reasons-responsive than we otherwise would be.

I take it that the second premise of the above argument (that being worse at forming evidence-based beliefs about reasons translates to being less reasons-responsive) is relatively obvious—part of what contributes to one's degree of reasons-responsiveness is how well one forms beliefs about reasons on the basis of one's evidence. What of the first premise—that it is precisely our lack of *conscious* awareness of the influence of situational factors which allows these situational factors to adversely affect how we form beliefs about reasons? It is clear that situational factors *do* adversely affect the manner in which we form beliefs about reasons. Those subjects in the bystander experiments who

are accompanied have just as much evidence that someone is in medical need, or that there is a potentially dangerous situation, as those who are unaccompanied. Despite this, many such subjects fail to realize these facts. Situational factors often do, then, make us worse at forming evidence-based beliefs about our reasons.

Part of why this is so is that we cannot directly combat the influence of situational factors, and part of why we cannot directly combat this influence is that we are not *consciously aware* of it (see 3.2 for a more in depth defense of these claims). In essence, because we are not consciously aware of the ways in which situational factors influence us, we cannot effectively counter the negative ways in which these situational factors affect how we form beliefs about reasons. Thus by lacking conscious awareness of the influence of situational factors, these factors can render us less reasons-responsive than we otherwise would be.

I conclude, then, that reasons-responsiveness is often diminished due to an agent's lacking conscious awareness of either her reasons or the influence of situational factors on her. Given that reasons-responsiveness is a measure of control (because the more reasons-responsive one is, the more control one enjoys), we may further conclude that an agent's control can be diminished when she is not consciously aware of her reasons or how situational factors affect her.

3.4 Translating long-term goals and values into action

Being affected by situational factors and lacking the relevant kinds of conscious awareness also makes us less effective in translating our long-term goals and values into action. These goals and values may include helping others, acting compassionately or with kindness, having certain religious values, helping oneself or self-preservation, etc.

In the first instance, translating long-term goals or values into action can be negatively affected by one's lack of conscious awareness of *reasons*. This is because the implementation of such goals and values requires that the agent *perceives* the relevant situation as an *occasion* for their execution. For example, implementing one's goal of assisting others in need requires that one is aware that one is presented with an opportunity to assist someone. If an agent lacks awareness of normative reasons, she is rather unlikely to perceive her situation as an occasion to translate the corresponding long-term goals and values into action. This is because recognizing that one has a normative reason to A just *amounts to* recognizing that A-ing is needed or justified in the given situation. For example, recognizing that one has a (normative) reason to help amounts to recognizing that one is in a situation where help is needed.

Now, if an agent is *unconsciously* aware of the relevant normative reasons, and thus unconsciously recognizes that she is facing a situation where her goals or values can be implemented, this gives her *some* opportunity to translate these into action (in comparison with a case when she lacks awareness altogether). However, being *consciously* aware of one's reasons, and, correspondingly, consciously recognizing that one has an opportunity to translate one's goals into action, significantly enhances one's effectiveness or chance of doing so (due to increased flexibility, etc.).

Now, as I have shown above, at least in some experiments, agents do lack conscious awareness of their reasons for action due to being influenced by certain situational factors. It is thus, minimally, more difficult for these agents (and other agents in relevantly similar situations) to translate their values and goals into action, in comparison with those agents who *are* consciously aware of their reasons for action. (One might even suggest that some of the former agents are *unable* to translate their goals and values into action altogether if they lack conscious awareness of the relevant reasons).

Translating goals and values into action may be negatively affected not only by one's lack of conscious awareness of reasons, but also by one's lacking conscious awareness of being influenced by situational factors. Suppose that an agent values not being influenced by some normatively irrelevant factor. For instance, she might strongly disvalue that her decisions about whether to help out in an emergency situation should be based solely (or at all) on things such as the clothes the person in need of assistance is wearing, or, relevant to the discussion above, whether there are other bystanders around. Now, if this agent is exposed to such situational factors and ends up being influenced by them (due to the fact that she lacks conscious awareness of their influence and thus fails to combat it), she will then fail to act in accordance with her values. An agent's implementation of long-term goals and values into action may be, then, negatively affected by her failing to become consciously aware of the influence of situational factors as well.

4. Moral Responsibility

I have shown above that the lack of conscious awareness which may occur when agents are influenced by certain situational factors diminishes various measures of control. All four measures of control that I discuss in the previous section are indeed negatively affected by such situational influence. Recall that both the ability to act on sufficient reasons as well as the ability to directly combat pernicious influences on one's behavior are arguably completely eradicated if one lacks the relevant conscious awareness (possibly leaving the agent only with an indirect—and a lot less effective—ability of the

latter kind). Further, the effectiveness with which one translates long-term goals and values into action, while maybe not completely eliminated, is significantly decreased. With regards to reasons-responsiveness, this measure of control is also diminished given the fact that part of what makes a person reasons-responsive is *precisely* that one is consciously aware of the relevant reasons.

What does this mean for the *overall* amount of control of those agents whose behavior is influenced by situational factors in this way? The most straightforward conclusion is that the overall level of control that such agents have is *diminished*. After all, the different measures of control are what *constitutes* an agent's having control, and so diminishing one or more measures of control available to the agent will also diminish her overall amount of control.

Why not then say, in the light of the above observations about different measures of control, that a situationist agent, whose measures of control are affected by an undue situational influence, lacks control of her behavior altogether? Simply because the situationist data do not warrant this kind of strong conclusion—while situational cues may diminish the control an agent has over her behavior, they do not make her completely powerless. First, there are some measures of control which, even if somewhat negatively affected, are not completely eradicated (such as reasons-responsiveness). Second, there are arguably some measures of control which are not affected at all by the situational influence and the attendant lack of conscious awareness.¹² The situationist agents thus retain some control. However, in comparison with those who are not so influenced, agents who do lack conscious awareness of the situational influences on them, or of their reasons for action, will have, keeping everything else equal, *less* control over their actions.

What of implications for moral responsibility? Assuming volitionism, the view on which moral responsibility *requires* control, decreased behavior control correlates with decreased responsibility. In other words, the more control one has, the more responsible one is. Conversely, the less control one has, the less responsible one is. So, those agents who are influenced by situational factors in the way outlined above will be *less* responsible for what they do, in comparison with someone not so influenced who acts in a similar

12. These may include, for instance, *self-control* and *the ability to do otherwise*. Of course, some may try to claim that even these measures of control might be significantly affected when one is influenced by situational factors in the way set out above. It is, unfortunately, beyond the scope of my paper to engage with this point here. It should be noted though that defending myself against this worry is not essential to my argument—as long as the situationist agent retains some relevant proportion of at least one of the measures of control considered in Section 3, then one cannot claim that this agent lacks control altogether.

way (again, keeping everything else equal). Take someone who fails to help due to the bystander effect. According to my line of reasoning, this person will be less responsible than someone who fails to help but who is not subject to the influence of the relevant situational factors. This is because the first agent will have less control over what she does than the latter agent. However, it is important to bear in mind that situationist agents ought not be excused altogether for what they do—given that their control is not completely diminished, neither is their moral responsibility.

Some may think this last claim is too quick. Perhaps, such people may venture, some of the measures of control that are eliminated by a lack of conscious awareness caused by situational factors are *required* for having *any* amount responsibility whatsoever. Of the four measures of control discussed above, only two are plausibly eradicated completely (these are the abilities to act on sufficient reasons and to directly combat pernicious influences).¹³ In my opinion, of these two measures of control, only the first is a plausible candidate for being required for moral responsibility.¹⁴ Indeed, Susan Wolf claims that “an agent is responsible if and only if the agent can do the right thing for the right reasons.” (Wolf 1990, 68). In essence, Wolf claims that an agent is responsible for an action only if she is able to act on her sufficient reasons. (One argument for this position runs as follows: free will is required for responsibility [an agent is responsible for an action only if she performs it freely], and free will is best understood as the ability to do the right thing for the right reasons/sufficient reasons; thus such an ability is a necessary condition of responsibility.)

Any view, however, which requires of moral responsibility that an agent possesses certain *abilities* should be treated with considerable caution. This is because, since Harry Frankfurt (1969), various cases have been concocted that (at least seem to) show that responsible agents need not possess some specific abilities. Consider the following case, based on Frankfurt’s, that specifically targets the claim that an agent is responsible only if she is able to act on her sufficient reasons:

Ethan has sufficient reason to help someone nearby to him—Warren—who is in medical need. Unbeknownst to him, if he even shows signs of

13. Agents adversely affected by their lack of conscious awareness may be *less* reasons-responsive and *less* effective in translating their values into action, but they are not *totally* unresponsive to reasons, nor *completely* ineffective at translating their values into action.

14. The ability to directly combat pernicious influences on one’s behavior is not *required* for responsibility in part because one may lack this ability and yet still succeed in *indirectly* combating such influences, in which case one would be praiseworthy (and hence responsible) for one’s actions.

choosing to help Warren, a spell cast by a powerful witch, Willow, will make him instead choose to walk past Warren, without doing anything to help. As it happens, however, Ethan decides entirely on his own to walk past Warren without doing anything to help—the spell did not need to kick in at all.

In such a case, Ethan is *responsible* (indeed, blameworthy) for not helping Warren (and thus responsible for failing to act on his sufficient reasons). After all, Ethan's choice not to help Warren is made perfectly under his own steam—the spell has nothing to do with him making the choice. Indeed, had Willow not cast the spell, Ethan would have made the same decision, for the same reasons, and in the same way. Ethan is nevertheless *unable* to help (or even choose to help) Warren, and thus unable to act on his sufficient reasons. This is because, should Ethan show any sign at all of choosing to help, the spell would kick in and prevent him from doing so. Therefore, such an ability is not required for moral responsibility.

I conclude, then, that a lack of conscious awareness of the influence of situational factors, or of one's reasons for action, brought about by the situations one faces, can diminish the degree of control one exercises over one's behavior. In turn (assuming volitionism), this decrease in control mitigates one's moral responsibility—one is less responsible than one would otherwise have been. One does *not*, however, bear *no responsibility at all* for one's behavior. This is because one still exercises some degree of control over one's actions. Though lacking conscious awareness of certain things excuses us to some extent, we are still accountable for what we do.

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