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PHI2014-1108

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Empirically Adequate?**

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This paper should be cited as follows:

Szutta, N., (2014) "Is Aristotelian Concept of Phronesis Empirically Adequate?", Athens: ATINER'S Conference Paper Series, No: **PHI2014-1108.**

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URL: www.atiner.gr

URL Conference Papers Series: www.atiner.gr/papers.htm

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ISSN: **2241-2891**

01/08/2014

Is Aristotelian Concept of *Phronesis* Empirically Adequate?

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Abstract

Contemporary virtue ethics, after gaining a strong position in ethics during the last decades of the twentieth century, has become an object of radical criticism. Situationists, such as John Doris, Gilbert Harman and Maria Merritt, inspired by the results of the research in social and cognitive psychology, questioned empirical adequacy of moral psychology on which virtue ethics was based.

In their view, not dispositions and character, but situational factors decisively determine human behavior and thinking. At first this criticism of virtue ethics was focused on questioning the existence of ethical virtues, which would explain stable, consistent and morally integrated actions; then, the critics moved on to questioning the ideal of practical wisdom (*phronesis*) understood as an acquired constant disposition to deliberately search the best ways to respond to given moral reasons, choosing what is right as well as to find best means to realize the goal of good life. Situationists, notice that majority of our cognitive and motivational processes are automatic and unconscious. They are often incongruent with declared moral values to such extend that the model of practical wisdom seems to situationists to be problematic.

In my presentation I will try to respond to the situationistic objections. I will analyze a number of experiments, to which they refer, and ask to what extend these experiments allow them for so radical conclusions. I will also present contemporary dual – process theories of cognition and show how they fit with the Aristotelian idea of practical wisdom.

Although virtue ethics is normative, there is no easy passage from the analysis of facts (situationists) to the formulation of norms (virtue ethicists), we must admit that formulating norms cannot contradict our knowledge about facts. And for this reason the situational criticism cannot be easily ignored.

Keywords: *phronesis*, virtue, virtue ethics, situationism, Aristotle

Introduction

Contemporary ethics is considered to be one of the most influential ethical theories today. With a great number of papers and books written from its perspective, virtue ethics reached its height at the turn of the 20th and 21st century. Simultaneously, however, one of its central presumptions, namely Aristotelian moral psychology with its focus on virtues, especially practical wisdom (*phronesis*), became a target of heavy criticism from so called Situationists. Inspired by empirical research social psychology, situationists questioned the very existence of ethical virtues or moral character as empirically inadequate, claiming that human behavior is substantially shaped not by moral dispositions of agents but by situational factors.¹

My paper aims to respond to this criticism. I will set off with explaining the place and role of practical wisdom in virtuous action as it is seen in virtue ethics. Then I will present situationistic arguments against the claims virtue ethicists make about *phronesis*. In the closing part, I will try to critically respond to situationistic criticism, first by pointing at weak sides of their arguments, and secondly by showing how our contemporary empirical knowledge on human action still allows to speak of practical wisdom.

Phronesis – its Role in Virtuous Action

From the point of view of virtue ethics virtue is a very complex disposition, consisting of a number of cognitive-affective processes.² The cognitive aspect of virtue encompasses a group of moral beliefs and practical wisdom (*phronesis*), while its affective aspect relates to emotional maturity. Distinguishing these aspects is merely methodological; in practice they are neatly interwoven with each other. It is difficult to imagine a prudent but emotionally immature person, or a person who is emotionally mature but lacks practical wisdom.

This cognitive-affective approach to ethical virtue differs from the behavioral approach, which is often taken by the critics of virtue ethics. Behaviorally understood ethical virtue is merely a set of thoughtless and automatic habits, which cause the agent to behave in a stiff, inflexible way. A truthful person, in such a perspective never lies, a helpful one always positively responds to requests for help, a patient person never shows a sign of impatience or anger. So, defined virtues resemble automatic mechanisms which leave no room for autonomous considerations concerning moral reasons which change in given time and place.

In cognitive-affective approach, ethical virtues (truthfulness, willingness to help) are not seen as automatic compulsions, but dispositions that although

¹M. Meritt, G. Harman, J. M. Doris 2010. Character. In: *The Moral Psychology Handbook*, J. M. Doris, Ed. OUP, Oxford, 356-392.

²J. Annas, 1994. *Morality and Happiness*. OUP, Oxford, 47-66; D. C. Russell, 2009. *Practical Intelligence and the Virtues*. OUP, Oxford, 324-325.

shape a definite direction of action, its trajectory is not stiffly determined.¹ Virtuous action consists in proper responses to actual moral reasons and circumstances. A virtuous person is a wise person, who is aware of the situational context, and what “here and now” should be done. Thus, the virtue of truthfulness does not signify a blind following the absolute duty of telling everything one knows and to everyone who asks, even when aiming to use information for evil purposes. Similarly, readiness to help does not signify unconditional willingness to help, even when helping may enable someone to do evil. Patience does not mean inability to show anger, even it is morally required. Of course, flexibility does not mean that virtues or actions flowing out of them have no one determined direction. There are still some more general principles which define the frames of acceptable action. There is some unity in all virtuous actions the basis of which is practical wisdom – *phronesis*.

Phronesis is first of all of practical character. Aristotle clearly distinguished theoretical and practical reason. The former is responsible for recognition of what is universal and unchangeable [EN1139b]; the latter deals with grasping what is particular and unnecessary (“what could be otherwise”) [EN1141b]. Universal and unchangeable in Aristotle’s ethics is the goal of human life – *eudaimonia* (the self-fulfillment and realization of human potentialities). *Phronesis*, in Aristotle’s view, was a constant and acquired disposition to efficiently search for the best means to realize that goal. One must distinguish this disposition from what today is understood as practical intelligence. The latter is nothing but a mere wit and cunning used in the realization of various goals, whether moral or immoral [EN1144ab]. Although it is impossible to be a *phronimos* (someone in possession of *phronesis*) without intelligence, *phronetic* intelligence is of a specific kind, always directing towards moral goodness.

The close relationship between practical wisdom and morality in Aristotle’s philosophy finds its explanation in the doctrine of the unity of virtues, with its two claims. One claim is that each ethical virtue presupposes *phronesis*. For example one cannot be ethically brave without being prudent (*phronetic*). And vice versa, one cannot be prudent without having at least some minimal level of other ethical virtues. The other claim is that all ethical virtues presuppose each other, in such a way that one cannot develop a given virtues without developing the others. As Aristotle said: either one has all ethical virtues or none [EN1144b]. The latter claim is very controversial and obviously unacceptable to a most contemporary ethicist, the former, however, finds a number advocates. Practical wisdom seems to condition virtuous actions; without it virtues would turn into a thoughtless habit.

Aristotle defines virtuous action as acting “at the right time, about the right things, towards the right people, for the right end, and in the right way, is the mean and best; and this is the business of virtue” [EN1106b16-17]. The measure of „what is right” is defined by *phronesis*, grasping what is relevant, fine, noble, and necessary in given circumstances. To better understand this

¹Russell 2009, 339-345.

function of *phronesis* we need to say something about Aristotle's doctrine of "golden mean". Virtue and virtuous action are "in the middle" between extremes where the "middle" refers to accuracy about particular circumstances. *Phronesis* helps identify this kind of middle. This kind of accuracy, or „hitting right in the middle" cannot be achieved by merely following universal principles or procedures but requires the ability to read particular situations and circumstances.¹ Such ability rests on various narrow skills of reading or grasping different aspects and levels of reality. For this reason *phronimoi* need to perfect their various dispositions, which together form their *phronesis*.

The accuracy of a given decision and action depends on various factors. First, particular action should be in a proper relation to final goal of human life. Therefore accurate decisions require knowledge of the general goal or direction of life. Second, equally important is the recognition of the relevant features of the particular situation and how they relate (as means) to the general goal of human life.

The virtuous cognition of what is right has further two aspects. One is moral perception, the other moral deliberation. The former consists in a direct and instant grasp of those morally relevant aspects of a given situation, and serves the basis for latter. Moral perception and deliberation presuppose some kind of acumen, which cannot be acquired just on the basis of theoretical considerations (discussion, learning moral principles or definitions). Some level of moral practice and experience is also needed.² Acumen must be accompanied by some level of moral sensitivity, ability to read or sense other persons expectations and needs. It also requires some level of moral imagination, understood as ability to "put oneself into other's shoes", perceive the reality for their perspective. Thus we see that *phronesis* is a very complex disposition, enabling one to search for the right moral answers to given (here and now) moral situations, as well as to make decisions which are supported by the strongest moral reasons.

Even if virtue rests on the use of habits, moral perception and deliberation in some of its aspects are somewhat automatic, it does not make virtue a mere automatic mechanism. Virtuous action, based on such perception and deliberation, is conscious and free. It flows out of reflection on a range of consciously accepted values, and out of recognition of best means to the achievement of good life.³ This model of deliberation has become the object of a radical criticism.

¹R. Hursthouse, 2011. What Does the Aristotelian Phronimos Know? In: *Perfecting Virtue. New Essays on Kantian Ethics and Virtue Ethics*, L. Jost, J. Wuerth, Eds. CUP, Cambridge, 43-46.

²Reeve 1992, 71-72.

³R. Sorabji 1980. Aristotle on the Role of Intellect in Virtue. In: *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*, A. Oxenberger-Rorty, Ed.: Californian University Press, London 201-205.

Situationistic Criticism of the Reflective Model of Practical Wisdom

Referring to the latest research in cognitive sciences, situationists, such as John Doris, Gilbert Harman, and Maria Merritt, claim that cognitive and motivational processes occur quickly and automatically in acting agents without their intentional and conscious control. Quite often these processes lead agents to actions that oppose their own value systems. All this suggests that virtue ethics is empirically inadequate, as it is based on a false vision of human cognition and motivation. In consequence of this, virtue ethics imposes on agents too high standards that human agents are not able to observe. Although situationists admit that on the basis of “what is” one cannot conclude what “ought to be”, they maintain that each “ought implies can”. By the reference to latest research they want to show that the model of practical reasoning maintained in virtue ethics is deeply inconsistent with contemporary empirical studies.¹

Situationists focus on demonstrating that our cognitive-motivational processes are automatic, effortless, and independent of our intentional control, and even, to a large extent, inaccessible to our introspection. Even when encouraged to reflection over their motives, agents have difficulties to accept that some, irrelevant facts or details may decisively influence their behavior. These processes, situationists argue, cannot be interpreted in terms of constant dispositions but they are much better understood as strongly correlated with specific situational factors.² They support this claim referring to experiments carried out by John A. Bargh, Marc Chen, and Larra Burrows and others, who used the procedure of priming the subjects to specific forms of behavior, such as being nice or rude, following race stereotypes, without the subjects’ awareness of the priming effect.³

In one such experiment, 34 students were supposed to compose correct sentences out of word pieces. The whole group of students was divided into three subgroups, each undergoing subliminal influence by exposition to incentives semantically tied with specific character features such as politeness, impoliteness. The first subgroup was exposed to politeness words (such as “respect,” “patience,” “sensitivity”); the second to impoliteness words (ex. “disturb,” “aggressive,” “bold”); the third subgroup to neutral words (ex. “normally,” “occasionally,” “exercise,”). After the task of composing the sentences had been accomplished (i.e. about 5 minutes), the subjects went on to another room, in which one of the experimenters was to inform them about another task. The experimenter, however, turned out to be busy talking with one of the assistants. Noticing the subject, the experimenter did not interrupt

¹Meritt, Harman, Doris 2010, 377; Merritt, M. 2009. Aristotelian Virtue and the Interpersonal Character. *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 6, 42.

²Meritt, Harman, Doris 2010, 373-374; J. M. Doris 2010. Heated Agreement: Lack of Character as Being for the Good. *Philosophical Studies* 148, 144-145

³Priming – is a way of influencing people way of thinking and associating cognitive categories in perception, reasoning or decisions by (repeated) exposing these people to a semantic or affective, (often subliminal) stimulus.

his conversation but secretly measured how long the subject patiently waited before he or she approached the experimenter to interrupt the conversation. If the subject waited patiently for ten minutes the experiment was over. Among the subjects who interrupted the conversation, 67% were those subscribed to the subgroup exposed to impolite words, while merely 16% of the interrupters were from the “polite words” subgroup.¹

According to Bargh, Chen, and Burrows, perception and evaluating in social interactions may have subconscious and automatic character, similarly as it is the case with behavior mainly directed by environmental stimuli. This comparison seems to be confirmed by the reports from the subjects, gathered after the experiment, as the subjects, while explaining their behavior, did not take into account that the words from the first task could have any influence on their behavior, which, however, did seem to have been the case. Such priming effect has been confirmed by other, analogous experiments, in which the subliminal stimuli were related to race stereotypes.

In one of such experiments 41 non-African origin subjects were asked to fill a boring and troublesome test on a computer. Between the questions a short flash with a picture appeared on the screen. In one group of the subjects the picture presented a young black male, while in the other group the picture presented a young white male. After the subjects had finished their work, the experimenter asked them to sit down next to the computer. After a moment one could hear some strange sounds as if the computer got spoiled and lost its data. The experimenter informed the subject sadly that it might be necessary to repeat the test. The subjects reactions were recorded secretly and then analyzed by experts with the aim of analyzing the level of aggression of the subjects' behavior. The subjects exposed to the images with the Afro-American face showed a higher level of aggression than the subjects who were exposed to the image of the white man. During the interview after the experiment, the subjects, when asked whether they had noticed anything unusual appearing on the screen and whether this might have influenced their behavior, answered negatively, the exception being two persons who thought they had seen a face but were not able to tell whether the face was white or Afro-American.²

Bargh, Chen, and Burrows maintain that the same priming mechanisms influence human perception of a situation and behavior in everyday life. They are convinced that the results of their experiments have serious implications to our estimation of human behavior and to the nature of social interactions, either empathic ones or those based on enmity.³ Another case that situationists refer to is the phenomenon of diffusion of responsibility. Darley Batson, Bibb Latane et al., inspired by the tragic death of Kitty Genovese (who was murdered in front of many witnesses who observed the whole incident from

¹J. A. Bargh, M. Chen, L. Burrows 1996. Automaticity of Social Behavior: Direct Effects of Trait Construct and Stereotype Activation on Action. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 71, 233-235.

²Bargh, Chen, Burrows 1996, 238-239.

³J. A. Bargh, 1999. The Automaticity of Everyday Life. In: *The Automaticity of Everyday Life*. R. S. Wyer, Jr. Ed. *Advances in Social Cognition* vol. 10, Erlbaum, Mahwah NJ, 1-61.

behind the curtains of their windows, with not even one of them having called the police) carried out a series of experiments focused on helping behavior.

In one of the experiments students from Columbia University were asked to participate in market studies. Each time the experiment was carried out, one student filled in a questionnaire either alone in a room, or assisted by a number of people cooperating with the experimenters who pretended to be filling the questionnaire with the subject. After handing over the questionnaires to the participant or participants, the experimenter, a young woman went to a place detached from the rest of the room with a curtain, saying that she would be back after the questionnaires were filled in. After a while the subject could hear a sound of a fall, a scream, groaning and then sobbing from behind the curtain. The reactions of the subjects were quite different depending on whether they were the only persons in the room or they were in a group with passive confederates. Among the ones who had no company in the room 70% offered to help, while among those who filled the questionnaires in a passive group the number of those offering help fell down to 7%.¹

In another experiment the subjects were placed in separate rooms and were asked to communicate with each other via intercom. Their task was to lead a discussion on the problems of urban environment. One of the participants of the discussion, informed the others at the beginning that he or she might have an attack of epilepsy, and after some time of the discussion simulated to have one. The experiment showed a high level of correlation between the helping behavior of the subjects and their conviction that they are the only or one of many witnesses of the incident of epilepsy. If the subjects were convinced they were the only witnesses of the attack, 100% helped the sick, but when the subjects were sure there is at least 5 other persons witnessing the attack, the helping reaction fell down to around 63%.²

These experiments, together with many more, corroborated the diffusion of responsibility thesis. It is worth noting that the subjects themselves were not aware of the fact that the presence and behavior of other persons around them influenced their decisions to help or refrain from helping behavior. When directly asked about the possibility of such influence they denied that this fact had any impact whatsoever on their behavior.

Situationists point out a number of other situational factors, experimentally shown to influence human empathic behavior, for example being in a hurry, noise, authority, social status of the person in need of help, sense of community (sharing the same beliefs or fate), fear of embarrassment, the possibility of leaving the situation that requires showing compassion or help. In the light of experiments, human action and the cognitive-motivational processes, usually ascribed to virtues of benevolence, care etc., actually seem to be conditioned by accidental situational factors which are independent of acting agents. If this is so then Aristotelian deliberative model seems very problematic.

¹J. M. Doris, 2002. *Lack of Character. Personality and Moral Behavior*. CUP, Cambridge, 32.

²Doris 2002, 33.

According to situationists all these empirical data support the thesis that our cognitive and motivational processes, decisive to the mode of our behavior, have automatic and unconscious foundations. They also emphasize incongruency between these processes (also influencing our behavior in normatively relevant situations) and our normative engagement. Did we know the exact content and structure of those mechanism we would reject them as contradicting our consciously accepted values. Moreover, our introspective consciousness seems to a large extent unreliable and frequently misleading when it comes to controlling our cognitive and motivational mechanisms; and for this reason it cannot guarantee that our behavior will remain in agreement with our moral convictions. This incongruency, say situationists, applies to a wide range of situations, and this makes the model of practical rationality, preferred by virtue ethicists, very problematic.¹

Thus defending practical wisdom understood as a harmonious unity of reflective deliberation and habitual sensitivity becomes a special challenge for virtue ethicists. Practical wisdom in Aristotelian approach requires quick responding in terms of moral perception, feelings, judgments and action. This quickness, situationists maintain, is possible only on the level of automatic cognitive processes. Although, in a way, Aristotle defined virtues in terms of well-trained automaticity, he also thought that virtuous actions have to be a result of deliberation and one's moral beliefs. To situationists such a picture of moral cognition is contradicted by what is shown by today's scientific research, a crucial fact being the discrepancy between various unconscious and automatic cognitive processes that shape our behavior and moral values which we consciously accept.²

An Attempt to Defend the Empirical Adequacy of *Phronesis*

Experimental studies, which seems to be the best way of testing scientific hypothesis about human behavior, have to meet various, precisely defined, methodological rules. Correct cause-effect reasoning (of a type: independent variable X caused observable changes of dependent variable Y) is possible only when three conditions are met: covariance (i.e. a correlation between dependent variable and independent variable is observed); time order (i.e. manipulating the independent variable precedes the change of the dependent variable); and exclusion of alternative explanations (the most difficult condition to be met). Identifying a correlation requires some additional method of control, such as maintaining the same experimental conditions or counterbalancing individual characteristics of the subjects. Meeting this condition seems especially difficult when individual subjects take part in the experiment only once.

¹Meritt, Harman, Doris 2010, 375.

²Meritt, Harman, Doris 2010, 375-376.

How do we know, that given behavior of the subjects has been a reaction to the procedure of priming? And how do we know that dispositions of subjects' character or other independent variables, not controlled during the experiment, had no causal effect on subjects' behavior? How do we know that the persons who showed no patience during the experiment are not generally impatient, and persons who showed patience during the experiments are not such generally? Why is their behavior interpreted merely as a result of automatic cognitive and motivational processes, which are the result of priming, and not as a result of their general attitudes and dispositions? In the experiments presented above, as well as in other experiments relevant to the problem discussed here, one cannot exclude the influence of some other variables, not being in focus of the experiments, especially when the subjects are tested only once, and the experiments are not a part of longitudinal studies.

Similarly, one cannot exclude the possibility that the principle of diffused responsibility applies merely to people with considerably low level of moral sensitivity. Before we make a generalization in this respect we need to make sure that this scheme of behavior would also take place in case of subjects with higher moral standards, for example working for charity organizations, or volunteers in hospices. We cannot exclude that had such people taken part in the experiments presented above (Darley & Latane), they would help the persons in need regardless of the fact that there were others around who behaved passively, or even tried to discourage them. Besides, in all experiments there were some subjects who behaved in accordance with their moral standards and expectations. Maybe they were the examples of people of higher moral condition, who direct themselves with the precepts of practical wisdom and are resistant to situational factors.

The data presented by situationists at best allow us to formulate a thesis that most people act automatically, often against their declared values. Questioning the empirical adequacy of the reflective model of practical wisdom would require much more than that. Situationists would have to demonstrate that action as described by Aristotelian model is totally beyond human possibilities. Meanwhile, even the experiments cited by situationists do not show that this is the case. There are always some subjects who behave not in the way situationists expect. The fact that they constitute a minority is irrelevant to this debate, as virtue ethicists agree that perfecting one's virtues, including *phronesis*, is a difficult process.

Also maintaining that practical wisdom is empirically adequate does not require rejecting automaticity in our cognitive and motivational processes. It merely excludes the claim that all such processes are totally automatic. Within social psychology, and on the basis of the same empirical data authors such as Brewer, Bollender, Kahnemann have formulated various dual-processing theories which make room for both, entirely automatic processes as well as conscious, reflective processes. To illustrate how dual-process theories allow for traditional practical wisdom, I will refer now to Daniel Kahneman's theory

presented in his book: *Thinking, Fast and Slow*.¹ From the perspective of his theory although perfecting *phronesis* seems to be very difficult and requires a lot of agent's effort it is still possible.

Basing on the latest research in social and cognitive psychology, Kahneman outlines a vision of a human dual-system mind. System 1, named "fast", is specialized in automatic, effortless thinking (ex. associating, cause-effect reasoning). It constructs impressions, emotions which then become the source of our later choices and decisions. System 2, "slow," requires conscious effort and is responsible for conscious thinking, monitoring and controlling agent's own actions and emotions. We identify ourselves with this system, as our conscious self who holds views and makes choices. Both systems are constantly active: system 1 constantly generates various impressions, presentiments, intentions, emotions etc. Meanwhile system 2, lazy by nature, maintains at a low level of activity, usually passively accepts what system 1 suggests. Only when facing problems or difficulties it intensifies its activity.

The two systems complete each other, thus minimalizing and optimizing their efficacy. System 1 is usually very good at daily activities. Basing on its data, people make quick, effortless, usually accurate choices. However, system 1 is often tendentious and falls for various illusions. Moreover, when it comes to realizing logically more complicated or statistical tasks it breaks down. Then it needs intervention of system 2, which is responsible for comparing, critical analysis of various options and aspects of a problem, and making choices between viable alternatives. System 2 is also responsible for monitoring and controlling thoughts, actions and spontaneous tendencies to act, generated by system 1. The less effort on the part of the agent, the more tendency of the agent to uncritically rely on what is suggested by system 1. More generally, Kahneman depicts system 1 as impulsive and intuitive, and system 2 as understanding and cautious but, at least in cases of some people, very lazy.

Kahneman devotes a lot of attention to the issue of cognitive illusions influencing our choices and decisions. He is well aware of empirical results concerning the priming effect, and does not deny them. He does not think, however, that we are totally determined by priming factors. As he notices, priming mechanism and factors can be foreseen and measured, and they are not as strong as it may seem. For example empirical studies show that only a few voters out of a hundred who had undefined political views will change their voting decision about the way of financing schools just because the polling station was in a school building. We are not totally defenseless against priming factors. Another example refers to framing effects: empirical studies show that two logically synonymous descriptions may evoke different reactions in agents, depending on how they were formulated, which words were used ("you lose" or "you gain"; "survive" or "die"). Emotions evoked by certain words may decisively influence our final choices. They may but do not have to. The studies show that there are always such agents who choose the same option, regardless of the differences in their descriptions, which suggests they do not

¹D. Kahneman 2011. *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York.

blindly follow system 1, but take effort to analyze rationally the presented options. This requires activation of system 2.

The whole Kahneman's book, although to a large extent focused on identifying thinking traps, mistakes people make when following system 1, does not lead to pessimistic conclusions that we are doomed to the limits of automatic cognitive and motivational processes and have no influence on them. Knowing how expansive system 1 could be, it is good to elaborate an attitude of caution and criticism, and mobilize system 2 to be active and control. Kahneman's book warns against intellectual laziness and encourages the readers to be more engaged and vigilant not to fall prey of easy and quick responses. The good news is that the two systems are able to mutually influence each other, also system 2 can influence system 1. Besides automatic schemes of thinking and acting are not that bad; they allow us to efficiently function in our daily lives. Our deliberative and cognitive possibilities are limited, a constant activity of system 2 on high level would lead to the "exhaustion of ego". System 2 needs some periods of rest.

Conclusion

Aristotelian model of practical wisdom, especially its contemporary version in virtue ethics, is not contrary to empirical research. Firstly, experimental data to which situationists refer do not allow for the rejection of this model, at best they lead to a conclusion that few people follow practical wisdom in their actions. Secondly, based the same data theories of dual-system mind seem to support the claim that at least to some extent moral deliberation, a core function of *phronesis*, is possible. The research shows that it is difficult to achieve the virtue of practical wisdom, but did not deny its empirical possibility. Virtue ethics requires what is difficult but not impossible.¹

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¹The research on which this article is based has been supported by National Science Centre, Poland (2011/01/B/HS1/00522).

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