Character theory has experienced a veritable renaissance in moral philosophy since, at least, the publication of G.E.M. Ancombe’s seminal manuscript, “Modern Moral Philosophy” (1958), which argues that the two main moral traditions, Kantianism and utilitarianism, rely on metaphysically untenable, legalistic notions of duty and obligation. Anscombe’s work (along with similar proposals by, e.g. Philippa Foot and John Rawls) has precipitated a resurgence of virtue ethics in the tradition of Plato, Aristotle, and, much later, Hume. One of the main antagonists to this approach is situationism, which relies on experiments in social psychology—such as the famous Milgram experiments (1963)[[1]](#footnote-1)—to dispute the existence of broad, situation-invariant character traits. In my dissertation, “Situationism, Moral Responsibility and Blame,” I show that while situationists (such as John Doris, Gilbert Harman, and Philip Zimbardo) agree as to the explanatory disutility of character traits, they differ on the topic of moral responsibility, defending a variety of mutually incompatible views (ranging from radically revisionary to extremely conservative). In my work, I propose an externalistic account of moral responsibility, which holds that responsibility should not be predicated on (perceived) character, but instead evaluated by comparison with population base rates, the action options available to the agent, and consideration of whether the agent *could have done otherwise* in a reasonable (pragmatic) sense of the term. Methodologically, this view entails a stronger emphasis on the agent’s overt behaviour as opposed to her subjective states, which, according to situationist research, are obscure, unreliable, and somewhat opaque to second-hand discernment. This is a position that situationists should in principle agree upon in light of their shared commitment to the non-existence of robust character.

To give a more precise description of my dissertation, I begin by arguing that situationist psychology calls for an externalistic framework for three main reasons: (i) experiments in situationist psychology call into question our ability to distinguish in-character behaviour (for which the agent is putatively morally responsible) from out-of-character behaviour (for which the agent is not), which renders character-based theories explanatorily otiose; (ii) neuropsychological studies reveal that we cannot reliably ascertain our own subjective motives, let alone other people’s; and (iii) the internalist approach excludes a type of external excuse that is deeply rooted in our shared pretheoretical intuitions, i.e. the excuse of non-voluntary epistemic isolation, owing to constraints such as deprived childhood circumstances and extreme cultural seclusion. In addition to being intuitively deeply rooted, this type of excuse can also be justified in terms of the familiar moral principle of ought-implies-can, which restricts responsibility attributions to voluntary behaviour. This principle likely underlies our pretheoretical intuitions.

In light of these objections, I argue that we need an inherently externalistic evaluative framework, and I suggest that we adopt the standard of the reasonable person, which was originally defended by O. W. Holmes’ in his seminal legal text, “The Common Law” (1881). This standard measures responsibility according to what an ordinary person would do in the defendant’s circumstances, given comparable physical and intellectual capacities. I contend that, because this standard derives its justification from familiar moral concepts such as fairness, liberty, security, interpersonal equality, and appropriate attentiveness to the interests of others, it is eminently suitable for use in moral appraisal. I then argue that this standard—which problematically originated as “the standard of the reasonable man”—must be refined in light of equality considerations that have arisen across a range of value theoretic disciplines such as feminist philosophy, critical race theory, critical disabilities studies, and cross-cultural studies. (In this regard, and in its association with situationist psychology, this project is highly interdisciplinary). I give a brief sketch of what sorts of constraints are reasonable in view of recent case studies, but much of this work must be left to educated discretion. This should not come as a surprise, since the application of any evaluative concept ineluctably requires a significant degree of normative competence (or practical wisdom), developed over time through experience and study. Thus, all theories are susceptible to implementation problems, but the reasonable-person standard is more practicable than internalist views insofar as it does not require insight into the murky depths of people’s subjective motives.

1. In the Miligram experiments, subjects were instructed to “shock” a mock-learner with (simulated) electrical shocks, increasing in 15-volt increments from 15 volts to 450 volts—the point at which a real victim would have been dead or severely injured. (At 300 volts, the “learner” pounded on the door and screamed, and thereafter stopped responding to instructions). The experimenters, and others whom they questioned, expected the subjects to stop before the 150-volt mark. However, all of them surpassed the expected threshold, and 65% continued to the maximum intensity. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)