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Reflections on Courage (And Other Virtues): A Dialogue Between Ethics and Moral Psychology

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Leaders of Character? The Dangers of 'Integrity'

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> It's commonly presumed that good character inoculates against shifting fortune…the person of good character will do well, even under substantial pressure to moral failure, while the person of bad character is someone on whom it would be foolish to rely. In this view, it's character, more than circumstance, that decided the moral texture of a life; as the old saw has it, character is destiny.
> —John M. Doris

Military Moral Vocabulary

All of the US military academies, and most postcommissioning professional military education, talk a great deal about the importance of the ethical foundation of the profession of arms. All of the academies have honor codes (or an honor concept, in the case of the Naval Academy). Those codes reflect an assumption that cadets and midshipmen who mature under them will acquire firm and abiding moral habits of honesty and rectitude they will carry forward throughout their careers. Each of the academies has a center devoted to character development and administration of the honor system. These centers conduct programs, conferences, and training events continuously. All this activity only makes sense if one believes that by repeated exposure, the cumulative effect will contribute to the formation of firm and unshakeable character.

Further, all the academies teach a core course in ethics, which is a mixture of basic philosophical concepts of ethics, just war theory, and usually some aspects of ethics unique to military service.

Postcommissioning, officers continue to talk and think about the importance of ethics in their careers and in the profession. The army in particular has made very impressive efforts to inculcate and develop these concepts through the creation of the Center of the Army Profession and Ethic (CAPE) and through the programs CAPE has developed. There too, the assumption is that by spreading the ideas and vocabulary of 'profession of arms' through the service, it will decisively improve character and the overall conduct of the service.

The philosophical concept of ethics at work in all of these efforts is manifest in the somewhat limited moral vocabulary of most military members. As one listens to ordinary discourse about morality in the military, it's impossible not to note that the words 'professional' and 'integrity' serve as all-purpose moral words throughout the service. Individuals are praised as 'having true integrity' and 'being true professionals,' terms of praise and approbation applied to a whole range of behaviors, from properly shined shoes to brave conduct under fire. Behaviors one wishes to express disapproval of, ranging from a messy desk to extreme moral failure, are similarly described as 'unprofessional' or failures of 'integrity.'

Broadly, efforts at moral education in the military consist of three kinds of activities. In the first, the emphasis on training, discipline, and rigid behavioral expectations are aimed at the formation of habits. Through the articulation of clear expectations for behavior, military bearing, and routinized procedures, military training aims at forming individuals into relatively predictable behaviors and relatively automatic responses to challenging circumstances that have been shown through time to be effective in stressful and combat situations. As we like to say, "the training took over," or "muscle memory" kicked in when circumstances didn't allow or require reflection.

The philosophical forefather of this aspect of military ethics training is, of course, Aristotle. He argued that we raise young people through the selective application of pleasure and pain to habituate them to desirable behaviors. If this process is successful, not only can they be expected to do the right thing when called on, but to do so nearly automatically, and to find pleasure in doing so. That combination of right action, grounded in formed habit, and accompanied by pleasure that has been shaped by training is a fair definition of 'character.' Aristotle completed this account with an element that usually drops out of the military instantiation of the concept: the role of the rational and reflective underpinning of those other aspects of character that he calls phronesis—practical wisdom.

The second general type of moral preparation for military service is aimed more at moral thinking. Here I mean the time spent on teaching ethics classes by the philosophy department. The core academic courses reflect the belief that the explicit study of traditions of moral philosophy, just war, and professional ethics will inform the cadet's mind and perhaps improve their moral reasoning. Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development has historically provided a basis for the belief that exposure to moral dilemmas, reasoning about them with peers, and exploring one's reasons for holding

a particular view of the correct course of action will advance students up the six-stage Kohlberg Scale. Kohlberg's framework, the Kohlberg Scale, is constructed around two major philosophical pillars. One is broadly Platonic, and assumes that if one reasons about moral questions correctly, moral conduct will follow (although since there's almost no empirical support for that assumption, Kohlbergians are careful not to overpromise in this regard). The other pillar is roughly Kantian. The postconventional stages of the Kohlberg scale culminate in something that looks like absolute Kantian principles of fairness, justice, and so forth. So the assumption underlying Kohlberg is that a particular philosophical tradition does, in fact, represent the pinnacle of moral reasoning.

The third major branch of moral preparation at the military academies is centered in various activities that cluster under the broad heading of 'character development.' Many of the character development center programs, at least in my experience of them at the Air Force Academy, are aimed as much at the heart and emotions as at the intellect. A combination of motivational movie clips, examples, motivational speakers, and cultural heroes are presented to cadets. The assumption here seems to be somewhat the same as in emotional preaching: that arousing emotion and presenting exemplars will inspire and motivate moral behavior. Since we all know the high from an emotional sermon or the glow after a week a church camp tends to fade fairly quickly, it is best to apply the treatment regularly in hopes that cumulative applications will move the baseline of each individual's character. Whether any of this is true is weakly supported by valiant attempts at assessment conducted by all the academies.

Underlying all these efforts are two very large philosophical assumptions: that there is such a thing as character, and that the activities I've described will in combination with each other form it properly. 'Character' is understood as a stable set of behavioral dispositions, formed by habit and education, which can be relied on to guide individuals' behavior and which others can use as a relatively reliable basis for predicting their behavior. That this assumption is true seems to most of us intuitively correct and perhaps even obvious.

However, in the past couple of decades the nascent branch of philosophy calling itself 'experimental philosophy' has raised fundamental challenges to these assumptions. Experimental philosophy in the area of ethics draws on a fairly large body of experimental work in moral psychology to draw out philosophical implications. The predominant result of this work, if taken seriously, forces us to fundamentally reassess our understanding of the whole

idea of character. Further, if it is correct, is also provides some constructive suggestions about what besides character we would need to be thinking about if we wish to improve the odds that morally correct behavior will be present in a wide range of environments.

But before I turn to a review of the situationalist challenge to our taken-for-granted views of character, I thought it might be worth a brief digression into why I've gotten so interested in this question. As an ethicist working for the U.S. Navy, I've been drawn in to a discussion of one of the most troubling developments in recent navy history. The navy has been experiencing a dramatic increase in detachments for cause (that's navy-speak for firings) of relatively senior officers (mostly at the rank of O-5 and O-6, or Senior Enlisted). The vast majority of these detachments have been for personal misconduct, rather than operational failures—like running a ship around or navigational error. As you might imagining, removing an officer from his or her command, especially for misconduct, is extremely damaging to the navy and to individual units.

The inspector general of the navy commissioned quite a good study of this phenomenon. Among its findings were these: without exception, the officers in question report that they knew their conduct was wrong. They knew that, if caught, they'd lose their jobs (although they often report that they underestimated the gravity of the consequences). Almost without exception, they wrongly believed others around them were unaware of their conduct. But in fact, upon investigation, it almost always became apparent that their misconduct was fairly widely known and had already greatly damaged the morale, command climate, and trust relationships within their command. Further, it often takes years for units to fully recover from such events. So understandably, the navy is casting around for explanations and solutions to such a grave problem.

Just to give you a flavor of these firings, let me give you a couple of examples. Recently a commander (O-5), a forty-three-year-old married captain of a submarine, went online to a dating site, met, and impregnated a twenty-three-year-old woman. To escape the situation (and the consequences), he faked his death by email and impersonated someone else in the process. A senior enlisted chief of the boat, of the submarine *Nebraska*, began an affair with a female midshipman (mid) on summer cruise, and then continued it ashore, flying across the country to see her. His conduct caused another senior enlisted guy to begin an affair with another mid—so the person responsible for the conduct of the crew on the boat directly caused its deterioration. A

navy captain (O-6), head of all logistics for 5th Fleet, was fired for swimming naked in the canals of Bahrain at the end of a drunken party, one that included junior officers and enlisted personnel—a pattern of partying that had gone on with his encouragement throughout his time in command.

This is just a sampler of such firings. In every case, the individual in question had twenty plus years of service under their belt. Of course, it's possible these were individuals who had been misbehaving all throughout their careers, and just finally got caught. If that's the case, it's not philosophically interesting, although it would be important for the navy to figure out how they got promoted that far through the system if they were doing such things all along.

But what if, as seems to be the case in at least in some cases, these are individuals who have reached high rank by being squared away 'officers of character' up until now, and some change in their environment, circumstance, power, or something else fundamentally disorients them morally? Could it be that changes in circumstance have far more bearing on actual behavior than we like to think—and certainly more than our preferred talk of fixed character and global virtues invite us to think about? And if that were true, ignoring situational factors and continuing to talk of global character and virtue is not only a philosophical and empirical mistake, but possibly downright pernicious insofar as we wish to do everything we can to insure good conduct in practice.

Since so many of these firings of officers seem to cluster at the rank of O-6, I have proposed and will be conducting a study, along with a research psychologist friend from the Air Force Academy, to better understand the nature of the transition to O-6 levels in the navy to see if we can identify any major changes in the environment at that level. Anecdotally, it does seem that this particular transition point in the navy brings responsibilities that are a quantum leap or two greater in complexity than the level below. In other words, in the navy at least, leadership challenges don't evolve in a linear fashion, but rather have sharp and dramatic spikes in a couple of places in the leader development continuum. If we are able to find any systemic features, it might be possible to better address those elements at the Major Command course these officers attend before taking their commands. But the general point is this: if the concept of character is less global and stable than our rhetoric suggests it is, we may be failing to prepare our people as effectively as possible for ethical challenges by inculcating a partial or false idea that they can rely on formed character alone to insure their proper conduct. Further, it might turn out that neglecting close attention to situ-

ational factors affecting behavior is preventing us from examining aspects of the environment and situation that do affect behavior and for which, if we understood them, we might better control. It is that situationalist challenge I wish to explore in the next section.

The Situationalist Challenge to Character

Philosophers have only recently begun to engage normative ethical thought with a fairly large body of empirical moral psychological studies. Most philosophers who do so are associated with experimental philosophy, a nascent and controversial movement in philosophy. Experimental philosophy takes the traditional armchair to represent the armchair approach to settling matters characteristic of Anglo-American philosophy of the past century. That approach not only avoided, but extolled the virtues of, avoiding of any taint of empirical information. Instead, philosophical ethics in the Anglo-American tradition of the past century has tended to focus on analysis of moral concepts and examination of ever more arcane (and increasingly embarrassing) thought experiments about trollies and the like.

In contrast to that approach, experimental philosophy takes as its symbol the flaming armchair. Experimental philosophy issues a call to engage directly in empirical examination of philosophically interesting questions, as well as to attempt to draw on good empirical research from beyond the scope of traditional philosophy.[1]

For the purposes of our question tonight, the single best book to deal with the topic is John M. Doris's *Lack of Character*. Doris critically and carefully reviews a large number of moral psychology experiments, many of which have become almost common knowledge in our culture, such as the Zimbardo Stanford Prison Experiment and Stanley Milgram's Peer Shock Experiment. He also includes lesser-known studies as well.

The studies he reviews are usefully summarized as follows:

> According to Isen and Levin (1972), 87.5% of those participants who had just found a dime in the coin return slot of a public telephone helped a confederate (of the experimenter) who "accidentally" dropped a folder full of papers, while only 4% of those participants who had found no coin helped. According to Darley and Batson (1973) 63% of unhurried participants helped a coughing and groaning confederate who was sitting slumped in a doorway, while only

1. *See* Knobe and Nichols 2008 for the clearest statement of the fundamental aims and purposes of the movement.

> 10% of hurried participants helped. According to Milgram (1974), 65% of those participants who were prompted by an experimenter administered the maximum available (in fact fictitious) electric shock to a confederate, while only 2.5% of those participants who were allowed to choose the shock levels administered the maximum available shock. (Vranis 2004, 284–88)

The conclusion all these studies support, Doris argues, is that situational and environmental factors play a very large role in how people will actually behave. Indeed, in some cases the situational changes one would a priori think to be utterly trivial (my favorite is the finding a dime in a payphone coin return as such a powerful predictor of helping behavior!) have extremely significant and wholly counterintuitive effects on actual behavior.

Studies such as these force us to question whether the assumption that character and formed virtues are as globally relevant (i.e., they remain constant in a diverse range of environments) and are as reliable a guide to individuals' actual behavior as commonly thought.

Jonathan Haidt, a research psychologist, has done excellent empirical work showing how little rational reflection actually has to do with our fundamental moral beliefs, attitudes, and judgments. One of his essays is provocatively entitled, "The Emotional Dog and its Rational Tail: A Social Intuitionist Approach to Moral Judgment"—a title which well captures his fundamental claims. His recent book, *The Righteous Mind* is the best analysis I've seen yet about why the fundamental political and religious narratives we have are impervious to rational discussion. Haidt shows that such narratives are polarized to the point that people of opposite political and religious opinions often seem to literally live in different conceptual universes. Indeed, they are so polarized that what one group considers facts, the other considers completely false.

One of the most interesting and important of Haidt's contributions is to note that the modern West has an oddly narrow and limited palette with which to paint a moral canvas, compared to most other cultures now and in human history. As members of the post-Enlightenment West, we focus on individuals as bearers of rights, and on utilities to be maximized. In contrast, he argues that most cultures and most of human history have had a much richer set of important values and moral concerns. Indeed, he argues that one reason liberals and conservatives seem to talk as if they accepted different 'facts' and live in apparently different moral world is that they do! And, while a liberal himself (at least when he started his studies), he believes the

conservatives' willingness and ability to paint with more of the palette (giving value to issues such as loyalty and tradition, for example) often accounts for their success in winning debates.

Most recently, Haidt has engaged in a spirited and fascinating discussion of the relative role of reason in moral deliberation with two other philosophers in the "The Stone" section of the *New York Times*—a section devoted to popular discussion of philosophical ideas. The philosophers, as one might expect, wrote two pieces doggedly defending the importance of reason in moral thinking and the relevance of moral thinking to moral behavior. Haidt's response is equally spirited, and is entitled "Reasons Matter (when Intuitions don't object)" (2012).

The current Inspector General of the Navy, Admiral Phil Wisecup, has been recommending a book throughout the navy called *You are Not so Smart* by David McRaney. This book captures in a fun and easily digestible form a very wide range of social science research. Each chapter is organized around two opening sentences. One he calls "the misconception," and it's what we all believe to be true about the issue in question. The second, which we don't believe and would fight to reject, he calls "the truth." The theme running through the book is that many important things we believe to be true about ourselves, our character, our autonomy, and even our memories are demonstrably false.

All of these perspectives converge to undermine some of the implicit assumptions embedded in military character development efforts. Doris causes us to have serious doubts about the idea of character and virtue as a reliable predictor of the behavior of individuals in a variety of contexts and situations. Haidt causes us to wonder whether appeals to our moral reasoning and efforts to improve it are nearly as effective as we think they are. To use another of his metaphors, reason is just the rider of the elephant of nonrational intuitions and impulses. As he summarizes his claims, "Intuitions come first, strategic reasoning second" (2012c, 52). Often, he demonstrates, reason comes in after the fact of moral intuition to try to find reasons to support those intuitions. Furthermore, even if reason is unsuccessful in doing so, we're unlikely to change our intuitions, and therefore our moral convictions unless (as he puts it) we find ways to "talk to the elephant."

McRaney's romp through our systematic cognitive errors, while breezy, captures a very wide range of empirical research, all of which goes to show we really aren't that smart, and a lot of what we quite sincerely believe to be true about ourselves, our memories, our motivations, and even our actions, is demonstrably false.

So, what are the implications for our thinking about officer development if we take the challenges posed by moral psychology more seriously than our traditional character development efforts have to date?

Situationalism's Implications for Military Ethics

To some degree, military leadership has long recognized the morally corrosive effects of some aspects of context and has stressed the need for leaders to take specific actions to prevent moral deterioration. For example, poor discipline, prolonged combat stress, and poor leadership are commonly recognized as strongly predictive of immoral and illegal conduct on the battlefield. Major General H. R. McMaster recommended a book to me that I commend to all of you: *Black Hearts* by Jim Frederick. In this book, Frederick chronicles in exquisite and painful detail the pattern of poor leadership, lack of discipline, and erosion of morale that culminated in four members of one platoon of the 101st Airborne plotting and executing a plan to rape and kill an Iraqi girl, murder her family, burn the bodies, and then attempt to cover up the whole affair. What's especially useful about Frederick's book is the dissection of the course of events and the climate that got that platoon there and the many points along the path to those events where effective leadership might have prevented them.

So at least at the level of the extreme, military culture and leadership recognizes the dangers of allowing situational factors to accumulate that may well culminate in atrocity. We certainly understand that sustained combat stress, poor unit morale, and poor leadership set conditions that may well end in catastrophic moral failure.

What's important about the situationalist contribution to the discussion is the emphasis on the often apparently small, even trivial, changes in the environment that may alter behavioral outcomes to a remarkable degree. In other words, while we already recognize the impact of obvious and large situational factors in either maintaining moral standards or eroding them, I think we've not begun to think seriously about the factors so small that intuitively we'd dismiss the possibility that they might significantly affect behavior. If the situationalist perspective is even partially correct, we do so at our peril. If we believe that integrity and character possess a global reliability and constancy that—if situationalism is taken seriously—they simply don't, we rely on such notions more completely and uncritically than we should. Further, if that's right, we might need to think more deeply about the apparently minor and negligible situational factors that might indeed have more

influence than we like to think. Doing so would provide a foundation from which we can better educate, train, and lead military personnel to insure the highest levels of proper behavior we can attain.

John Doris provides a helpful and provocative nonmilitary example of how taking situationalism more seriously into account might guide behavior to protect against moral failure:

> Imagine that a colleague with whom you have had a long flirtation invites you for dinner, offering enticement of interesting food and elegant wine, with the excuse that you are temporarily orphaned while your spouse is out of town. Let's assume the obvious way to read this text is the right one, and assume further that you regard the infidelity that might result as an ethically undesirable outcome. If you are like one of Milgram's respondents, you might think there is little cause for concern; you are, after all, an upright person, and a spot of claret never did anyone any harm. On the other hand, if you take the lessons of situationalism to heart, you avoid the dinner like the plague, because you know that you are not able to confidently predict your behavior in a problematic situation on the basis of your antecedent values. You do not doubt that you sincerely value fidelity; you simply doubt your ability to act in conformity with this value once the candles are lit and the wine begins to flow. Relying on character once in the situation is a mistake, you agree; the way to achieve the ethically desirable result is to recognize the situational pressures may all too easily overwhelm character and avoid the dangerous situation. I don't think it wild speculation to claim that this is a better strategy than dropping by for a "harmless" evening, secure in the knowledge of your righteousness. (2002, 147)

The conclusion Doris draws from this is important, and has important implications for thinking clearly about how to minimize ethical failure in the military. We might more helpfully explain ethical failure less in terms of a single failure of moral will and look for "culpable naiveté or insufficiently careful attention to situations" (Doris 2002, 148).

Let me hasten to anticipate a likely objection to the argument I'm making. By no means am I suggesting that the importance of situational factors in influencing behavior can or should be used to eliminate the importance of moral responsibility and even of legal culpability. Confusion on this point is not just a theoretical possibility. My colleague and research psychologist Dr. George Mastrioanni skillfully dissected precisely such massive confusion in Zimbardo's

testimony at the Abu Ghraib criminal trials, in which Zimbardo tied himself into conceptual knots trying to balance the personal responsibility of the individual agents with the situational factors that enabled their misconduct (2011, 2–16).

What the situationalist challenge invites us to do is not to reject moral and legal responsibility, but rather to more accurately and precisely locate where, as Doris puts it, 'culpable responsibility' lies. We may at the end of the day want or need to continue to criticize and punish individuals who—having gotten themselves into a highly dangerous situation they or their leaders should have anticipated—behave badly (as we might have anticipated to be highly likely on situational grounds). Taking situationalism seriously invites us to ask a wider range of questions and to anticipate and control for their negative influences on morally desirable behavior in a way that psychologically naïve reliance on individual character and virtue does not. I'm of course aware that I'm waterskiing at high velocity over some deep philosophical water here, and we'll have to think long and hard about the importance of situationalist considerations when we assess moral failure. Are we offering situationalist exculpations, extenuations, or just partial explanations?

But for our purposes here, let me stress the positive importance of insisting that we think deeply about situationalist considerations when we look at military organizations and questions of military leadership. Most importantly, it invites military leaders at every level to be more aware of the inherent limits of the moral vocabulary of integrity and character. Overreliance on character as a reliable bulwark against moral failure is, empirically speaking, a mistake and a very dangerous mistake if what we care about in the end is moral conduct. Situationalism leads military leaders at every level to think more clearly and explicitly about the situational factors at play in their unit and to recognize that even matters they might be inclined to dismiss as trivial might decisively affect their unit's ability to maintain high behavioral standards.

Lastly, if we want to do everything possible to prevent moral failure, situationalism suggests a productive line of empirical research of great importance. Studies and observations of the influence of situational factors are essential if we are to be better able to control and predict behavior in the real world. Insofar as excessive reliance on talk of character and integrity predisposes us culturally not to examine such questions, we run the risk of setting ourselves up for preventable failures of military ethics.

So my conclusions are necessarily a bit tentative. Experimental philosophy is a new and, in many philosophical circles, suspect field. But there's enough smoke coming from that flaming armchair to suggest to me there's

probably some real fire there. And the fact that these questions lead directly to inherently intellectually interesting and potentially extremely practical important lines of research that might well pay off handsomely as we refine training and leader development programs. Military ethics that sees itself as the handmaid of the military profession (as opposed to merely philosophical military ethics) has to concern itself with the real world implications of its work. To that end, better dialogue and perhaps even joint research with situationalist moral psychology might do more for the ethical health of the profession than anything else we can do.

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