Character vs. Situational Imperatives as the Primary Driver of Unethical Conduct: Implications for the Study of Leadership

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The notion of ethics is central to the study of leadership (Ciulla, 2004). This paper investigates two great and infrequently intersecting streams of thought on the drivers of ethical conduct: the character project that emerges from classical philosophy, and the situational perspective provided by modern psychology. Both are insufficient on their own to inform those who study and practice leadership. Since leadership studies uses an interdisciplinary approach and maintains a strong drive to be relevant it presents an able forum to explore bridges between two seemingly disparate perspectives.

INTRODUCTION

There is a level of cognitive diversity among leadership scholars that suggests, depending on your perspective, either instability of ideas or an exciting and emerging field. Those who study leadership may not be able to agree on many things, but most will admit that the essence of the subject involves a relational influence process directed to shared goals or objectives. We do not agree on the extent to which the definition of leadership contains an ethical component.

Some suggest that we should insert an ethical qualifier to our definition of leadership that discriminates between leaders who influence us to good or bad ends (Burns, 2003; Heifetz 1994). In the classic case used to explore this question we ask whether Hitler was a leader (Gardner, 1990, pp. 69-70). Those of the normative school say no, Hitler was a tyrant who drove his society to abhorrent acts and eventual destruction. Others (Rost, 1993; Kellerman, 2004) eschew the centrality of the normative and proffer a more descriptive approach. Leadership, they would say is neutral; it can be for good or bad. Thus Hitler was a leader, albeit an exceedingly bad one. The argument serves to illustrate the centrality of the notion of ethics that sits at the heart of leadership studies. Ciulla (2004) asserts that our study of leadership is facilitated when we understand that leadership and ethics are inextricably intertwined (p. 325).

It probably wasn't long after the first group of humans got together to combine their labor toward some task, whether it was hunting large and dangerous prey, or tilling a field, that they were confronted with the problem of the unethical, the miscreant, and the villainous. Having established societal norms of human behavior the tension was set between the interests of the group and the interests of the individual. Most of the time the interests coincide, and yet humans are obviously prone to engage in actions that are shortsighted and destructive to themselves as well as the collective. In the United States the federal prison population doubled since 1995 with a count of 208,118 in addition to the 1,404,053 under state prison authorities (Pew Center on the States, 2010).

Those who attempt to lead large and complex organizations from authoritative positions are often confronted with the problem of the noncompliant. Managers seem to spend a significant amount of time dealing with misconduct. Every barrel seems to have some bad apples and it often falls to those in authority to militate against their impact. We often chalk up misconduct to weak character and poor moral development. Rarely do we examine systemic factors that lead to the deviant behavior, and it is even less common to consider the possibility that we are participating in a system of our own making that tends to drive good people to bad behavior (Reed, 2006).

There are two great and too infrequently intersecting streams of thought on this question of drivers of ethical conduct: character-based and situational perspectives. In the remainder of this essay I will explore these two approaches, and suggest that both are deficient on their own to sufficiently inform scholars and practitioners of leadership. Leadership studies, with its interdisciplinary nature and strong desire to be relevant might serve as an able forum to explore bridges between the two seemingly disparate thought streams.

THE VENERABLE CHARACTER PROJECT

It is through an exploration of the classics that we are introduced to what I will refer to as the "character project" that extends back to the ancient Greeks and most apparent in the works of Aristotle. Aristotle believed that we could inculcate good habits of character by diligent practice and emulation of the noble and just. The way to be of good character is to understand the good, and then practice it such that it becomes second nature; a habit of excellent conduct that becomes ingrained and dispositional when practiced consistently over time. Thus ethical conduct is a process that begins with the individual deriving an internal understanding and motivation. We can judge the quality of one's character based upon how he or she consistently thinks and then acts, perhaps moderated by the situation, but not controlled by it. We can applaud the success of those who manifest good behavior while shaking our heads at the underdeveloped character or ignorance of those who do not see, or fail to act in accordance with, the good. Misdeeds are often viewed as the result of proverbial bad apples. Based on his writing in Nicomachean Ethics Aristotle clearly believed that "vice is voluntary" (Aristotle, 1995, p. 689).

We see the modern day equivalent of the character project in a number of examples. Perhaps most in keeping with Aristotle's version of habituation is the current character education movement that seeks to develop specific values in K-12 students. The Character Development Center at my own institution, the University of San Diego, is a well-known purveyor of character education initiatives. In July 1992 a group of ethicists and educators met in Aspen Colorado at the invitation of the Josephson Institute and eventually published the Aspen Declaration (Education Week, 2004). This excerpt from that effort is on point: "People do not automatically develop good moral character; therefore, conscientious efforts must be made to instruct young people in the values and abilities necessary for moral decision making and conduct."

We also see the emphasis on individual accountability that is characteristic of the character project in our disciplinary systems and processes. Sometimes people find themselves in situations not completely of their own making, and engage in activity that places them at odds with established rules and norms. When transgressors are discovered they are typically labeled as deviant and distanced from the mainstream. Relegated to the behavioral fringe, they are excoriated by their organizations and sanctions are applied. They are reviled for their weak character and lack of integrity. Once the punishment is meted out those in authoritative positions wipe their hands and applaud the high standards set and enforced by the organization as they point to the case as a message to other would-be violators. This is a worldview that consists of good apples and bad apples.

From a disciplinary perspective the character project is largely the turf of the humanities, especially that of the moral philosophers and the ethicists. Philosophers sometimes express disdain of the behavioral sciences. An ethicist friend once quipped to me in a personal communication that, "The only thing that the behavioral sciences can tell us about ethics is that most people are average." There is certainly value to extending our thinking beyond the empirical to the outer reaches of the theoretical. Central questions of

ethics focus on terms like "ought" and "should" that sometimes have little relationship to what actually is. Let us not be too tough with our philosopher colleagues. It would be a mistake to suggest that they are uninterested in the realities of daily life. They just don't feel particularly constrained by them. Carr (2007) points out that, "philosophers from Hume and Kant to modern non-cognivists have denied—on the basis of arguments that have still not been decidedly refuted—the relevance of so-called facts of human nature to ethical reflection" (pp. 398-399).

The character project has much to commend it. The locus of responsibility is clearly situated with the individual. Accountability is firmly established, and we have a roadmap for development. Rational people can learn about higher levels of good and practice acts of virtue until they are properly habituated. Society rightly provides either praise or blame, and in some cases sanction. Aristotle did recognize that people might be compelled to engage in a wrong action because of overwhelming circumstances, but also asserted that we should suffer the most terrible consequences and even accept death rather than perpetrate some acts.

ENTER THE SITUATIONISTS

In *Lack of Character* experimental social psychologist John Doris asserts that we should acknowledge that situations have a powerful impact on behavior (2002). The situational approach identifies human behavior as subject to external conditions with psychological and social cues, modified to some degree by internal dispositions of trait and personality. From this perspective the locus of control is largely external to the individual. Thus we can expect that otherwise good people will behave in bad ways given the requisite situational and contextual factors.

Where Aristotle was the quintessential progenitor of the character project, consider Stanford psychology professor Phillip Zimbardo as a champion of situationism. In his book *The Lucifer Effect* (2007) he not only recounts the now famous Stanford Prison Experiment that illustrated the power of roles in driving human behavior, but he further advances the notion that group dynamics influence us to do things we might not do on our own (p. 260). We might also consider the work of Stanly Milgram who demonstrated that it takes very little to induce people to administer ostensibly high doses of electric shocks to experiment volunteers.

Zimbardo served as a witness for the defense of Sergeant Ivan "Chip" Frederick, the non-commissioned officer in charge of a team of military police on the night shift of Tier 1A at Abu Ghraib Central Prison. Abu Ghraib goes down in history as the sight of shameful abuse of detainees at the hands of the American military. Zimbardo made his argument that situational social dynamics were key in explaining Frederick's behavior, an argument that was apparently dismissed by the military judge who sentenced the young soldier to eight years confinement at hard labor. Frederick pled guilty, but the defense hoped in vain that Zimbardo's testimony might result in greater leniency at sentencing (Zimbardo, 2007, pp. 372-373).

Experimental psychologists seem to be telling us that human behavior is a great deal more dependent upon psychological and social cues than we might be comfortable admitting. They raise the possibility that despite our focus on character and need to establish individual accountability, systemic forces play an important role in driving otherwise good people to bad behavior. In the words of Zimbardo,

> Hopefully the examples and supporting information in this book will challenge the rigid Fundamental Attribution Error that locates the inner qualities of people as the main source of their actions. We have added the need to recognize both the power of situations and the behavioral scaffolding provided by the System that crafts and upholds the social context. (2007, p. 445).

Character might be a compelling concept, but there is precious little evidence that it is predicts much in terms of actual behavior, nor do we seem to be very good at intentionally influencing character development one way or the other. Doris (2002) notes that philosophers have had little to say about the

efficacy of different approaches to moral education. Berkowitz and Bier (2004) observe that while "there has been an abundance of educational methods and curricula generated but comparatively little research on its effectiveness" (p. 72). Harman (1999) presses the case even more directly suggesting there is no evidence that people have character traits and since "there is no such thing as character, then there is no such thing as character building" (Harman, 1999).

Doris (2002) also points to the problem of a lack of consistency as a major weakness of the character project. If dispositional factors drive human behavior we would expect that virtuous people would act virtuously to a fairly consistent degree. The problem arises when we note that people are often remarkably inconsistent in their behavior. They will act honorably today, and with dishonor tomorrow or virtuously in some aspects of their lives yet villainously in others. As an example, consider the case of Randall "Duke" Cunningham. Cunningham was a naval aviator from the Vietnam conflict that was awarded the Navy Cross and two Silver Stars for heroism in combat. He served as a member Congress from 1993 to 2003 resigning after pleading guilty to federal charges of conspiracy to commit bribery, mail fraud, wire fraud and tax evasion. He was sentenced to eight years and four months in prison and ordered to pay $1.8 million in restitution (U.S. v. Cunningham, 2005) He was a powerful and respected member of the House Defense Appropriations Subcommittee where he allegedly brokered defense contracts in exchange for bribes. So how are we to reconcile such inconsistent depictions of the same person?

Situationism places the locus of control largely outside the individual. It notes the power of organizational culture and climate. This approach, to paraphrase comedian Flip Wilson's punch line, "The devil made me do it" puts the power to drive human behavior in the mysterious forces of the system. This is a worldview that consists of good and bad barrels.

Despite the compelling empirical evidence that social psychologists provide this perspective is not without flaw. We are left to ask, "What about free will?" Are we to relinquish altogether the notion that individuals are capable of being the captains of their own souls? There are, after all, exceptions to account for. In the case of Abu Ghraib only one tier of the prison sank to such a low level of morality. The same environmental factors were present elsewhere and while there was enough misconduct to suggest that there might have been an inclination to moral collapse not everyone took to the slippery slope. There are many instances of individuals who overrode extant psychological and social cues. We recall that the abuse at Abu Ghraib came to the attention of authorities only after Specialist Joseph Darby provided information that included the now famous photographs to an Army CID agent (Hersh, 2004). Even Zimbardo (2007) holds forth the possibility that moral agents can resist situational forces. He provides a prescription for resistance against undesirable influences: self-awareness, situational sensitivity, and street smarts (p. 452).

The external locus of control of situationism presents some real problems with accountability. Just how does one hold a "system" accountable? Some might argue that if everyone is responsible then no one is responsible. It might be a fiction that individuals can actually control the actions of their subordinates, but it might well be a useful fiction. It tends to drive a sense of responsibility that leads to some positive leadership behaviors. We tend to take a dim view of those in positions of responsibility who, in response to evidence of misconduct in their organizations, shrug their shoulders and say, "I didn't know" or "I didn't do it so it's not my fault."

Let us not make the mistake of placing excessive confidence in the findings of modern psychology. There is not much in the field of psychology, or the behavioral sciences for that matter, that is accepted without debate. Philosophers warn against the reductionist and technical discourse that is characteristic of the behavioral sciences (Carr, 2007). Carr asserts that, "it is a clear category mistake to conceive moral growth as any sort of natural process suited to empirical scientific description and explanation" (p. 400).

BRIDGING THE DIVIDE

Having asserted in the early paragraphs of this paper that the two streams of thought on the drivers of human behavior rarely intersect, where does that leave those of us who attempt to study and practice

leadership? If we are remain within the disciplinary boundaries of philosophy and psychology perhaps we merely recognize that the two approaches are inconsistent and permit the philosophers to decry the sterility of the psychology lab while the psychologists point to the lack of empirical studies in philosophy. At first glance moral philosophy and experimental psychology appear irreconcilable (See Figure 1).

FIGURE 1
COMPARISON OF MAJOR FEATURES OF CHARACTER V. SITUATIONAL APPROACHES

Character Project- Person Centric	Situationist – System Centric
• Self-mastery and habituation to the higher good (Aristotle). • Unethical behavior from weakness, pathology, or lack of moral fiber. • Moral philosophy. • Character development programs (indoctrination, exhortation, values). • Prominent in leader development and legalistic approaches. • Locus of control: Individual • Good apples and bad apples.	• Situations drive behavior. • Mid-twentieth century (Milgram, Zimbardo). • Unethical behavior is the product of psychological and social cues. • Social psychology. • Used as a defense or explanation. • Prominent in organizational climate and culture literature. • Locus of control: The system • Good barrels and bad barrels.

Psychologist George Mastroianni asserts that although situationist explanations are still dominant in the field of psychology, the distance from the character project is not as far as one might initially think:

> In psychology broadly and in leadership theory more narrowly we have seen that person and situation are no treated less as mutually exclusive alternative explanations for human behavior, than as complimentary perspectives which each contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the behaviors of interest. (Mastroianni, 2011, p. 8)

While the emerging and discipline-bending fields of experimental philosophy and philosophical psychology might have something to do with bridging the gulf, it is also the inherently applied nature of leadership studies that drives a search for answers that extends beyond traditional disciplinary approaches. I once had an enlightening discussion with one of my professors at St. Louis University that illustrates this notion. After a disturbing conversation with a professor in the history department I sought the guidance of Dr. Scott Cummings, a senior professor in the Department of Public Policy. My concern stemmed from the historian's rather elegant and sophisticated explanation of why the founding fathers were not racist. I was experiencing cognitive dissonance because I had just read S. T. Joshi's book *Documents of American Prejudice* (1999). Professor Cummings suggested that the historian, who labored in a period of American history that was thoroughly studied, benefitted from developing new angles and

perhaps even fantastic interpretations. In his field colleagues might applaud his nuance and creativity. Then got rather stern with me and said, "You can't do that George. People might actually attempt to put into practice what you write." Such is the responsibility of scholars in the applied sciences. Neither the navel gazing, angels dancing on the head of a pin style of philosophizing, nor the sterile laboratory-based experimental psychology that isolates variables divorced from a real world of staggering complexity and dynamism will do.

Ethics, for those of us primarily concerned with the moral dimensions of leadership, is most useful when applied as what ethicists Cook and Syse (2010) describe as "professional ethics." For them the practice and study of ethics is for the purpose of being of service to those who are entrusted with important tasks:

> It is analogous to medical ethics or legal ethics in the sense that its core function is to assist those professions to think through the moral challenges and dilemmas inherent in their professional activity and, by helping members of the profession better understand the ethical demands upon them, to enable and motivate them to act appropriately in the discharge of their professional obligations. (p. 119)

Leadership is not a profession, but it is an activity that has implications for professional practice in a variety of contextual settings. The analogies from the field of law and medicine, however, are helpful and to extend their argument about professional ethics to the ethics of leadership, the field provides a means to assess the relative value of leadership behaviors. Cook and Syse (2010) are calling for ethics that are relevant and provide a means of thinking critically in a way that leads to a more comprehensive understanding. This drive for relevance and strong desire to be useful to those in the arena is characteristic of leadership studies at its best.

IMPLICATIONS FOR LEADERSHIP

Both the situationists and adherents to the character project have something to contribute to our understanding of the study and practice of leadership. We may not be building character with our character development efforts, but they might still be valuable and productive. It is good to have "should" and "ought" statements to aspire to. Such programs serve to profile and encourage pro-social behaviors. Evidence from studies of school-based character development initiatives link a number of positive outcomes to character development efforts including greater commitment to democratic values, reductions in drug use, and fewer delinquent behaviors (DeRoche, 2009). Those behavioral changes might not be consistent, but few would argue that such outcomes are not beneficial.

Our exploration of the importance of situational factors as drivers of good and bad behavior suggests that perhaps we should, in our organizational lives, put less attention on matters of character that we have little control over and more on things we can influence such as systemic factors that drive good people to do bad things. The world might be a better place if those with status, power, and prestige perceived it as a fundamental duty to identify when systems and processes are negatively influencing people in organizations. We might start by looking at patterns of misconduct and then extend our exploration to look for subtle incentives or psychosocial cues that are driving people to behave badly. As an example, excessive expectations and insufficient resources combined with unrealistic timelines is a potent recipe for driving unethical behavior. The statement from an authority figure, "I don't care how you do it, just get it done" also portends a high probability of moral collapse.

In my classes and workshops I use a simple exercise (the helium stick), as taught to me by Bob Anderson of The Leadership Circle, to make a point about the power of systems. After dividing the room into two groups I have them line up in two columns facing each other. They are instructed to bend their hands at the elbow at a 90-degree angle and extend their index and middle fingers. I move them forward until their fingers interlace like a zipper. At this point their fingers are at about waist height. Now come the instructions: Their task is to lower a stick (actually connected segments of half inch PVC pipe) to the

ground as fast as possible. It's a simple task, but it is a timed exercise. I place the stick gently on top of their extended fingers and hold it at the middle while I provide a few more "rules." Rule one is that the stick cannot be dropped. It is to be lowered as if it were made of glass. Rule two: The stick must remain absolutely level the entire time. No sagging or leaning. Rule three, they are not to hook their fingers over the top of the stick and pull it down. I also tell them that it is rumored that there will be dire consequences if they break contact with the stick. After reviewing the rules one more time I release the stick and watch it rise as if by magic. The stick always rises, sometimes just a few inches, but usually the participants find themselves on tiptoes with arms fully extended.

The exercise participants usually manage to wrestle the stick to the ground after some shouting and often a few accusations. Leadership emerges and they eventually organize themselves to achieve success, but it takes much longer than they anticipated. There are many ways to debrief the exercise, but for our purposes I'll focus on just a few questions: Did anyone want the stick to go up instead of down? The answer is invariably no. Were they clear on the task at hand? Yes they were, it was after all a simple and straightforward task. So here we had a simple task and clear directions that everyone understood, yet the system performed contrary to both intent and expectation. Why? The answer is because the system performed as it had to given the rules in place. Because the stick was flexible and because they were told it must remain level, those on the ends had to exert slight pressure upward. When they did, those to their immediate left or right had to slightly raise their fingers to maintain contact. That slight pressure is enough to send the stick skyward. The message is clear. If you want to change behavior, you have to change the system. Preaching, extolling, yelling, establishing clear goals, and effective communication will not prevent systems from performing they way that they are designed to. That design is not always intentional. Sometimes it is inadvertent and the result of second or third order effects that are beyond our intention. We humans are part of the system but are also to some degree along for the ride. In the end people may triumph, but it takes a lot more effort than one might think.

Do we altogether abandon individual moral agency and accountability associated with notions of free will? Of course we do not. We may find ourselves in systems that are not of our design and exerting pressures that human beings are prone to, but we are not mindless cogs in a machine. Our helium stick participants do eventually overcome the system after all. At best the systemic forces provide some explanation, if not mitigation, for certain behaviors, especially those that we see repeated time and again. Once we recognize that such forces exist we are morally compelled to look for the unintentional incentives and drivers and address them. From this perspective it is not enough to simply investigate and punish the transgressors while ignoring the systemic factors in force. Enforcement and correction are necessary but insufficient. Thus the emphasis ought to be expanded beyond addressing noncompliance to include the potentially more productive effort of identifying the situational and contextual drivers of bad behavior.

A strongly socialized and sophisticated sense of professional ethics and a collective sense of ethos can be powerful systemic drivers that compete against negative situational forces. A clear sense of expected behavior and strong identification with a professional identity are useful in establishing or reinforcing an ethical climate. I've often defined a healthy ethical climate not as when a supervisor tells a subordinate to stop doing something unethical, but when a peer turns to a co-worker and says, "Hey, knock it off. We don't' do that here." While ethics may be the purview of the philosopher, there are a number of instruments developed by behavioral scientists that are proffered as useful in measuring ethics and ethical climate. A simple yet insightful early example was provided by Cullen, Victor & Stephens in their 1989 article entitled "An Ethical Weather Report: Assessing the Organization's Ethical Climate." Lennick and Kiel (2007) provide another more contemporary example with "The Moral Competency Inventory." Such instruments may not currently be in widespread use as a management metric, but if ethical climate is a predictor of behavior then perhaps they should be given additional consideration.

If we agree that there is benefit to the use of ethical climate assessments then we have an example of how behavioral science methods just might be compatible with concepts derived from moral philosophy. Knobe & Nichols (2008) suggest that the discovery by experimental philosophers and psychologists that people think about ethical processes differently than philosophers assumed need not be "a specter

haunting contemporary philosophy" (p. 3). Their experimental philosophy manifesto is a call to a holistic view that is less concerned with keeping philosophy separated from other disciplines and more interested in the human condition. That is a viewpoint in concert with the central argument of this essay. Those interested in the study and practice of leadership are less interested in disciplinary boundaries and more interested in determining what works.

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