LEADERSHIP

Focus on the Locus: A Response to "The Rhetoric of Character and Implications for Leadership" by George Reed

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George Reed's insightful analysis of the rhetoric of character and the implications of that rhetoric for leadership development, which recently appeared in these pages (Reed, 2018) raises challenging questions for anyone committed to the development of character and leadership. Professor Reed suggests that the concept of "character", as interpreted in many character and leadership development programs, misattributes to human nature a consistent internal mechanism that guides ethical and moral conduct. Professor Reed turns to the social-psychological concept of situationism, the idea that some or much our behavior is governed by external factors, to offer a different path for character and leadership development.

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That human behavior is complex, and that social factors can and do affect even our moral choices, is an important insight. But the literature of situationism cannot be taken at face value. Social psychology experiments like those of Stanley Milgram and Phillip Zimbardo contain a prominent element of theater: Milgram's experiment has aptly been called a "scientific parable" (Kotre, 1992). The lessons we draw from such parables do have important implications for our thinking about moral and ethical conduct, but exactly what the lessons are may not always be clear. My purpose in quibbling with some of Professor Reed's points is not to draw attention away from his viewpoint and toward my own, but to (hopefully) expose alternate ways of looking at and thinking about these difficult and complicated matters. Discussions end when people agree (except on cable news) and while disagreement for the sake of disagreement is merely churlish, considering one another's ideas in a respectful but searching and critical way is the beating heart of intellectual progress. It is in this spirit that the following is offered.

Ancient and Venerable Ideas

Professor Reed sees character development as often treated as a "fire and forget" enterprise that leaves its subjects vulnerable to situational forces that can readily derange the moral compass. Reed's statement of the Aristotelian position is clear (Reed, 2018):

> "Aristotle suggested that we can instill character as a trait through habituation and emulation of those who are just and noble (Aristotle, 1995). The way to good character is to understand the good and then practice it over time until it becomes second nature. Good behavior comes from the person who develops an intrinsic motivation to be good. The quality of character can be determined by how a person consistently thinks and acts over time. Aristotle saw vice is an individual choice (p. 689). The locus of control is squarely on the individual. When confronted with a choice between vice or virtue, those of good character can be counted on to choose virtue. While he recognized that some could be compelled to do wrong, he also felt the virtuous should accept death rather than engage in some acts. The impact of Aristotle's idea that virtue can be habituated is hard to overestimate. We see it in the service academies, in character development initiatives targeting primary school children, and especially throughout our systems of discipline and justice."

I am not a philosopher and will leave the argument about what Aristotle really meant in his discussions of character to others. Daniel N. Robinson's book *Aristotle's Psychology* (Robinson, 1989) for example, offers a comprehensive and clear look at those aspects of Aristotle's writings that address character, will, biological and situational determinism, and of course virtue and vice. Suffice it to say that it appears that Aristotle may have been quite realistic about human nature, recognizing that even those properly habituated to the pursuit of a virtuous life may fall short sometimes. There are constitutive and psychological variables that might contribute to an individual's failure to act virtuously, but importantly there are also social, cultural, and political circumstances that are relevant to individual moral behavior (Robinson, 1989):

> "The attainment of such a life[1] is not guaranteed, to say the least, and faces high hurdles at every turn. To live a virtuous life is not easy at the outset. The individual person who might hope to attain eudaimonia will need direction, care, and good examples, all of this coming from the society and culture that surrounds him. *Polis andra didaska*. Man is taught by the city, and the goals of Aristotle's human science must therefore be realized by a social science."

Professor Reed interprets Aristotle's approach as locating the source of control over individual actions exclusively within the individual, and indeed it would

1 Robinson here is referring to the "flourishing life", eudaimonia.

seem that Aristotle endorses a strong version of what we might now call personal responsibility. But Aristotle also recognized the complicity of organizations and institutions in making it easier or more difficult for individuals to continue to live the virtuous life to which they have been habituated and conditioned. This last point is approximately Professor Reed's conclusion, which he reached by way of Stanley Milgram and Phillip Zimbardo: that the "fire and forget" approach is doomed to failure, and that organizations and institutions share some of the responsibility for individual behavior, including individual failures to toe the moral line. Whether Milgram and Zimbardo are really necessary to have reached this conclusion, or perhaps Aristotle alone might have been sufficient to arrive at a similar place is immaterial, though others can certainly adjudicate that claim better than I. The defective notion that character can be inculcated early on through mainly hortatory mechanisms, and like a kind of moral vaccine, protect the individual against trouble forever, is most definitely abroad in the land, though, and indeed may be found in service academies and other institutions. The situationist perspective articulated by Milgram and Zimbardo and raised by Professor Reed in critically evaluating the fire-and-forget approach is often cited in discussions of the efficacy of character and leadership development, especially in the military and it is worth taking this opportunity to examine it more closely. Before doing so, however, some preliminaries demand attention.

Determinism

The great American philosopher and psychologist William James wrote a wonderful essay entitled *"The Dilemma of Determinism"* in 1884 (James, 1884/1992). The determinism James was writing about was scientific determinism, and the dilemma arose as a consequence of its application to human nature. Scientific determinism is the doctrine that phenomena in the world are fully determined by the natural scientific laws we have discovered. Boyle's Law, Amonton's Law, and Charles's Law describe the relations among pressure, volume, and temperature in confined gases, for example. If one increases the temperature of a confined gas, holding the volume constant, the pressure exerted by the gas on the vessel in which it is confined will increase. The confined gas has no choice in how it will behave in response to these changing conditions: we can always expect the same result.

Whether human behavior can be understood in similar terms was and is a fundamental question for psychologists. In his essay (which was delivered orally to an audience at Harvard University) James considers the question of which street he will take in returning to his home after his presentation is concluded: as it happens, there are two streets that will serve equally well. If human behavior is subject to the same kind of determinism that governs the behavior of confined gases, then the choice of which street he will take has already been made, says James. James may think that he himself is freely, perhaps even capriciously choosing which street to take, but the fact is that that choice has already been made: it has been determined by everything that has occurred or is about to occur in James' life up to the point of action.

The dilemma that arises when we apply this kind of determinism to human behavior has to do with the moral tone we can ascribe to actions that occur not as the result of human agency, or something we often call *free will*, but instead as a result of the inexorable and inevitable operation of natural laws and principles. If human actions are completely determined by the sum total of all the billiard-ball like interactions of the atoms that make up us and the world we inhabit, then what sense can it make to "blame" an individual for any of those actions? James uses the example of an infamous murder that had recently occurred when he delivered his talk to emphasize that even a heinous and violent crime could not be blamed on the perpetrator if we view human behavior through the lens of a thorough and complete determinism.

Now, we psychologists like to think of ourselves as scientists, or at least many of us do. Many of us spend a great deal of time and effort attempting to apply scientific methods – methods rooted in determinism - to furthering our understanding of human nature and human behavior. The questions raised by James in *The Dilemma of Determinism* sometimes become very salient for us, especially when we take our scientific psychology out of the laboratory and apply it to real-world events.

Situationism

Stanley Milgram and Phillip Zimbardo were high-school classmates: both born in 1933, coincidentally the year Adolf Hitler became Chancellor of Germany, these two men have had an impact on post-war American psychology that is hard to overstate. In the early 1960's Milgram embarked on a series of studies that he hoped would validate the view that there were national differences in the tendency to obey. In particular, he suspected that Germans were an especially obedient people, and that this tendency to obey helped to make the Holocaust possible. Milgram deliberately set out to conduct research that would help answer the question that so many were asking in the aftermath of World war II and the Holocaust: How could people do such things to other people?

Milgram encountered difficulties in carrying out his research, though, and eventually shifted his focus to conformity. Solomon Asch (Asch, 1956) had conducted studies on conformity in judging the length of lines. In some of these experiments, a group of people would be asked to publicly judge which of the four lines was longest. The experimental subject (we now call such people *participants*) thought that everyone in the group was, like him, naïve to what was going on. In fact, everyone but him (in some versions of the study) was actually working for Asch and doing his bidding. Asch's bidding was that often, the group members would correctly identify the longest line, but occasionally, the group members working for Asch would select an obviously wrong choice. After listening to the rest of the group make an obviously incorrect choice, would the subject submit to social pressure and follow suit, choosing the wrong line, or would he choose the line that he knew was longest, in defiance of the group consensus? Anyone who has taken a psychology course knows that the answer to almost any rhetorical question posed this way by a psychologist begins with, "It depends…", but suffice it to say that the behavior of a surprising number of people was affected by the choices made by other group members.

The questions raised by James in The Dilemma of Determinism sometimes become very salient for us, especially when we take our scientific psychology out of the laboratory and apply it to real-world events.

Milgram's crucial step was to develop an experimental paradigm that required participants to engage in behaviors that were more consequential than judging the length of a line: actions that had a definite moral tone. His studies evolved into the now-famous electric-shock obedience studies conducted at Yale University. Milgram actually conducted about two dozen variations of the experiment, and compliance rates (the percentage of subjects who went "all the way" and delivered the maximum shock to the learner) ranged from near-zero to 100%, depending on the configuration of the experiment. The most commonly reported condition produced rates around 65%.

Milgram interpreted his findings as validating the view that most Germans had just been following orders during the Nazi era, a view coincidentally buttressed by the publication of Hannah Arendt's book on the Eichmann trial (Arendt, 1963) in which she famously used the phrase, the "banality of evil" to describe Eichmann's conduct. This nexus between obedience as demonstrated by Milgram in the laboratory and perpetrator behavior during the Holocaust has been the subject of much discussion, but the case for the dominance of "obedience" as an explanation for perpetrator behavior has been considerably weakened over the years.

Many who include the Milgram studies in discussions of leadership fail to note the substantial critical literature that now exists surrounding these iconic studies. A good summary of this literature may be found in Gina Perry's recent book, *Behind the Shock Machine: The Untold Story of the Notorious Milgram Psychology Experiments* (Perry, 2012). There were procedural and other irregularities in the conduct of the experiments, and some of these are significant, but for our purposes it is quite interesting to consider Milgram's take on the moral posture of his research participants. Were his subjects blameworthy, or not? Remember, the Milgram studies are often used in the context of leadership discussions to emphasize the "power of the situation", the dominance of external factors in determining behavior, and the weakness of internal psychological or character-based factors.

Milgram's attitudes toward the behavior of his subjects were complicated by the ethical attacks that had been leveled against him for running the experiments in the first place. Diana Baumrind had published a scathing critique of Milgram's experiments a few months after they were first published (Baumrind, 1964), suggesting that the subjects had themselves been treated unacceptably cruelly. In public discussions, Milgram generally emphasized the positive assessment of their experience as research participants offered by his subjects after the fact (the full story is more complicated) and the overweening power of situational cues to force them to behave as they did. This latter point also formed part of the sensational appeal of the findings themselves, and was used by Milgram to promote his 1974 book about the studies. Some of the tag lines he proposed to his publisher for marketing the book included the following: *"Perhaps there is something in their national character that makes them follow orders unquestioningly. Perhaps that is what makes them…Americans. The most controversial book of the decade."* (Perry, 2012). He also famously said (on the television show *Sixty Minutes*):

> "I would say -- on the basis of having observed a thousand people in the experiment, and having my own intuition shaped and informed by these experiments -- that if a system of death camps were set up in the United States of the sort we had seen in Nazi Germany, one would be able to find sufficient personnel for those camps in any medium-sized American town."

This public stance minimized the culpability of the individual participants and universalized the potential for harmful behavior through the mechanism of destructive obedience as demonstrated in his laboratory. In this sense, Milgram clearly emphasized an external locus of control, just the opposite of the internal locus of control Professor Reed ascribes to the character approach. Privately, though, Milgram's views appear to have been a bit more complicated. In a letter to the National Science Foundation, Milgram referred (indirectly) to research participants who had delivered ostensible shocks to the learner as "moral imbeciles":

> "In a naïve moment some time ago, I once wondered whether in all of the United States a vicious government could find enough moral imbeciles to meet the personnel requirements

> of a national system of death camps, of the sort that were maintained in Germany. I am now beginning to think that the full complement could be recruited in New Haven. A substantial proportion of people do what they are told to do, irrespective of the content of the act, and without pangs of conscience, as long as they perceive that the command comes from a legitimate authority."

Omer Bartov, a leading Holocaust historian, points out that Milgram's notes describing the conduct of his research participants reveal prejudices that themselves reflect a misunderstanding of the history of the Holocaust (Bartov, 2003):

> "Although Milgram introduces the detailed exposition of his experiment by claiming that people from different professions and classes behaved similarly, his examples do not confirm this assertion and reveal his own biases. If we were to sketch a portrait of the typical perpetrator based on the findings of this experiment, he would be working class, crude, muscular, lacking in education and intelligence, possibly lethargic, badly dressed and speaking ungrammatical English, originating in southern Europe or the American South, probably black or Italian. Women supporters would belong to the working class, possibly of East European origin, or be hysterical, hypocritical, arriviste Jews. Conversely, those most unlikely to become perpetrators would be middle-class academics, professionals, the clergy or at least men of faith, intelligent, elegant, probably blonds of north European, most likely Protestant background. Those exposed in the past to war, atrocity, and complicity would be unlikely to comply.

The problem is, of course, that the typical supporter of Nazism came from the north German, middle-class, Protestant milieu. We know that the commanders of the Nazi death squads, the elite of the SS and the Police, were men with university degrees, often with a Ph.D. in law. We know that the medical and legal professions collaborated happily with Nazism and facilitated many of its crimes; that the clergy, Protestant and Catholic, did little to oppose the genocide of Jews and much to popularize prejudice. We know that the brutalizing effects of World War I played a major role in the success of Nazism. That is, the most unlikely to comply with malevolent authority supported Hitler. We also know that inside Germany it was first and foremost members of the working class who opposed the regime. We know that Nazism's victims came mainly from Eastern Europe and European Jewry, from among the handicapped, the Gypsies, the homosexuals. We know that Italians tried to hinder crimes perpetrated by Germans in Europe (although in Ethiopia they practiced habitual colonial mass killing).

> This does not mean that Milgram is necessarily wrong in his psychological portrait, but rather that Milgram got his history wrong. Had these men and women acted merely out of a sense of obedience to authority, the results of the experiment could not possibly conform to the reality in Nazi Germany. Hence we are left to conclude that the opposite is the case, namely, that middle-class professional Germans supported Hitler for what appeared to them intellectually and morally sound reasons....It means that, for a while at least, people had a choice and what they chose indicated their beliefs."

Moreover, Milgram's differentiation of his research participants who did or did not go "all the way" based on factors like educational level, class, race and ethnicity belies the notion that susceptibility to the mechanism of blind obedience to authority is in any way universal. This can only mean that for some people, the locus of control is more internal. This begins to sound uncomfortably like a character-based explanation of

moral conduct: those of proper breeding, education, and culture behave well (have good character?) but less-educated people with inferior pedigrees behave badly.

Phillip Zimbardo conducted his now-famous Stanford Prison Study (Haney, Banks, and Zimbardo, 1973) a decade after Stanley Milgram carried out his obedience studies. Zimbardo shut down his simulated prison after only six days of a scheduled three weeks, because some guards had become very abusive and some prisoners very submissive. Zimbardo interpreted these results as a demonstration of the power of the situation to determine behavior. He framed the abusive behaviors of guards and the submissive behavior of prisoners as out-of-character conformity to role expectations induced by the total environment of the prison.

As with Milgram, many commentators who use the example of the Zimbardo prison study in their analyses of character and leadership do not discuss the significant and substantive critical literature on the study that has, if anything, grown more significant and more substantive in recent years (Griggs and Whitehead, 2014). While Zimbardo portrays the events that occurred in the basement of the Psychology building at Stanford University over those six days as spontaneous and unscripted, there is clear evidence that Zimbardo and his associates were deeply and heavily involved in shaping the course of events to suit their purposes.

Whatever the limitations of the research itself, Zimbardo has subsequently embraced a very muscular form of situationism (Zimbardo, 2007):

> "The SPE [Stanford Prison Experiment] along with much other social science research…reveals a message we do not want to accept: that most of us can undergo significant character transformations when we are caught up in the crucible of social forces. What we imagine we would do when we are outside that crucible may bear little resemblance to who we become and what we are capable of doing once we are inside its network…This lesson should have been taught repeatedly by the behavioral transformation of Nazi concentration camp guards… Any deed that any human has ever committed, however horrible, is possible for any of us – under the right or wrong situational circumstances. That knowledge does not excuse evil; rather, it democratizes it, sharing its blame among ordinary actors rather than declaring it the province only of deviants and despots – of Them but not Us".

Zimbardo's universalization of the potential for evil is breathtaking in its sweep: can he really mean that each and every one of us is capable of committing any deed ever committed by any human, however horrible?

Zimbardo's universalization of the potential for evil is breathtaking in its sweep: can he really mean that each and every one of us is capable of committing any deed ever committed by *any* human, however horrible? In discussing Abu Ghraib, Zimbardo employs similarly stark language (Zimbardo, 2004):

> "That line between good and evil is permeable," Zimbardo said. "Any of us can move across it….I argue that we all have the capacity for love and evil--to be Mother Theresa, to be Hitler or Saddam Hussein. It's the situation that brings that out."

I have to think that a bit more than "the situation" goes into making a Mother Theresa or an Adolf Hitler, but consider the moral consequences of this kind of situational determinism. It is difficult to read such a statement and fail to conclude that Zimbardo might not think that Mother Theresa was all that great, or that Adolf Hitler wasn't all that bad: after all, any one of us could easily have ended up the same as either of them in the same situation! Professor Reed's approach seems a bit more measured (Reed, 2018):

> "There may or may not be such a thing as good character. If speaking of character as a stable and dependable trait, evidence weighs against it. Leaders of military organizations should not solely depend upon it lest they be surprised and disappointed. Those engaged in character development efforts might consider reframing their attention to how human beings actually behave rather than subscribing to ancient and venerable suggestions about how humans should behave. Humans are much more influenced by roles and situations than we might want to believe. That is not an excuse for bad behavior, but it can serve as an explanation".

Ancient and venerable suggestions about how we should behave (the Bible, for example) have indeed coexisted with much human-authored misery and suffering over the centuries, but we must ask exactly how these two flawed social-psychology experiments will help us do better. The truth is that these two studies, despite their enduring popularity, may not tell us much about how we "actually behave" at all. The primary event that Milgram had in mind when designing the obedience studies was the Holocaust, and even Milgram enthusiasts now concede that the results of the obedience studies are relevant at best to a narrow and limited slice of perpetrator behavior during the Holocaust (Blass, 2002). Zimbardo's book, *The Lucifer Effect*, (Zimbardo, 2007) a significant portion of which was devoted to the abuses at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq in 2003, tried to make the case that the soldiers who were convicted of criminal conduct at Abu Ghraib were merely pawns, forced to behave as they did by the policies of senior administration officials. In Zimbardo's view, these were all good soldiers who responded as any of us would have to the situation created by high-ranking military and political figures, including President George W. Bush and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld. Zimbardo does at least mention the delightfully eponymous Specialist Matthew Wisdom in passing, on page 360 of the book, but his story fundamentally challenges Zimbardo's premise that the situational factors at Abu Ghraib were so powerful as to be nearly irresistible. This exchange from the trial of Ivan Frederick, one of the Abu Ghraib abusers, is illustrative (Graveline and Clemens, 2010):

Myers ended with one last question. 'Given the actual circumstances that existed at Abu Ghraib, that irrespective of who occupied the role of night shift guard, was there a certain inevitability to abuse, given all the factors that existed?'

> 'Yeah, I guess l would be drawn to that, is that not every single individual in a setting like that gets out of control. What we have found not only in my prison study, but many other studies is that the majority. . . the typical reaction of someone in that study is to give in to the situational forces. It's the exceptional person, the heroic person who can somehow resist. But it's impossible to do so when you're encouraged to soften up the detainees for interrogation'.

Consider the two soldiers who were most responsible for the abuses, and who received the longest prison terms, Charles Graner and Ivan Frederick. Both had had previous corrections experience as civilians, both were older men; Frederick was a non-commissioned officer, and the ranking man when the abuses took

place. And by the way, few of the detainees in the most famous abuses were ever interrogated, as they were mostly not suspected terrorists. But one might think that if anyone were in a position to resist the situational pressures at the prison, it would be more likely to be one or both of them than Specialist Matthew Wisdom. Matthew Wisdom was 19 years old at the time, quite probably the lowest-ranking soldier present, and yet when he saw the abuses taking place on Tier 1A, he immediately went to his NCO and reported what he had seen. His concerns were dismissed and he was sent back to work. Specialist Wisdom was so disturbed by what he saw that he went back to his NCO a second time to report what he was seeing, and this time was sent off to a different part of the prison to work.

Whether one describes the wellspring of Wisdom's actions as "character" or as something else, it seems clear that he was guided by some steady internal principles which were not swept away by situational forces. That situational forces can sometimes compromise our capacity to behave in accordance with our internal beliefs and values should be uncontroversial: parents have been warning children about "peer group pressure" for a long time, and asking if the kids at school jumped off a bridge, would you do it, too? What reasonable people can't and shouldn't accept is the notion that situational forces always trump internal beliefs, values and convictions, or even that it is the rare and heroic individual who is capable of doing so. People successfully resist social pressure all the time.

Determinism Redux

The psychological assault on free will has been underway for a long time. Sigmund Freud viewed unconscious urges as the real drivers of behavior, our conscious ego a weak and pitiable thing buffeted about by the titanic forces of id and superego. John Watson and B.F. Skinner, reacting in part to Freud's conception of psychological motivation, saw all behavior as determined by environmental contingencies: classical and operant conditioning. Social psychologists such as Milgram and Zimbardo see situations as determining our behavior; as well, various forms of biological determinism seem to be increasing in popularity. The ready availability of personal genetic-testing kits has only fueled this unfortunate trend.

William James resolved the dilemma of determinism with which he wrestled in a characteristically pragmatic way. James saw that any thorough-going determinism that diminished or eliminated the possibility of assigning blame or praise to human actions would wreak havoc on our social relations, so he simply decided to accept the idea that humans do have free will – that our behavior is self-determined. He freely acknowledged that he had no philosophical or scientific basis on which to accept this idea, but did so simply because the moral consequences of not doing so were unacceptable to him.

Professor Reed, confronting the reality that character-development approaches prevalent in the military do not appear to determine behavior nearly as powerfully as we might hope, turns to situations, which, as it turns out, do not seem to determine behavior nearly as powerfully as situationists claim. Professor Reed juxtaposes a strong form of the character approach, the fire-and-forget form, against a weak form of the situationist approach, in which behavior is determined by situations but individuals somehow still retain some degree of personal responsibility. This last point is the one that tripped up Zimbardo most egregiously in the trial of Ivan Frederick, one of the Abu Ghraib abusers (Graveline and Clemens, 2010):

> 'Dr Zimbardo, you subscribe to a situationist perspective in understanding abhorrent behavior, correct?'
>
> 'Yes.'
> "'If I could be so bold as to attempt to summarize that line of thinking in just a few sentences. When clearly evil behavior is committed by an otherwise

psychologically normal person you must look to the situational circumstances surrounding the event, rather than those of personal choice, character, or free will to explain the conduct, right?'

'No. That's too simple an explanation. People always have free choice. Ultimately, individuals are always responsible for their actions. A situationist approach simply says that when trying to understand any behavior, we have to take into account various factors in the situation.'

'I apologize. I must have misunderstood. When you testified before Congress, did you say the following, "Individual behavior is largely under the control of social forces and environmental contingencies, things that occur, rather than some vague notions of personality traits, character, willpower, or other empirically invalidated constructs?" You said that, correct?'

'Correct, yes.'

'You went on to say, "We create an illusion of freedom by attributing more internal control to ourselves. . . to the individual than what actually exists." Did you say that, as well?'

'Yes, I did.'

'You went on one more time and said, "We put too much stock in some notions of character, free will, or personality traits to which there's no evidence, psychologically, that they even exist." You said that, as well?'

'Yes.'

'Is it your testimony today that SSG Ivan Frederick, because of the situation he found himself in [in] Abu Ghraib last fall, was essentially guaranteed to commit the heinous crimes?'

'You're misconstruing what I said in my position. I didn't say people do not have free will. I said, those are vague constructs, that we use them in a vague sense. You don't measure free will. You don't measure character. It doesn't mean they don't exist, but they are vague constructs in comparison to the very specific things of. . . we can measure the level of exhaustion. We can measure the level of stress. We can measure specific event situations. So, I don't want you to. . . it sounds to me like you're trying to twist my position, that he had free will to act in the way he did or not; but that free will got undercut, that free will gets distorted the more situational factors you have that pushed behavior in this negative direction."

Zimbardo's attempt to clarify things, in response to questioning from Frederick's attorney, after which the defense rested, did not go much better (Graveline and Clemens, 2010):

"'You're not here to excuse his conduct, are you?'

'Oh, I don't excuse his conduct. Again, the situational approach is not excuseology. It's not saying, "Oh, we're going to blame the situation and take the person off the hook." It simply says in trying to understand why Sergeant Frederick suddenly did these terrible things to which he has nothing in his history, nothing in his personal background, nothing in any psychological test that would have predicted that he did these terrible things, that what we have to put on trial is both the situation and also the system of. . . on trial has to be all of the officers who should have prevented it. Abu Ghraib was treated with indifference. It had no priority, the same low priority in security as the archaeological museum in Baghdad. These

are both low-priority items, and this one happened to end with these unfortunate circumstances. So, I think that the military is on trial, particularly all of the officers who are above Sergeant Frederick who should have known what was going on, should have prevented it, should have stopped it, should have challenged it. They are the ones who should be on trial. Or if Sergeant Frederick is responsible to some extent, whatever his sentence is, has to be, I think, mitigated by the responsibility of the whole chain of command."

Social psychologists have struggled with this dilemma for a long time: if situations are so powerful that they approach duress, then individuals who yield to these pressures cannot be held responsible for their actions. If situations are merely mitigating factors, leaving personal choice and responsibility intact, then courts and judges are free to interpret the degree of coercion they might imply, based on whatever factors might inform that assessment: the Matthew Wisdoms of the world then become quite relevant. So if neither character nor situations are very helpful in helping us understand and predict behavior, where does that leave us?

Attribution

Though Professor Reed and I have arrived at the ends of our papers having followed very different paths, I think we are actually substantially in agreement as to the best way forward. Before turning to pontifical prescriptions for future leaders though, one more brief foray into social psychology will be helpful.

A concept to which social psychologists have devoted considerable attention is attribution. Attribution is the process by which we ascribe responsibility for human behavior: our own behavior, and that of others. Social psychologists are fond of reminding us of something known as the *fundamental attribution error* (Ross, 1977), now so well-known it is often referred to simply as the *FAE*. The fundamental attribution error is the tendency we have to assume that behavior is internally directed, rather than being the result of external, environmental or situational pressures. A great deal of research has been done on attribution, and attribution patterns turn out to be startlingly complex. One pattern of attributions is a self-serving pattern. Anyone who has ever employed or met a stockbroker can begin to appreciate this pattern immediately: if our investment portfolio is up, this is obviously the result of the shrewd and canny investment decisions made by our broker. If our portfolio is down, on the other hand, well – you know: there is the business cycle, the Fed, over-regulation, the phases of the moon…the list is endless. But it is definitely not the broker's fault.

We can expand this self-serving bias in attribution using the table below:

	Good Thing	Bad Thing
I did a…	Internal attribution (virtue)	External attribution (bad luck)
You did a…	External attribution (good luck)	Internal attribution (vice)

Now, of course not all attributions follow this pattern, but organizing our thinking this way can help us see more clearly how we are explaining the determination of behavior. Zimbardo, for example, has a table that looks like this:

	Good Thing	Bad Thing
I did a...	External attribution (good luck)	External attribution (bad luck)
You did a...	External attribution (good luck)	External attribution (bad luck)

But as it happens, that is only for low-ranking people: if you happen to be a high government official, officer, or leader, then you are much more likely to be saddled with a dispositional attribution by Zimbardo.

A more interesting case for our purposes might the hypothetical attributional matrix of the leader of a character-leadership development program at, say, a service academy. We'll have to take a little poetic license with the matrix, so we'll work through this step-by-step:

	You behaved well	You behaved poorly
I run a character program	Internal attribution (I am virtuous)	
You participated in my character program	Internal attribution (you are virtuous because I transferred my virtue to you)	

Our hypothetical manager of a character and leadership development program is, perhaps not unlike our hypothetical stockbroker, ready to take credit when things are going well. If, on some measures (number of honor cases, etc) it appears that things are staying the same or maybe even getting better, then leaders are unlikely to see this as a happy accident: they are likely to see and portray it as evidence that their character program is working because they are virtuous and smart. So far, so good: we are on familiar territory vis a vis the self-serving attribution pattern.

What, on the other hand, if things go wrong? This is where the matrix as a vehicle to analyze these attribution patterns becomes just a bit strained. Let's for the sake of argument, consider that the lower-right "You behaved poorly" cell means that you as an individual behaved poorly, but that the overall rate of bad behavior has not called into question the overall success of the character/leadership program. Then, we should expect another internal attribution:

	You behaved well	**You behaved poorly**
I run a character program	Internal attribution (I am virtuous)	
You participated in my character program	Internal attribution (You are virtuous because I transferred my virtue to you)	Internal attribution: (You are a bad apple and not virtuous)

This attribution is straightforward, in that it allows the leader to maintain a consistent, positive self-image: after all, every barrel has a few bad apples, and our program can't be expected to be 100% successful. The real challenge occurs when there is evidence that the program is not working: a major cheating scandal occurs, or a steady drumbeat of honor cases makes clear that things are not improving, or perhaps even getting worse. How will leaders respond under these circumstances?

	You behaved well	**You behaved poorly**
I run a character program	Internal attribution (I am virtuous)	External attribution: (Society is sending us morally inferior individuals)
You participated in my character program	Internal attribution (You are virtuous because I transferred my virtue to you)	Internal attribution: (You are a bad apple and not virtuous)

Now we might expect to see an external attribution. When I worked at the Air Force Academy, I clearly remember senior officers, when confronted with the reality that cadets were continuing to commit high-profile honor violations despite their high-profile character programs and efforts, patiently explaining to me that this was because American society had morally deteriorated to such an extent that the cadets we were being sent were of inferior moral material, and no one could be expected to make a moral silk purse of these societal sow's ears.

So, it may not always be the case that the leaders of character programs of the sort Professor Reed describes always fail to recognize that situational variables can affect behavior: it may rather be that their external/internal attributions are sometimes organized in a way that is congenial to the maintenance of their preferred world-view.

The external attribution lets them off the hook, and places society on it. This incidentally, is precisely parallel to Zimbardo's organization of internal/external attributions: his world view is that authority is bad, and that those in authority are to blame when low-level actors act badly. As a result, those who actually commit crimes are let off the hook with an external attribution, but those in charge, no matter how remote from the crimes, are blamed with an internal attribution.

Locus of Responsibility

So where does our discussion of character and situations, internal and external control, and attribution leave us if we return to the questions so perceptively posed by Professor Reed in his discussion? Professor Reed correctly, in my opinion, points out that misconduct is frequently misattributed by the leaders of character programs at service academies and elsewhere. Professor Reed's suggestions to improve the outcomes of character programs are congruent with those I would offer: institutions and organizations that would seek to lead young people to a virtuous life should consistently and transparently and honestly set the example of virtuous living themselves. Far too often we see institutions and organizations fall short of this goal: this in itself need not be fatal to the enterprise of character development, but failing to admit error, papering over organizational misconduct, and failing to be honest about such lapses can be.

I am suspicious that this prescription would fit well within the Aristotelian framework, but I repeat that I do not know the philosophy well enough to take too strong a stand. Whether it is or isn't Aristotelian, it seems to me to make good sense. In the final analysis, the only real point of disagreement between Professor Reed and me is the nature of the misattributions sometimes made by some leaders of character development programs: who gets the blame when such programs don't work as well as we would like them to? I don't think the problem is that leaders don't recognize the role situational factors play, but that their pattern of internal and external attributions is self-serving.

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One way to think about the different attributional schemes suggested by the situationist and the character approaches is to divide institutions and organizations

into three levels: low, medium, and high levels of authority and responsibility. The distribution of blame suggested by Zimbardo at Abu Ghraib is illustrative of the situationist approach when blameworthy events occur: little or no blame at low levels of the organization, some blame at middle levels, and most of the blame at the highest levels. We sometimes see character-based attributional schemes that place most of the blame at the lowest levels, some blame at the middle levels, and little or no blame at the highest levels: this is the "bad apple" approach against which Zimbardo correctly fulminates. We can compare these two approaches in tabular form:

	SITUATIONIST	CHARACTER
HIGH LEVEL	MOST BLAME	LITTLE OR NO BLAME
MEDIUM LEVEL	SOME BLAME	SOME BLAME
LOW LEVEL	LITTLE OR NO BLAME	MOST BLAME

We can now address the somewhat cryptic title of this paper: "Focus on the Locus". The locus I have in mind is the locus of responsibility: where do we look when we seek to assign responsibility for conduct that has a moral valence, either positive or negative? I submit that biased attributional schemes like those posited above may both be unhelpful in fully understanding the origins of misconduct. Such schemes tilt the explanatory balance in advance, potentially blinding us to important factors contributing to the outcomes we seek to change. A more balanced approach might be ideal:

	SITUATIONIST	CHARACTER	IDEAL
HIGH LEVEL	MOST BLAME (CREDIT)	LITTLE/NO BLAME (CREDIT)	SOME BLAME (CREDIT)
MEDIUM LEVEL	SOME BLAME (CREDIT)	SOME BLAME (CREDIT)	SOME BLAME (CREDIT)
LOW LEVEL	LITTLE/NO BLAME (CREDIT)	MOST BLAME (CREDIT)	SOME BLAME (CREDIT)

We psychologists like to think that the first step in changing our behavior is developing self-awareness: often, the act of explicitly attending to our behavior creates its own momentum for change. The first step in an effective weight-loss program is often onto the scale. Organizations interested in understanding the origins of misconduct might usefully analyze the attributional patterns of their own past, present, and future approaches to such problems. Simply enumerating the organizational level at which explanations have been offered and actions taken might help us to uncover systematic biases in our attributional schemata that we can work to correct. Balancing our attributional patterns in this way might offer hope for developing more realistic and effective responses when things go wrong.

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