

FEATURE

# The Rhetoric of Character and Implications for Leadership

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## ABSTRACT

This article casts a questioning eye upon the way the construct of character is used in military organizations and especially the military service academies. After examining what is typically meant by character from a historical perspective, this article considers insights from contemporary social-psychology and empirically informed moral philosophy. After making the case that character may be too unstable a construct for military leaders to rely upon, it suggests that efforts to develop character may still serve a useful purpose even if they aren't building character. Implications for leadership are also explored.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This manuscript is based on the Alice McDermott Lecture on Applied Ethics provided to cadets at the Air Force Academy in April 2018. The lecture was well-received by cadets and faculty as evidenced by a useful and energetic question and answer session. The audience seemed open and willing to consider the possibility that something so central to the Academy's self-perception rests on a shaky foundation (my opinion). No small amount of credit is due to the organizers of that lecture from the Philosophy Department as well as the editors of this journal for entertaining such a heretical questioning of a revered concept in the canon of military leadership.

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The notion of character is central to the identity and core work of the United States (US) military. The rhetoric of character is especially common among the military service academies. The United States Military Academy's (West Point) stated mission is to, "Educate, train and inspire the Corps of Cadets so that each graduate is a commissioned leader of character..." (US Military Academy, 2018). The US Air Force Academy states they "...educate, train, and inspire men and women to become leaders of character, motivated to lead the US Air Force in service to the nation," and asserts "Character and leadership are the essence of the United States Air Force Academy (US Air Force Academy, 2018). The Air Force

Some might view this questioning as an impudent attack on a venerable construct that has served the nation well. It is intended as a thoughtful examination and questioning in the best spirit of applied philosophy. When engaging in an activity as important as creating future generations of military leaders, perhaps we should be clear as to what we are about. The distance between intentions and outcomes can be vast. Then Chair of the Stockdale Chair of Professional Ethics at the Naval War College, Martin Cook (2013) suggested that designing programs and training personnel on a basis of flawed assumptions can result in unexpected and sometimes disastrous results. He further asserts that faced with an outcome that should not happen based

on accepted assumptions, we rarely go back and examine the assumptions on which the whole program was built.<sup>2</sup> Military programs can take on a life of their own and can be quite resistant to change even with evidence to the contrary. Therefore, we should expect undesired outcomes if our

assumptions about character are false. The belief that we can inculcate good character in such a way that military personnel can be counted on to avoid moral failure across different situations and environments is increasingly questionable.

### Character and Misconduct

One of the reasons the notion of character remains a focus of the military relates to the ubiquitous problem of misconduct. Violations of the norms and laws of society are unfortunately commonplace even in organizations that are well-trained and well-led. Thus, an activity that would guarantee desired behavior, no matter the situation, especially by those who wield great power and destructive capacity, has strong allure.

<sup>2</sup> Dr. Martin Cook and I have had numerous helpful discussions about this topic and it is difficult to discern my own thinking from his. I therefore wish to acknowledge his many intellectual contributions to this manuscript.

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Academy has a magnificent Center for Character and Leadership Development that seeks to "integrate character and leadership into all aspects of the Cadet experience..." (2018). The mission statement of the US Naval Academy also includes a reference to character, "...to graduate leaders who are dedicated to a career of naval service and have potential for future development in mind and character..." (US Naval Academy, 2018). Such an important construct deserves thoughtful examination. In light of the significant amount of public resources that are dedicated to the processes of character development, good stewardship suggests some questions: How much stock should be put in the notion of character? Is there evidence that we can actually develop or change character? What are we really doing when we attempt to develop character and is that helpful to the purpose of the armed forces?

It would be a wonderful thing if we could develop character. We could then depend on those of good character to act virtuously no matter the provocation or inducement to do otherwise.

Character is an ancient concept. We owe much to the Greeks and specifically to Plato and Aristotle for our understanding of the notion. In *The Republic* Plato wrote of the dyers of wool who had to prepare fiber in specific ways to take the dye so it sets fast such that no washing can take away its vivid color. He suggested in selecting and educating soldiers we want to indelibly fix by their nurture and training a perfect inculcation of the laws so they would not be diminished by pleasure, sorrow, fear or desire. 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.

When the locus of control is set so securely on the individual, the role of authority is clear. When individuals engage in misconduct, the organization or society intervenes, holding them accountable for their lack of character. Those who misbehave are

investigated, punished, and sometimes banished from the organization. Their actions are ascribed to a lack of integrity and poor character. There are sociological benefits to this approach from an organizational perspective. The miscreant can be ostracized, shunned and designated as an outlier, thereby absolving the organization for any role in the undesirable conduct. The response by those in authority is predictable and dependable. The cycle of investigation and punishment can go on with vigor without having to acknowledge or discern how systems and processes of the organization might be contributing to the misconduct.

### The Power of Situation and Context

Organizational members take cues from the network of incentive structures, both intentional and unintentional that exist in human social systems. Weisbord (1976) encouraged examination of both formal and informal systems imbedded in organizational culture. Formal structures can be observed in line and box charts and via official pronouncements such as mission statements, slogans and policies. Informally, members of the organization develop their own sets of beliefs about how to survive and thrive. Schein (2010) described the variation as the difference between beliefs and values that are espoused as compared to those actually enacted. The distance between intentions based in formal structure and actions by organizational members can be significant, sometimes to the dismay of those in authority. A case might be useful to illustrate the point.

Consider a situation that repeatedly arises in all military services in one variation or another. A unit that prides itself on excellence faces an annual inspection. The inspection largely relies on an examination of files and records of activity. Inspectors come in from out of town, examine the records and then provide a report on compliance with various directives. Much depends on the inspection, both formally and informally. Unit members, and especially the formal leaders, have

thoroughly bought into the inspection framework. A favorable inspection report is interpreted as evidence the unit is good and worthy of accolades, career enhancing fitness reports (performance reports) and bragging rights. Poor performance on the inspection can result in shame or even career failure. Failure is simply not an acceptable option. Now let's add some additional stressors to the mix. Let's say the unit is experiencing high turnover and shortages, especially among the most senior and experienced personnel. Add a significant increase in workload, perhaps due to an aggressive exercise schedule or deployment. The inspection is looming and again, failure is not an option. As familiar as the scenario, so is a likely response. Unit members are tempted (and some likely will) to put into the record activities they did not perform. Caught in a situation they cannot win and motivated by unit pride, they cheat. They do not cheat for self-aggrandizement or personal gain, but to enhance or maintain the reputation of the unit. Services even have euphemisms for such activity thereby indicating its prevalence. The Army and Air Force might refer to it as "pencil whipping" or "checking the box" while the Navy calls it "gun decking" or "cross decking."

The above scenario represents a situation created by the organization through an inspection and evaluation regime and a system of incentives fueled by an otherwise desirable culture of excellence. Perhaps unintentionally, it also incentivized misconduct. Kerr (1975) refers to such a situation as "the folly of rewarding A, while hoping for B." What happens when the cheating is inevitably discovered? The offenders are excoriated, punished, and labeled as those of poor character. One might argue that those of good character would never fall to falsely documenting unit activity to obtain a favorable inspection report. While that may be true, it also underestimates the power of the situation in influencing human behavior. Perhaps it should be a maxim of good leadership that those in position of authority who develop and maintain such

systems ought to be alert to unintended, yet powerful incentives that drive otherwise good people to bad behavior. Some focus on the external locus of control could be more productive than depending on character alone.

Detainee abuse at the Abu Ghraib central prison provides another example. The now infamous misconduct by the midnight shift of Tier 1 by a poorly resourced, poorly trained and poorly led reserve unit seemed to replicate the famous Stanford Prison Experiments conducted by Philip Zimbardo. Detainees were subjected to humiliation and physical abuse at the hands of US military police in ways reminiscent of what played out in the mock prison located in the basement of the Stanford Psychology Department. The environment in which the unit operated was abysmal. The prison was under frequent mortar attack and subject to eruptions of violence among detainees. There was also pressure to provide actionable intelligence. Perhaps there were a few predisposed individuals who answered the call to sadism, but there were also some who found themselves drawn in by the psycho-social cues loaded into the situation and reinforced by their peers (Adams, Balfour & Reed, 2006). Zimbardo actually testified as a defense witness at the court martial of the non-commissioned officer (NCO) in charge, but to little effect since the NCO was sentenced to confinement with hard labor (Zimbardo, 2007).

In a useful critique of character rhetoric, social psychologist John Doris (2002) asserts our desire to seat the locus of control so firmly on the individual, leads to an underestimation of the power of psychological and social cues that are powerful drivers of human behavior. The argument might be summarized by stating the power of the situation trumps character more often than we want to believe. This is not new information as the power of situational influence has long been a focus of psychology, noting Milgram's famous shock experiments (1974) and Zimbardo's

Stanford Prison Experiment (2007). As Doris states in the first sentence of his book, “I’m possessed of the conviction that thinking productively about ethics requires thinking realistically about humanity” (p. 2002, p. 1).

Doris (2002) also notes the inconsistency of character as a construct. If character is a trait, we should be able to depend upon it regardless of situational factors. Human beings, however, can be extremely virtuous in many aspects of their lives, yet despicable in others. A person who is virtuous and of seemingly good character most of the time, can be unvirtuous at another time. We need look no further than some of our most vaunted military leaders and their moral failures for examples. After a career and perhaps lifetime of seemingly exemplary character, some apparently go off the rails and engage in unseemly and even illegal activities. Were they not of good character in the first place, or did they have good character and lost it? Military leaders might hope for units full of those with good character but they would be well advised not to depend on it.

### Contributions of Experimental Ethics and Social Psychology

Daniel Ariely’s entertaining Ted Talk YouTube video, entitled “Our Buggy Moral Code” (2012) has over 170,000 views. In the video, he addresses cheating, acknowledging there is an economic benefit to the practice provided one does not get caught. He boldly asserts that given the opportunity and absent a high probability of getting caught, most people will cheat. They tend however, to limit their cheating to a little bit so they don’t feel bad about themselves. He arrived at that conclusion after a series of clever experiments. Students were given a sheet of simple math problems to

complete within a limited amount of time. They would pass the answer sheet forward and be paid one dollar for each correct answer. The average number of correct answers in the time given was four. He would then manipulate the environment to see if he could increase or decrease the amount of cheating that took place. For example, he would direct students to shred their answer sheets before stating the number of self-scored correct answers. The average number of correct answers increased to seven. “It wasn’t as if there were a few bad

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apples that cheated a lot, instead what we saw was a lot of people who cheated a little bit” (Ariely). No matter what the reward, cheating occurred, but only a little. Students did not cheat more when offered increased rewards. The experiment suggests that it is important to people to be able to feel good about themselves so they cheat enough to obtain some gain, but not enough to feel bad about it.

In a variation of the experiment, participants were asked to recall the Ten Commandments or ten books they read in high school before completing a series of math problems. The groups who attempted to recall the Ten Commandments did not cheat when completing the math problems. In another variation they asked students to sign a sheet acknowledging they understood the university’s honor code. Despite the fact that the university did not have an honor code, with that prompt cheating did not occur. Both

experiments suggest that when it comes to obtaining ethical conduct, human behavior can be influenced (i.e., primed) to the positive or negative with rather subtle cues.

A variation of Ariely's math problem experiment that has particular saliency for military organizations involved the introduction of student actors who would blatantly cheat. Would the students take the cue and emulate the actor's behavior? After thirty seconds the actor would stand up and announce that they solved all of the problems (an impossibility) to no ill effect. If that student was perceived as being a part of the group (e.g., wearing collegiate wear from the same university), cheating increased. As long as the cheater was an in-group member, they took the cue. If, however, the student wore clothing that identified them as from a nearby rival university (an out-group member), cheating actually decreased. The experiment underscores the power of group identity in influencing ethical behavior. Members are alert to behavior that is acceptable to the group and susceptible to emulation. "We don't do that here" is a powerful message when it comes from peers. When it comes to behavior that is questionable, group members apparently look to their in-group for reference.

As additional evidence of the malleability of human ethical behavior, consider an experiment conducted at the University of Newcastle where people had the option to pay for tea and coffee using an "honesty box" (Bateson, Nettle & Roberts, 2006). It was a place where patrons could obtain a beverage on the honor system of payment. Experimenters counted over time the number of people who paid and the number that did not. Having established a baseline, they set about altering the environment to see what impact changes might have on the rate of payment. While the posted instructions for payment remained constant, experimenters changed an image on a banner each week, alternating between an image of flowers and images of eyes. Everybody knows that a paper image

can't actually see whether people pay or not, but the symbolic reminder that someone might be watching was enough to significantly increase the number of people who actually paid for their drinks. When the image of eyes were present people paid nearly three times as much as when images of flowers were displayed.

Both of the above examples involved quasi-experimental settings with relatively low stakes. We are left to consider what would happen if the outcomes were vital to participants. The American experience with high stakes educational testing serves to suggest a likely result. In an effort to establish accountability for student learning, states and the federal government initiated mandatory standardized testing of elementary school students. Test results not only determined whether a student passed a grade, but could also drive removal of teachers and administrators or comprehensive changes to the school. In some jurisdictions, teacher pay was tied to performance on the annual tests. An unintended result of the approach was widespread cheating and gaming of the system at nearly every level of the public school system (Nichols & Berliner, 2005). As one administrator put it, "...a teacher knows that his whole professional status depends on the results he produces and he is really turned into a machine for producing those results; that is, I think, unaccompanied by any substantial gain to the whole cause of education" (p. 2). Few major school districts in the US have escaped resulting scandals associated with organized cheating by students and administrators.

### **Don't Give Up, There is Hope**

The message from these experiments might be disappointing from a character standpoint. All too many appeared to fail the character test. The bar for good character is high, and while there might be an admirable few who achieve it, all too many do not. Looking at the experiments from a behavioral perspective however, the results provide a ray of hope. It is apparently just not that hard to positively influence people's ethical

behavior. Subtle cues can make a positive difference. Rather than focusing on character as a fire and forget notion, front-loaded at the pre-commissioning stage of a career, perhaps we should instead focus on repeatedly exposing military personnel to a series of psychological and social cues throughout their tenure of service. An approach of lifelong ethical learning combined with reminders might provide a more effective approach. It is easy to poke fun at slogans, key chains, and bumper stickers, but there may actually be some benefit if they cue behavior. What currently passes for ethics training for mid-career and senior officers is insufficient and frequently disappointing. If the assumption is that character is already formed at pre-commissioning or before, there is no impetus to engage in efforts to influence continuing ethical behavior. Addressed to a population that is convinced of its own moral superiority, the state-of-the-art approach to in-service ethics is typically compliance-oriented and legalistic in nature.

Mandatory training is despised by many in uniform, yet it serves the purpose of convincing external stakeholders that the military is taking seriously the crisis of the day. The rise of discussions about professionalism and the military professional ethic are heartening developments worthy of additional effort. Don Snider's book, *The Future of the Army Profession* (2005) invigorated a multi-service examination of what it means to be a military professional that extends beyond character and integrity rhetoric. Efforts to focus on what is actually happening rather than what should happen based on ancient notions are valuable. As an example, US Army War College faculty members Leonard Wong and Stephen Gerras published an insightful monograph, *Lying to Ourselves: Dishonesty in*

*the Army Profession* (2015). They asserted that repeated exposure to a deluge of impossible demands requiring certification by officers created situational imperatives that rendered them "ethically numb" (p. ix). Despite widespread rhetoric of virtue and trustworthiness, dishonesty and deception were common in certifying training compliance, readiness reporting, personnel

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evaluations, and other forms of reporting. It would be naïve to think such routine dishonesty is limited to the Army.

More importantly, leaders should be especially alert to the unintended consequences of organizational climate and culture, systems and processes that are of key importance in establishing powerful situational imperatives. Recognizing the power of situations, those in positions of authority might receive a higher ethical payoff if they relied less on character and focused more on establishing environments and unit climates that facilitate good behavior. The character project does not incentivize examination of situational factors, yet we know that they are powerful drivers of human behavior.

Having engaged in the deconstruction of military rhetoric of character and the very construct itself, some reconstruction is warranted. It might be foolhardy

to abandon character development altogether. Our institutional efforts to develop character may not be having the intended effect of instilling good character, but they could still be having a positive impact. Character may be too unstable of a concept to put much faith into but there is substantial evidence that human beings can be influenced by situations and incentives we create, especially when aided by psychological and social cues and reinforced by peers. Character rhetoric does provide reminders of the kind of behavior the organization desires and wishes to avoid. Abandoning the character development project altogether could have deleterious effects. It would be a fair question to ask that despite the fact that our attempts to build good character seem to fail often, how much worse would it be without the attempt and how much better can it be if we consider situational factors as well?

## Conclusion

Implications of the above exploration lead to some suggestions for military leaders who seek to positively influence behavior. 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. We should not underestimate the power of situational imperatives as drivers of human behavior. Good leaders will look for and address systems and processes that drive otherwise well-intentioned people to bad behavior. Patterns of repeated misconduct might serve as a clue that interventions targeting ethical climate and not just unethical individuals are warranted. At the very least, an examination of

the reward structure and unintended consequences deriving from it should be carefully considered. When faced with repeated incidents of misconduct, leaders should not content themselves with investigation and punishment alone. They should take a hard look at how the organization might inadvertently be incentivizing bad behavior. Finally, and on a hopeful note, human beings can be positively influenced to act in ways that are in keeping with the high standards of the military profession. It doesn't take much to remind unit members of desired behavior, especially when it is reinforced by peers and repeated throughout a career.

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## THE RHETORIC OF CHARACTER AND IMPLICATIONS FOR LEADERSHIP

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