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Situations and dispositions: how to rescue the military virtues from social psychology

Peter Olsthoorn

Netherlands Defense Academy

PHJ.Olsthoorn.01@mindef.nl

If you were born in a country or at a time not only when nobody comes to kill your wife and your children, but also nobody comes to ask you to kill the wives and children of others, then render thanks to God and go in peace. But always keep this thought in mind: you might be luckier than I, but you're not a better person.

Jonathan Littell, *The Kindly Ones*

Abstract

In recent years it has been argued more than once that situations determine our conduct to a much greater extent than our character does. This argument rests on the findings of social psychologists such as Stanley Milgram, who have popularized the idea that we can all be brought to harm innocent others. An increasing number of philosophers and ethicists make use of such findings, and some of them have argued that this so-called situationist challenge fatally undermines virtue ethics. As virtue ethics is at the moment the most popular underpinning for ethics education in the military, it is important to know to what extent the claim situationists make is correct. Fortunately, a closer look shows that an interactionist perspective, with our character and the situation interplaying, is more accurate than the situationist perspective.

Key words: character, responsibility, situationism, virtue, virtue ethics

Introduction

As a result of the renewed interest for virtues as an alternative to utilitarianism and duty-based ethics, in military ethics military virtues are increasingly seen as the best way to underpin the ethics education of military personnel. In virtue ethics, virtues are usually described as stable character

traits that are worth having, and which generally function as correctives to our self-regarding temptations (Foot 2002, 8-12). Where its main contender duty-based ethics focuses on the act, that is, on what is wrong, right, permitted, or obligatory, the emphasis in virtue ethics is on terms that describe the actor, such as good and praiseworthy. Motives and emotions are therefore important in virtue ethics, something allegedly overlooked by other schools in moral philosophy. This focus on the kind of person one wants to be makes that it has a much broader range than duty-based ethics. Being friendly, for instance, is a virtue, but it is not a duty (Van Hooft 2014, 3). That until recently most modern moral philosophy paid less attention to such things as emotions, character formation, and personality does not mean that there is anything radically new about an approach that centers on virtues, though. Virtue ethicists hark back to the time-proven work of Aristotle, who held that we become virtuous by actually performing virtuous acts. Performing courageous deeds grows courage, for instance. It is this Aristotelian view on virtues that underlies most literature on military virtues too.

What makes virtue ethics interesting for the military is that it is concerned with character formation; it assumes that virtues and character can be developed to some extent, and that virtues are thus not to be understood as inborn or God-given qualities, but as dispositions that can be acquired through training and practice. At present many militaries see the Aristotelian approach to ethics as the best way to prevent misconduct by military personnel, superior to rules or codes of conduct imposed from above. That rules and codes are impotent when no one is around and lack the flexibility necessary in today's missions are perceived to be the main drawbacks of rule-based approaches in a military context. At first sight, then, there is a great deal to say in favor of virtue ethics as a basis for military ethics education.¹

Virtue ethics has its drawbacks too, however, the main one being that it presupposes a rather straightforward relation between character and conduct. Virtue ethicists assume that our virtues determine our conduct to a far greater extent than, say, situational forces do, but some

¹ But is the position of the virtue ethicist always superior to that of the deontologist, or even the utilitarian? The best-known example of duty-based reasoning is probably the one against torture; torture, most deontologists think, should be absolutely forbidden regardless of the stakes involved. An utilitarian who opposes torture would, on the other hand, point out that the harm the use of torture does outweighs the benefits – that other utilitarians are able to argue the exact opposite probably explains the bad reputation that utilitarianism has in military ethics. A virtue ethicist, in turn, would shun such calculations altogether and highlight instead that the most important matter is to be the kind of person who would under no circumstances commit torture. The virtue ethicist seems thus more concerned about the moral integrity of the interrogator than about the physical integrity of the interrogated. But does someone that stands a chance of being tortured really care about the motives and character of the potential torturer (those who might be rescued by torturing a suspect are probably equally indifferent about the interrogator's motives)? That virtue ethics is mainly about the agent makes it somewhat self-regarding. The aim of virtue ethics is human flourishing – but especially the flourishing of the possessor of virtues.

authors have questioned whether such a direct relation is really there. Writing about military ethics, Richard Gabriel noted already some time ago that possessing “a virtue is a disposition to behave well, yet in itself this is not sufficient to guarantee that someone will behave ethically” (1982, 8-9, 150, 152).² Despite these words of warning most militaries still see educating military virtues as the best way to ensure that their personnel behave morally, and they have devised their curricula accordingly. In that light, it is important to know to what extent (if at all) virtues do in fact relate to conduct. And if it is true that the relationship between possessing a virtue and good conduct is not always a straightforward one, as Gabriel claimed, is this because situations are strong, or because our characters are weak or, as some phrase it, fragmented?

The situationist challenge

The idea that our character is less powerful than most of us think, that situations are conversely more influential than we tend to realize, and that situational factors could, for instance, bring people to do things they normally would not do, is not a very novel one; it has been brought to our attention repeatedly by numerous social psychologists since the late 1960s or so. What is relatively new is that ethicists and philosophers are increasingly inclined to take these insights into account, and some are even conducting empirical research themselves – the burning armchair is their symbol.³ Some of these so-called experimental philosophers have drawn far-reaching conclusions. Basing themselves on the results of social psychological research, they point out that the knowledge that situational forces determine most of our conduct has some serious implications for our ideas about character, moral responsibility and virtues – in general, these ideas are mistaken (see for instance Doris 1998; Harman 1999). This idea that we underestimate the influence of situational factors goes under the name of situationism, or situationist challenge, which basically goes back to the fundamental attribution error: the tendency people have to over attribute behavior to dispositions instead of situations (Harman 2003). In a way, situationism is a variation on the age old insight that knowing good and doing good are not the same thing (see also Arjoon 2008, 235) – ethics professors, for instance, do not behave more ethically than professors in other departments (Schwitzgebel and Rust 2014).

Proponents of the view that the situation determines our conduct still refer to Stanley Milgram’s famous experiments on obedience of over five decades ago (1963; 1974). These

² Still earlier research (Moran 1945) revealed that courage is not a matter of “habituating ourselves to make light of alarming situations” (Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 1104a). In fact, such alarming situations erode our courage (Moran 1945, p. x, 67-71).

³ Gone are the days that leading philosophers could proudly declare that their moral psychology did not originate “in the science of human nature,” as that science was thought to offer little beyond “such bits of wisdom as not relying too much on scarce motives and abilities” (Rawls 1993, 86-7).

experiments showed that a large portion of research subjects could be brought to administer what they thought were dangerous shocks to innocent others (but who were in fact accomplices of Milgram). The exact percentage of research subjects complying depended on morally insignificant situational factors such as the proximity of the experiment leader. Although delving into the situationist literature could give one the impression that there is a set of three or four experiments (with the Milgram experiment and Phillip Zimbardo's Stanford Prison Experiment being the most cited ones) from the 1970s that almost all situationists refer to (see also Prinz 2009), there are numerous other examples of research in social psychology that point to the same conclusion. And sometimes that is research in which situational variables were manipulated that were considerably more trivial than those manipulated by Milgram, yet influenced behavior nonetheless. People are, for example, less inclined to help someone in need when in hurry (Darley and Batson, 1973), or with the noise of a lawnmower nearby (Mathews and Cannon, 1975). The by-stander effect – the greater the number of onlookers, the less likely it is that someone in distress will receive help – is a more common example.

Situationists claim that the fact that in experiments such as that of Milgram seemingly insignificant situational variables such as the proximity of the experimenter appeared to be more important in determining behavior than character traits such as the possession of the virtue of compassion (see also Smith and Mackie 2000) not only refutes our idea that our conduct springs from our character (see for instance Harman 1999; Doris 2002), but perhaps even also the idea that we have a character to begin with. As one prominent promoter of this view writes, “[i]n very many situations it looks as though personality is less than robustly determinative of behavior. To put things crudely, people typically lack character” (Doris 2002, 2). In this view, most of us lead moral lives because we have never been truly tempted, or experienced strong pressure, to behave unethically.⁴ That we nonetheless do believe that we possess stable character traits is because our character has apparently never been seriously put to the test.

When we say that people have character, we generally mean that they have traits that influence behavior across different situations (cross-situational consistency) and that are constant over time (temporal stability). Sometimes, we also mean that these traits are interrelated (integrity). So cross-situational consistency is about our expectation that someone who is courageous on the battlefield, or in sports, will demonstrate that same courage in his or her work. Temporal stability refers to our belief that he or she will still be courageous years later. Integrity is a bit more complicated, but it generally stands for “wholeness,” and goes back to the ancient idea that virtues

⁴ “Milgram’s experiments show that most people appear to be acting morally, in the few occasions when they are called upon to do so, simply because they have been lucky enough not to be put into situations where external factors exert great pressures to the contrary” (Athanassoulis 2000, 220).

are related. We expect someone who has the virtue of courage also to have the attendant virtues of wisdom and temperance, for instance (see also Olsthoorn 2009). Situationists especially take issue with the belief that we have traits that are cross-situationally stable, and not so much with the idea that we act consistently over time, or that our virtues are connected (see also Sreenivasan 2002).⁵ This idea that we have no character goes against widely held intuitions (intuitions that social psychologists like to label folk psychology, as opposed to “real” psychology. Likewise, situationists label our moral intuitions folk morality), but that by itself does not disqualify the thesis of these social psychologists, of course (as folk physics tells us that the world is flat).

John Doris and Gilbert Harman, not psychologists but moral philosophers, have among quite a few others influentially argued that this insight that there exists no such thing as character (or at least that there is no empirical ground for the belief that it significantly influences our conduct) fatally undermines virtue ethics, and that trying to build character in order to make people behave morally is betting on the wrong horse. As Harman puts it, “Aristotelian style virtue ethics shares with folk psychology a commitment to broad-based character traits of a sort that people simply do not have” (2003). And, clearly, “[i]f there is no such thing as character, then there is no such thing as character building” (Harman 1999). Instead of trying to instill virtues, situationists say, it is much more effective to avoid the situations that bring out the worst in us (bars, for alcoholics) and to seek or create situations that prompt us to do what is right. This claim that virtue ethics is mistaken because we do not possess stable character traits has (even in the weaker variety that holds that we do have character but that it is of little influence) serious consequences for military ethics, especially regarding the moral responsibility of perpetrators, and the way military ethics education should best be undertaken. Which brings us to the following.

Situationism, moral luck, and military ethics

In the 1971 Stanford prison experiment of social psychologist (and once high school classmate of Milgram) Philip Zimbardo, that other famous experiment situationists like to cite, a team of researchers divided a group of undergraduates into two teams, one performing the role of prisoners, the other that of guards. Within days the latter got so immersed in their roles that the experiment had to be stopped. Guards were humiliating prisoners in ways that were very reminiscent of the images that would come out of the Abu Ghraib prison facility years later – a similarity that Zimbardo did not fail to notice (2007, 328; see for a critique Griggs 2014). Drawing on his experiences during

⁵ Berghaus and Cartagena (2013) argue that militaries can further fragmentation by separating the soldier’s professional identity from his or her personal identity, and that virtue ethics can offer a way out, as it aims for a more comprehensive sense of identity that recognizes (and aligns) both professional and personal values and identities.

the Stanford prison experiment, Zimbardo has subsequently argued that we are too quick in assuming that incidents involving military personnel are the result of moral flaws at the individual level. According to Zimbardo, such a fairly harsh dispositional view, which reduces misconduct to a matter of “a few bad apples,” does not help us to understand what happened in Abu Ghraib and during other incidents (2007, 6). Most Abu Ghraib perpetrators had never showed any signs of being morally substandard prior to the scandal, and Zimbardo holds that it is therefore likely that the misconduct in Abu Ghraib was a result of the fact that “the military and civilian chain of command had built a ‘bad barrel’ in which a bunch of good soldiers became transformed into ‘bad apples’” (2007, p. x; see also Robinson 2009). The hopeless conditions under which the guards had to do their work (understaffed in an overcrowded prison, with daily mortar and rocket attacks, and pressure from the political and military to break prisoners who were said to be responsible for attacks on US troops outside) had made moral failure practically unavoidable (2007, 324-443; see Mastroianni 2011 and 2013 for a different view).

The aforementioned Doris, now co-authoring with Dominic Murphy, points to the fact that in combat situational forces are much stronger than those social psychologists found to be of influence; just compare the just-mentioned noise of a lawnmower influencing helpfulness with factors such as peer pressure, fatigue, invisible enemies, etc.. The main excusing condition that Doris and Murphy mention is that “individuals in combat are cognitively degraded,” and they see sleep deprivation, military training and culture, (racial) ideology, and the role of the primary group as the chief causes of this erosion of cognitive capabilities (2007). In a famous article on moral disengagement, social psychologist Albert Bandura already described the “many social and psychological manoeuvres” that enable people to transgress their own norms without feelings of guilt or shame (1999, 194). Such maneuvers include the displacement and diffusion of responsibility, the use of euphemisms such as “collateral damage” and “servicing the target,” and the dehumanization of outsiders (Bandura 1999, 195-203). To give an example of that latter phenomena, an unpublished US Army general’s report on the Haditha incident (in which Marines killed 24 Iraqi civilians) found that statements made by their chain of command “had the potential to desensitize the Marines to concern for the Iraqi populace and portray them all as the enemy even if they are noncombatants” (Bargewell 2007). Situationists therefore conclude that the idea that atrocities are the result of the actions of morally inferior individuals mistakenly suggests that individual soldiers can be held morally responsible if they behave unethically – they cannot. According to Doris and Murphy, in war “[p]erpetrators of atrocity typically occupy excusing conditions and are therefore not morally responsible for their conduct” (2007, 26), and they explicitly refer to Abu Ghraib and the My Lai and Haditha massacres as cases in point. In fact, “we may see our own faces – and the faces of our loved ones – in the countenances of both victims and perpetrators” of Abu Ghraib and similar cases (Doris and Murphy 2007, 28).

That last remark brings us to something already hinted at in the above: if situationists are right, behaving morally is merely a matter of moral luck.⁶ An often cited example in the context of war is that of the so-called “lucky late born,” or *Spätgeborenen*; Germans who were born too late to have felt the pressure to join the ranks of “Hitler’s willing executioners” (Goldhagen 1996; see also Neitzel and Welzer, 2012). According to Milgram most Americans can count themselves morally lucky indeed, as they would have been easy to convince to join these ranks too (see also Mastroianni 2015, 658). What he had found in his laboratory was according to Milgram very much in line with Hannah Arendt’s thesis about the banality of evil, dubbed by her during the Eichmann trial a few years before Milgram’s experiments: “After witnessing hundreds of ordinary people submit to the authority in our own experiments, I must conclude that Arendt’s conception of the banality of evil comes closer to the truth than one might dare imagine” (1974). Milgram explicitly linked his findings to the Holocaust, Eichmann’s wholehearted involvement in it, and Arendt’s interpretation of that involvement (1974; see also Perry 2013: 10, 256; Fenigstein 2015). In fact, understanding obedience in Nazi Germany, and the suspicion that there were important national differences here, had formed the inspiration for Milgram’s research.

In its turn, Milgram’s experiment was much referred to in Christopher Browning’s *Ordinary Men* (1992) – the famous book (and situationist classic) about the infamous German Reserve Police Battalion 101, a unit mainly consisting of ordinary men who out of obedience followed the order to execute Polish Jews. Notwithstanding the important differences between Milgram’s laboratory setting and wartime Poland, Browning thinks that “many of Milgram’s insights find graphic conformation in the behaviour and testimony of the men of Reserve Police Battalion 101” (1992, 174), and the nature of authority and role of conformity in that battalion’s doings “render considerable support to [Milgram’s] conclusions, and some of his observations are clearly confirmed” (1992, 175). The obedience rate in the battalion was around 80% (1992, 74), and factors such as the “pressure for conformity” and not wanting “to be thought a coward” played a large role in it (1992, 71-2).⁷

This situational explanation of the Holocaust has not gone uncontested. In his interpretation of the same events, Daniel Goldhagen argued (quite controversially) contra Browning and the ideas of Milgram that most Germans collaborating were not merely obedient but staunch anti-Semites,

⁶ Military ethicist Stephen Coleman has convincingly argued that some of the moral dilemmas military personnel face are in fact not really dilemmas at all, but tests of integrity: it is clear what is the right thing to do, yet there is considerable pressure (from peers, for instance) to choose the wrong course of action (2009, 105-6).

⁷ Other factors were habituation, depersonalization, drunkenness, and (sadistic) leadership (1992, 83-87). But different from what was the case in My Lai or Haditha, Browning points out, the atrocities committed by the Nazis followed from government policies, and were thus not the result from frustration, casualties among comrades, fatigue, an invisible enemy, etc. (1992, 160-1).

and that includes the members of Reserve Police Battalion 101 (1996). According to Goldhagen, German perpetrators did not succumb to situational pressures that made them do things they did not want to do. He considers the idea that they were unthinkingly obedient indefensible, and mentions that the same holds for Milgram's idea that people blindly obey (1996, 383). Others have pointed out that refusing to participate in the execution of Jews was not punished, and that group dynamism, more or less absent in Milgram's experiments, played a larger role than orders (see for instance Fenigstein 2015). Goldhagen takes an explicitly dispositional view; Germany's executioners *wanted* to exterminate Europe's Jews.⁸ But it seems misguided to see this, as Goldhagen does, as a refutation of the view that situational forces played much of a role here. The situation not only makes us do things we do not want to do (such as in the Milgram experiments) but clearly also influences what we *do* want to do. So although it might be true that it was their anti-Semitism that made many Germans into willing executioners, this anti-Semitism had surely everything to do (as Goldhagen himself explains at length) with the nature of Germany and German culture at that moment, that is, with the situation. As we have seen, Doris and Murphy explicitly mentioned racial ideology as an important situational factor in times of war.

So if social psychologists and experimental philosophers are right, it is to some extent a matter of moral luck that we were not Nazi executioners, or have never been caught up in an Abu Ghraib like scandal. The truth of the situationist challenge would mean that the current emphasis on character formation and instilling virtues in military ethics education (see also Cook 2015, Robinson 2007) is misplaced. But is situationism correct?

Can virtue ethics and military virtues be rescued from situationism?

Not surprisingly, virtue ethicists have come up with some answers to the challenge situationism poses (see for an overview Prinz 2002, 120-7). Some, first of all, have pointed out that the experiments in social psychology that seem to challenge our basic intuitions about character were never designed to undermine virtue ethics. What is more, a closer look at the experiments situationists cite suggests that situationism rests on a rather one-sided interpretation of the findings of social psychologists (see for instance Croom 2014). For instance, in all of the many varieties of the experiment Milgram conducted there were quite a few people who sooner or later refused to follow the orders of the experimenter and did not administer the highest, allegedly lethal, shocks. And in the Stanford Prison Experiment it was only about a third of the guards that became sadistic "bad guards," while the majority became tough but fair "by the book guards," or even "good guards" (Griggs 2014, 195). This means that different people behave differently in the same situation – a clear

⁸ Somewhat similarly, later critics of Arendt's banality of evil thesis have pointed out that there was nothing banal about Eichmann's devout anti-Semitism (see for instance Lipstadt 2011).

indication that people do have character (see also Croom 2014). Others have called attention to the fact that situationists also overlook that many of the respondents who obeyed in the Milgram experiment showed signs of serious discomfort, suggesting that they acted against their compassionate inclinations (see also Arjoon 2008, 233; Perry 2013; Webber 2006) – again an indication that people have character.

Milgram himself, meanwhile, had no clear theory to explain his results (Perry 2013, 205), and it is thus unclear whether it was his intention to measure levels of obedience or to determine the influence of the situation. In fact, there seems to have been some mission drift in Milgram's experiments: from measuring the influence of national culture and peer pressure on levels of obedience, to just measuring how many people were willing to administer potentially lethal shocks – it is rather clear that Milgram kept honing his experimental design so as to get maximum levels of compliance (Perry 2013). In private communications Milgram suggested in so many words that he saw his experiment more as a moral test than as providing evidence that the situation determines our conduct. Those who obeyed had failed the test and were, as Milgram's phrased it, moral imbeciles (Perry 2013). That phrasing suggests that it was, also according to Milgram, not *only* the situation that was to blame. One could even argue that subjects in Milgram's experiments did in fact demonstrate virtues (such as being trusting, or obedient), albeit not compassion (see also Perry 2013).⁹ Interestingly, even Milgram himself saw a role for virtues, although not a positive one. Reflecting on the My Lai incident in the epilogue to his 1974 book on the experiments, he remarks that “[i]t is ironic that the virtues of loyalty, discipline, and self-sacrifice that we value so highly in the individual are the very properties that create destructive organizational engines of war and bind men to malevolent systems of authority” (1974). It was, in the end, only in one variety of Milgram's experiment – the one that he conducted (and published) first – that 65% of the research subjects remained compliant to the end, and it has been noted that Milgram wrote a lot on those who obeyed, yet close to nothing on those who refused to comply (Perry 2013). Then again, that in some varieties of Milgram's obedience experiments only a minority proved willing to administer the highest voltages might be seen as undermining the dramatic conclusion that a majority is willing to do someone else serious bodily harm just because someone in a lab coat told them to do so, but the point that the percentage of refusers depended on the context in fact underlines the less dramatic conclusion that it is the situation that determines our conduct.

More convincing perhaps is a second line of defense. It holds that virtue ethics never assumed that virtues are widespread in the first place. That virtues are rare therefore does not mean that virtue ethics is incorrect – this is the rarity response to situationism (Miller 2014; see also

⁹ And even if obedience is not a virtue, it is clearly a character trait, and, according to Milgram, a very common one on top of that.

Athanassoulis 2000; Appiah 2008; Sreenivasan 2002, 57; see for a rebuttal Prinz 2009, 125). Social psychology merely shows that the influence of our natural dispositions on our conduct is weak. This does not tell us a lot about the influence of virtues, which are the product of training and habituation (see also Sreenivasan 2002). Virtue ethics does not claim that most people are virtuous, but that there are virtues, and that we can attain them, although with some difficulty. In other words: virtue ethics is not descriptive, but prescriptive, and assumes that virtues can be acquired, not that people already have them in place. Most social psychologists (Milgram was an exception in this aspect) use students as research subjects, and evidently their caliber of virtue is not necessarily typical for that of the rest of the population. It is equally evident that most of these students, and research subjects in general, are not trained to have particular virtues such as courage, compassion, or helpfulness. People who have received a training based on virtues might very well be less influenced by the situation they find themselves in than those who lack that training; that is, of course, the whole point of training. This defense might rescue virtue ethics as a normative enterprise. But what does this mean for virtue ethics in the military, and more specifically for virtue ethics as an underpinning of military ethics education? In other words: if this rescues virtue ethics, does it also rescue virtue ethics as something that contributes to the chances of military personnel behaving morally?

We surely cannot expect all military personnel to walk the long road towards virtue; Aristotle was clearly thinking about mature men who had reached the age of distinction when he was describing his man of virtue, not about young men and women in their (early) twenties. Nonetheless, at certain points in military life, training and education are designed with an eye to instilling the proper virtues. As Adam Croom puts it, “a combat soldier will have acquired experience and combat readiness through repeated training and consecutive deployments, and so will be expected to remain unwavering in courage on upcoming (intra-situational) deployments, but will not likewise be expected to remain unwavering in friendliness if captured behind (intersituational) enemy lines” (2014). It seems a bit hasty to write off all deliberate efforts to instill military relevant virtues in military personnel as ineffective, especially seeing that the situationist’s advice to avoid morally challenging situations is clearly of little practical relevance to military personnel (which does not mean that militaries cannot do a lot to make working conditions and the ethical climate less of a challenge for military personnel – Abu Ghraib is a good example).¹⁰

The claims that situationism rests on an incomplete interpretation of the findings of social psychologists and that training helps to overcome the situation will not convince a committed situationist, but it does suggest that an interactionist view is probably more accurate than a strictly situationist one: character and situation interplay in a complex and unpredictable manner

¹⁰ Per Sandin (2007) argues that ascribing virtues to collectives, in general less fickle than individuals, forms another way out.

(Croom 2014; see also Mastroianni 2011, 2, 8). Such an intermediate position is not new. In 1975, analyzing the use of violence by Dutch military personnel during the late 1940s in the Dutch Indies, military sociologist Jacques van Doorn pointed out that incidents during military operations cannot be solely ascribed to individual soldiers going amiss. Unethical behavior is often the result of an ethical climate, shaped by the political and military leadership (see also Schaubroeck et al., 2012), that leaves room for individuals that have an above-average tendency to violence (relatively often military intelligence personnel), not troops in general, to cross the thin line between legitimate force and excessive violence (Van Doorn 1975; compare Browning 1992, 163).¹¹

“The situation” in which a combat unit finds itself or “the mood” prevailing in such a unit are of course important in the explanation of what takes place when violence and its derailment occur. But precise analysis of the incidents reveals that “that situation” or “that mood” is mainly relevant for the decisive actions of single individuals (Van Doorn 1975, 159).

Looking back on Abu Ghraib, Mastroianni reaches a somewhat similar conclusion, finding a middle ground between the “bad apple” narrative and the “bad barrel” narrative: suboptimal leadership and supervision made it easier for a few morally corrupt individuals to misbehave (2013, 62-3).

Interestingly, also Browning seems to lean towards such a more nuanced position now and then. Although he saw his findings about the role of Reserve Police Battalion 101 in the Holocaust as a confirmation of the findings of Milgram, he nonetheless concluded “that those who killed cannot be absolved by the notion that anyone in the same situation would have done as they did. For even among them, some refused to kill and other stopped killing. Human responsibility is ultimately an individual matter” (1992, 188). In fact, a closer look learns that much of the situationist literature seems to subscribe to that viewpoint, or a variety of it. Zimbardo, although a prominent proponent of situationism, emphasizes for instance that a search for causes “does not negate the responsibility of these MPs, nor their guilt; explanation and understanding do not excuse such misdeeds” (2007, 445).¹² This is the compatibilist view on moral responsibility, which holds that “that determinism poses no threat to moral responsibility since praising and blaming could still be an effective means of

¹¹ Neitzel and Welzer reach a similar conclusion about German violence during the Second World War: atrocities were facilitated by the situation, for instance by the dehumanization of Jews and Russian soldiers, but it was individual differences that made the violence actually happen; it was the more violence-prone characters that initiated the violence.

¹² Zimbardo, however, acted as a defense witness for one of the guards, Sergeant Ivan “Chip” Frederick, who, in spite of Zimbardo’s efforts, was sentenced to eight years in prison for his role in the ill-treatment of detainees (see Mastroianni 2011 for a critique of Zimbardo’s acting as a defense witness).

influencing another's behavior, even in a deterministic world" (Eshleman 2009).¹³ That is perhaps the reason why also according to Doris and Murphy the temporary loss of mental capabilities does not necessarily imply that perpetrators are not criminally liable (2007, 28). Knowing that you might be held morally or (as Doris and Murphy hesitatingly leave room for) legally responsible for the atrocities you commit is a situational force by itself. And although it is the question how strong that force really is, it again suggests that situations and dispositions interact. That is not a spectacular conclusion, but it is probably the correct one. It also leaves us with some room for optimism regarding the role of virtues and character. For instance, Specialist Matthew Wisdom, who witnessed Abu Ghraib's main perpetrator, Charles Graner, punching a Iraqi prisoner in the face (Sturcke 2005), did not succumb to situational pressures, and told his superior about the incident (Mestrovic 2016, 129).¹⁴ That suggests that character might exist after all. And so does, incidentally, the fact that Graner was a man that prior to his deployment had misbehaved on various occasions.

Three remarks to finish with. First of all, let us not forget that many ethicists, both from within and outside the military, have already pointed to the role of situational forces such as peer pressure and bad or absent leadership in making unethical conduct by military personnel more likely. Some have conducted empirical research themselves (see for instance Schut 2015; Verweij et al. 2007). Especially the rise of technologies such as unmanned weapon systems and network enabled operations have prompted more empirical research into moral decision making in networked warfare (see for instance Burken 2014).

In addition, situationists not only argue that there is no empirical basis for the idea that we have a character in the first place (see for instance Harman 1999); they also tend to suggest that we do not want to learn the dark truth about human nature that experiments such as that of Milgram and Zimbardo reveal, clinging to our folk moral intuitions instead. Milgram and Zimbardo themselves seem to have shared that suspicion (see for instance Zimbardo 2007, 5-6; see also Perry 2013, 11). But one could argue that the contrary is the case. The experiments by both men are by far the most famous in

¹³ The competing view is the so-called merit based view of moral responsibility: praise and blame are in place if an actor "deserves" such praise or blame (Eshleman 2009). This is the view that Doris and Harman hold. Hayek, the economist turned moral philosopher, wrote that "we assign responsibility to a man, not in order to say that as he was he might have acted differently, but in order to make him different" (1990, 75). Often, the debate between situationists and virtue ethicists seems another - newer - variety of the debate about determinism versus moral responsibility; determinists argued that if our conduct is determined by our character and circumstances, moral responsibility evaporates. The main difference between determinists and situationists is that the latter see not much of a role for character (determinists do, but see character as the product of our genes and early experiences), but the question is how important that difference is; both situationists and determinists hold that people cannot be held morally responsible for their actions.

¹⁴ That superior, Sergeant Robert Jones, did not report the incident, but did confront one of the other perpetrators, Sergeant Ivan Frederick (Mestrovic 2016, 129)

social psychology, and have made their way into popular culture. They have been turned into movies, stage plays, and television shows. It seems that many of us – and this probably includes students in social psychology (Griggs and Whitehead 2014, 321-2)¹⁵ – are fascinated by the idea that we have a dark side, and that we (or others) can be brought to do about anything, under the right (or wrong) circumstances. This seems to be as much of an overstatement as the traditional dispositional view, though.

Lastly, it is unclear whether situationism, if correct, makes moral responsibility disappear, as some hold. Does it not merely shift, from the perpetrators to their supervisors and the political leadership? Zimbardo suggests this implicitly in a chapter titled “Putting the System on Trial” that was part of his book on Abu Ghraib (2007, 380-443). Although the title of that chapter is very much in line with the argument Zimbardo makes, namely that situations determine our conduct, the content of that chapter is less so; it clearly puts the blame on individuals. This individual is sometimes a relatively low ranking one, such as CIA operative Mark Swanner, but much more often Zimbardo puts the blame on high ranking individuals such as the Secretary of Defense at that time, Donald Rumsfeld. The “barrel of apples began rotting from the top down,” writes Zimbardo (2007, 415). With this blaming of the political leadership and the higher echelons of the organization, Zimbardo seems to undermine his own argument considerably, as it suggests that we are no longer excused by the situation we find ourselves in once we reach a certain threshold level in the organization. At the same time, Zimbardo’s blaming of individuals higher up is in line with the common intuition that at a certain level you can no longer hide behind the fact that you were just doing as others did, or were merely following orders. Which raises the interesting question at what level exactly the buck stops. Now, it is of course impossible to draw a clear demarcation line between those who bear moral responsibility and those who do not (we already concluded that the findings of social psychologists form no ground to fully excuse perpetrators). Different from legal responsibility, moral responsibility is a matter of degree. But if we have to draw the line somewhere, it seems to make sense to assume that junior commissioned officers – say, lieutenant Caley in My Lai – already bear considerable moral responsibility, if only because most militaries direct most of their efforts in ethics education towards (aspiring) officers, and not so much towards soldiers and NCO’s.¹⁶

¹⁵ Interestingly, many textbooks on (social) psychology do not mention the recent criticism on the experiments of Milgram and Zimbardo (Griggs 2014; Griggs and Whitehead 2014; Griggs and Whitehead 2015). These same textbooks increasingly fail to mention that in Asch’s famous conformity tests a majority gave the independent, correct answer (Griggs 2015).

¹⁶ Another reason is that leaders above the junior level are, although responsible for the ethical climate in which atrocities can happen, just not that often involved in the actual *committing* of atrocities.

Conclusion

The debate between situationists and virtue ethicists is a good example of how general moral philosophy can have a bearing on military ethics. Most military ethicists today use the findings of social psychology in both their own research and in their teaching, and this is clearly a good thing. But military ethicists should not, as many moral philosophers have done who were caught up in the situationist debate, identify themselves with a position that puts all emphasis on either character or the situation, to the exclusion of the other – especially those who emphasize the role of the situation have a tendency to err in this aspect.¹⁷ Being a form of applied ethics, military ethics can and should take an eclectic approach to the different schools and viewpoints in philosophy and the social sciences, which all have their own strengths and shortcomings. A weakness of a virtue ethics approach to military ethics, for instance, is that it focusses on the individual, suggesting that incidents involving military personnel are the result of moral flaws at the individual level (see also Robinson 2009). Many authors have argued that such a dispositional view is at best a half-truth. But we should not err on the other side, though. If the opposing situationist view was accurate, this would mean that the influence of a virtuous disposition is fairly limited, possibly in particular when needed the most. Most of the evidence, however, that should substantiate this situationist view rests on rather one-sided interpretation of experiments such as that of Milgram and Zimbardo that does not at all warrant the conclusion that virtues and character have no influence.

That does not mean, of course, that the situation is not a critical – and perhaps often underestimated – factor. Clearly, militaries and military leaders have to pay attention to the ethical climate, and promote awareness of the factors that determine our behavior. Studies have shown that the ability to recognize ethical issues, and to see the adverse influence the organization sometimes has, can make people act ethically in spite of the situation (Arjoon 2008, 225). It is for that reason that ethics education should not only aim at instilling virtues, but also at giving insight into the situational forces that make unethical conduct more likely to take place. A curriculum that does not take the actual possibilities and shortcomings of a character based approach into account is excessively academic. Clearly, the products of social science should have a prominent place in any military ethics program. So when we pay attention to, for instance, the insights of Zimbardo and Milgram in our ethics teachings at military schools and academes we should make clear to students that factors such as negative peer pressure, dehumanization, and fatigue do make unethical conduct more likely to occur, and that military leaders at all levels have an important role in countering these factors. At the same time, it is just as important to point out that people vary greatly in the extent

¹⁷ As Cook and Syse write: “papers in which philosophers argue with the positions of other philosophers, no matter how interesting they may be by the canons of the discipline, are not really military ethics in our sense” (2010).

which they will succumb to such factors; there are plenty of positive examples of people who did not yield. That is a matter of character, and character is, as we have seen, not something God-given or inborn, but something that can be trained and developed.

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