

Do Our Better Angels Stand Beside Us?

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Abstract

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This thesis draws on interdisciplinary literature in moral philosophy, the behavioral sciences, and history to examine the role of organizations in shaping the moral character development of their members in settings of competition and conflict. The first chapter considers the bedrock role of habit and habit formation in establishing moral behavior over time through analysis of the classical work of Aristotle and competing schools of thought in recent experimental psychology. The second chapter considers two additional mechanisms of character formation—the structuring of subjective group identity and the impact of extrinsic incentives on moral behavior—by examining Adam Smith’s work on moral psychology and incorporating a range of recent work from the behavioral sciences into the picture. The third chapter explores how these three mechanisms of moral character formation appear to have functioned in a series of historical case studies that consider different forms of organizations and different kinds of conflict settings, including economic competition in the case of Enron, political competition in China’s

Cultural Revolution, and military competition in the context of American prisoners of war in Vietnam. These analyses support the claim that these mechanisms do shape moral character over time, that these processes are evident in important ways in organizations engaged in competition or conflict, and that effectively understanding and responding to each of the three mechanisms under consideration requires careful attention to the interactions between them.

Introduction

We humans seem to become our best or worst selves when placed in the crucible of stressful or hostile situations, but we rarely face such situations alone. As societies have grown, humans have come to spend ever more time participating in an increasingly complex series of organized groups. As a consequence, competition *between* those groups has become a pervasive feature of human life, whether it takes the form of peaceful commercial competition in the marketplace or of open warfare (history is, of course, full of examples of one shaping or bleeding into the other). It should come as no surprise that so many of the stories that we hear of both moral depravity and heroism take place in these settings. What is surprising is how little work has been done to tie together an understanding of just how the features of organized groups themselves shape the moral behavior of their individual members over time as they face these competitive pressures and stresses.

The fact that the exploration of these processes by ethicists remains less developed than one might imagine is striking, given that philosophers and scientists have puzzled over human moral behavior for thousands of years in an attempt to understand it properly in context. Work in ethics and moral psychology often focuses on individual decisions and behavior, but human actions never occur in a vacuum. The environment

and other individuals around each person appear to have an impact on individual behavior, even in the eyes of a casual observer. That recognition, in turn, has motivated extensive analysis and debate of its own in the fields of organizational theory and social psychology. The gap is in integrating these areas of analysis to examine how these bodies of thought come together to shine a light on the linkage between moral and organizational psychology in situations of human conflict.

Rigorous inquiries into ethics, psychology, and organizational behavior have a long history, and it turns out that modern empirical research has often fleshed out and refined earlier observations and arguments made by major figures in the history of moral philosophy. Although each of these areas still remains full of ongoing projects and open questions, the existing body of complementary work already done by philosophers and social scientists provides a range of well supported insights to draw upon. What remains is to pull the right pieces together to build a foundation for clearly understanding the web of relationships between organizations, competitive settings, and the development of human moral character. These issues are as pressing for managers and officers who want to lead their teams effectively as they are for scholars and analysts who want to better understand the consequences of different practices and policies for human wellbeing.

Since the bodies of work that can be connected to shine a light on the relationships between moral character, organizational psychology, and the distinctive pressures applied by competition and conflict are themselves ongoing works in progress, I intend to offer a provisional foundation for better understanding their relationship by drawing on a combination of robust classical work in moral philosophy and the most

compelling current insights from the behavioral sciences. Using these resources, it is possible to develop an integrated account of how certain key mechanisms determine the impact of institutional features have on individual moral character across different forms of conflict and competition. These include processes of habituation, ways of defining group identity, and direct extrinsic incentive mechanisms, each of which appears to relate to the others in interesting and important ways. Later in this work, I will explore how these mechanisms appear to have played out across a series of important historical case studies, followed by an attempt to draw these findings together into a more refined set of insights and lessons that might be used to form and lead more morally resilient organizations. It is my hope that this work will help others to better navigate around some of the most dangerous moral pitfalls of the modern world.

Crucially, this project does not focus on identifying or defending a single particular set of moral principles that should be applied in organizational settings. Granting that there are sincere disagreements about a wide range of moral principles, the aim of this project is to provide knowledge and resources that remain broadly useful even in the face of competing values and theories. This should be a helpful approach to this kind of problem, given the simple point of fact that moral behavior and moral norms change over time, often for reasons other than persuasive theoretical arguments alone. The philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah explored such transformations in an insightful work of applied ethics and historical analysis that served as one of the inspirations for this project, which he titled *The Honor Code: How Moral Revolutions Happen*. Across a series of historical case studies of his own, Appiah examined how shifts in moral

behavior have developed at a broader cultural level in different societies, which provides some useful background context.

Drawing a contrast inspired by Immanuel Kant between morality and the descriptive task of science, Appiah noted that moral change (especially in broader social settings) is ultimately about “transformation in moral *behavior*, not just in moral sentiments” (emphasis in original).¹ The focus of his project, like this one, is on understanding *how* human moral life is shaped—in this case, how character is shaped by institutional structures and the pressures of conflict—rather than on prescribing a specific model of what the outcome should look like. Although I will tend to defer to a range of broadly accepted moral norms (such as preferences for the general welfare, honesty, and benevolent reciprocity over those for unrestrained selfishness, deceptiveness, or malice), the focus of this project is on understanding the *means* to building healthy moral character under these circumstances, rather than on specifying the exact details of what ideal of moral character organizational leaders should aim for.

In his analysis, Appiah focused on exploring the consistently central way in which an unexpected mechanism—social and cultural ideas of honor—drove widespread changes in morally significant practices as different as dueling, slavery, and footbinding at times when longstanding theoretical arguments about the morality of these practices had shown a limited impact in driving widespread changes in actual behavior.²

Following his lead, over the next three sections of this work, I will provide analyses of three additional mechanisms that shape moral behavior in ways that are distinct from—

¹ Appiah, p.xi

² Appiah, p.xii

though they may interact with—particular theories about what constitutes moral or immoral behavior. Extensive bodies of empirical and theoretical work provide strong support for the argument that habituation, ways of defining group identity, and extrinsic incentive mechanisms shape behavior over time in ways that matter deeply to understanding how moral behavior is influenced by the structures, practices, and leadership decisions of organizations. Crucially, by analyzing each of these mechanisms in depth, it's possible to explore how they influence each other and how they might operate in organizations that find themselves faced with circumstances of competition or conflict. Each of the next three sections will assess one of these mechanisms by drawing on, analyzing, and often critiquing some of the best work that has been done to understand them. With that analysis in hand, the second major part of this thesis will examine how these key mechanisms appear to have played out in a series of real world organizations over time.

Moral Habituation from Aristotle to Ajzen

It's surely worth asking whether or not the basic approach of this thesis is on solid footing. My analysis is built on the analysis of moral *character*—the development and expression of persistent traits or behaviors over time. The ideas of character and of good and bad habits are old ones and are usually familiar enough to people with no scholarly background related to the topic (even if only in an informal way) that from a rhetorical perspective they provide a particularly easy place to start. However, character and habit aren't universally accepted by behavioral scientists as an accurate way of understanding human behavior and have often been ignored by philosophers who focus on deliberate analysis, decision, and action in individual situations as the more appropriate focus of ethics. Because the idea of character is both controversial and the main focus of this project, it's worth beginning this part of the analysis by focusing on the mechanism of habituation as the one most deeply tied to the question of whether the basic framework of this project is useful in the first place. Fortunately, there is a particularly old and particularly rich history of work that attempts to explore whether and how habituation influences human behavior.

One of the earliest truly systematic written attempts to explore human moral life in the Western tradition begins with the work of Aristotle—a thinker whose work was so comprehensive and influential that many of his successors in later generations began to

refer to him simply as “The Philosopher.” Although western philosophers largely sought to break from the past and start fresh in the early modern period, the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have seen a resurgence of interest in Aristotle’s work and in his focus on character and habit as crucial areas for analysis in human moral life. Given the focus of his approach, it’s well worth revisiting Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics* to take a look at his examination of these topics and to compare it to more recent empirical research.

It also turns out that digging into work on the topics of moral habit and habituation is made devilishly challenging by the diverse and inconsistent ways in which the terms have been used over time (and often by thinkers and researchers who are directly responding to each other without quite defining their terms in the same way). Does habit refer to a purely unconscious process or one that involves shaping a person’s knowledge and expectations? How does it play into other aspects of human behavior? How and why might habits form and develop their persistence? Because of diversity of opinion on these questions too, Aristotle is a particularly good place to start, as his treatment of the topic touches on all of these threads to one degree or another. His work can serve as a sort of foundation to which we can anchor later empirical research.

Unlike many modern thinkers who have treated ethics as a comparatively narrow field of inquiry focused on norms governing interpersonal conduct, Aristotle approached ethics as a more comprehensive set of issues, inclusive of individual and collective human wellbeing. His discussions of moral character in general and of the virtues (those appropriately cultivated traits that are conducive to human wellbeing) in particular

focused on the important roles played in human life by both the parts of our identity based on rational thought and those based on our not-always-calculated behavior more broadly. As a result, he drew a distinction between intellectual virtue (which “owes its origin and development mainly to teaching”) and virtue of character (which, in accord with our current focus, “is a result of habituation”—the key topic of this section).³ In either case, Aristotle argued that the process of moral development involves taking capacities that naturally exist in each person and cultivating them properly to build more mature and consistent behavioral traits.

Aristotle suggests that the virtues and vices that constitute our moral behavior involve complex sets of perceptions and dispositions about how to respond to our environment, but his basic understanding of habituation relied on nothing more mysterious than repetition of an activity as part of a “learn by doing” approach. Just like skills, “we first acquire the capacities and later exhibit the activities” of moral virtues by progressively more successful and consistent attempts to act them out.⁴ As he observes, “by abstaining from pleasures we become temperate, and having become so we are most able to abstain from them. Similarly with courage: by becoming habituated to make light of what is fearful and to face up to it, we become courageous; and when we are, we shall

³ Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*. Trans. Roger Crisp. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge UP, 2000. Print. P.23, 1103a

⁴ *Nicomachean Ethics*, p.24, 1103a. Aristotle notes in the same passage that “What happens in cities bears this out as well, because legislators make the citizens good by habituating them, and this is what every legislator intends.” There is no reason to think that this practice wouldn’t extend from the management of a Greek city-state to that of other organizational settings as well—but it presumes quite a bit about the aims of the leaders in question. Depending on the goals of a leader, deliberate habituation might be either deliberately or unwittingly put to bad use as well. This issue should be apparent in the case studies later in this thesis.

be most able to face up to it,”⁵ and so on with other virtues of character. By repeatedly practicing morally appropriate activities, Aristotle believed that humans tend to develop a more reliable tendency to act in those ways in the future. Like with any learned skill or practice that fleshes out our natural capacities, virtues of character are ones that we learn by doing.

Aristotle also believed that the same general processes held in reverse. He argued that “the origin and means of the development of each virtue are the same as those of its corruption” and that “like states arise from like activities” when individuals repeatedly behave in an unjust or cowardly fashion and thus begin to exhibit those vices more readily.⁶ In both cases, he also linked the development of virtues and vices to pleasure and pain as motivators that can interfere with the development of virtue—giving educators and legislators a reason to use rewards and punishments to push back against background interference and support the habituation of positive traits.⁷ Part of the key to Aristotle’s theory that links these issues together is the idea that repeated exposure to situations and repeated actions train the basic reaction that a person has. When a person confronts a situation that is familiar in some way, what they have done in similar situations in the past and what came of those past precedents shapes the person’s emotional responses and expectations (conscious or otherwise) in the new situation.

With all of these features of Aristotle’s account of moral habituation in mind, an example of how he describes a successfully cultivated virtue should clarify how they fit

⁵ Aristotle, p.25 1104a-b

⁶ Nicomachean Ethics, p.24, 1103b

⁷ Nicomachean Ethics, p.26, 1104b

together. He describes a courageous person as “one who endures and fears – and likewise is confident about – the right things, for the right reason, in the right way, and at the right time; for the courageous person feels and acts in accordance with the merits of the case, and as reason requires.”⁸ What he describes is a deeply context-specific set of perceptions and responses acquired by practice that a person applies appropriately to new situations. Different forms of destructive moral behavior can arise when any one of those pieces is thrown out of order through habitual reinforcement of inappropriate responses or through faulty perception or judgment regarding situations at hand. Crucially, because Aristotle’s account of virtues and vices involves the appropriateness of a person’s emotional reactions and actions to the concrete situations they find themselves in, the person’s beliefs and practical knowledge about how to respond in different ways are a natural part of the habituation process through which virtues and vices are formed and reinforced.

Aristotle provides a complex and multifaceted account of habituation that factors in the appropriateness of the emotions, perceptions, and reactions a person becomes prone to over time as a result of repeatedly confronting situations in better or worse ways over time. With that very broad starting point in mind, it should be easier to properly anchor a few select examples of more recent empirical research on the topic, which tends to rely on narrower ways of understanding or defining habituation as a process. Given the importance of habituation as the backbone of this analysis, it warrants a particularly high degree of further scrutiny.

⁸ Nicomachean Ethics, p.50, 1115b

While it has been exhaustively researched by psychologists over the last several decades, a large proportion of recent work on habituation fits into two broad camps. One camp explicitly upholds and uses the language of habituation as a well-supported way of understanding repeated human behavior and is represented by a group of researchers that includes Henk Aarts, Bas Verplanken, and Ad Knippenberg, whose 1998 article in the *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* serves as a strong example of this line of research and analysis. The dominant competing framework rejects the usefulness of the language of habituation in favor of a mature version of what Icek Ajzen (in a 2002 article in the *Personality and Social Psychology Review* that directly critiques the former set of researchers) refers to as “reasoned action perspectives” that emphasize deliberate processing of information as the a consistent way of understanding human behavior, even when it follows repetitive patterns. Although there are substantive differences in the conclusions drawn by the two camps, the relationship between each side’s findings and arguments is obscured somewhat by a mismatch between the narrow ways in which each side tends to define habit and habituation. Aristotle’s more comprehensive framework can help to clear up some of the confusion about terminology, making it easier to evaluate where the latest research and theory on the topic stands.

Representing the first camp, Aarts, et al. insist that the idea of habit is important for filling in the gaps in those models of human behavior that rely primarily on conscious deliberation and decision-making. They grant credit to these so-called attitude-behavior models for providing useful insights into the more deliberate aspects of human behavior, but they argue that such research is missing an important detail by ignoring important

details of behaviors that “are executed on a daily, repetitive basis, and therefore may become routinized or habitual.”⁹ The research pursued by these authors, by contrast, seeks to empirically examine the seemingly automatic side of habitual behavior and how the process of habituation itself works.

Aarts, et al., insist that competing attitude behavior models neglect the importance of (unreflective) repetitiveness to learned behavior, which shapes humans’ tendency to transfer what they have learned in one situation to seemingly similar ones in the future. They also criticize these models for assuming that any influence from past behavior more or less consciously shapes “attitudes and perceptions of social norms and behavioral control.”¹⁰ It is this presumption that conscious attitudes and perceptions are consistently in play that Aarts et al. are challenging in the case of habitual behaviors. Instead, they focus on the possibility that the habitual character of repetitive behavior is something that largely “arises and proceeds efficiently, effortlessly, and unconsciously.”¹¹ Their review of the experimental evidence emphasizes the importance of unconscious or subconscious “shortcuts” and models of behavior that are built up over time and do not require more conscious reflection.

The routine and repetitive nature of many human activities that they highlight certainly applies to the moral dimension of our behaviors as much as any other. For a particularly glaring example, consider just how many times a day a typical person is faced with a decision about whether to respond honestly or deceptively to the questions

⁹ Aarts, Henk, Bas Verplanken, and Ad Knippenberg. "Predicting Behavior From Actions in the Past: Repeated Decision Making or a Matter of Habit?" *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 28.15 (1998): 1355-374. P.1356

¹⁰ Aarts, et al., pp.1357-1359

¹¹ Aarts, et al., p.1358

that pepper nearly every interpersonal interaction (even when distanced and sterilized by electronic media or standardized forms). Is it at all realistic to expect that a person consistently consciously weighs every such question in light of their chosen moral guidelines before responding? The demands on a person's time and attention would be staggering. Running such a continuous set of deliberate moral calculations about honesty and deception would likely interfere with an individual's ability to function in daily life so severely that it might be considered a behavioral disorder.

To test their account of the unconscious character of such habitual behavior experimentally, Aarts, et al. conducted an experiment testing whether subjects displayed a noticeable influence of habit on contrived decisions about habit formation in travel decisions. They found that, much as they suspected based on past findings, frequent repetition of behavior in the experimental setting both increased subjects' likelihood of choosing the most familiar method of travel and *decreased their reliance on searching for relevant information* in any given scenario. Based on that, it seems that the subjects were indeed thinking less consciously about their decisions as they continued to repeat their actions over time. When they performed a modified version of the experiment to control for other possible confounding variables in their initial attempt, the same pattern held,¹² reinforcing their observation that "habitual choices tend to follow cognitive shortcuts, in the sense that little information is needed to consider options and to make a choice."¹³

¹² Aarts, et al. p.1365

¹³ Aarts, et al. p.1368

It is important to keep in mind that their account of habitual responses is one that, in their words, “can be thought of as a cognitive structure that is learned, stored in, and readily retrieved from memory upon the perception of appropriate stimuli.”¹⁴ This provides more attention to the cognitive side of the issue than strictly behaviorist approaches that drop out analysis of internal mental life and focus only on externally observable behavior. Aarts, et al., aren’t dropping the nuances of memory and mental life out of the picture. They even describe habits as “*goal-directed* automatic behaviors that are mentally represented [..and that] automatically activated by environmental cues” (emphasis added).¹⁵ According to their view of the evidence (both their own and that which they review from past research), there is clearly a mix between conscious and purposeful behavior on one hand and automatic and unconscious reaction on the other, as (they note) is typically true of “behaviors such as typing, walking, driving, and even choosing a travel mode” which “are usually qualified as automatic, but [...] do require a goal to engage in it in order to occur.”¹⁶ On this understanding, a habit requires a perceived *purpose* but does not necessarily require conscious *planning*; the link between a purpose and a process has already been built into the brain over time, even if the relationship can’t be calculated with precision.

Icek Ajzen, of course, disagrees with this account and fleshed it out in a direct response accounting for other facets of the research done on the topic. He argues (in direct response to Aarts, et al. and other proponents of similar views of habituation) that

¹⁴ Aarts, et al. p.1359

¹⁵ Aarts, et al. p.1359

¹⁶ Aarts, et al. p.1358

the sort of reasoned action perspective endorsed by Ajzen and fellow members of his school of thought “does not propose that individuals review their behavioral, normative, and control beliefs prior to every enactment of a frequently performed behavior” and recognizes that “attitudes and intentions—once formed and well-established—are assumed to be activated automatically and to guide behavior without the necessity of conscious supervision,” but that Ajzen and his fellows focus on how attitudes and intentions are triggered instead of simple “of stimulus cues” as he believed researchers in the camp of Aarts, Verplanken, and Knippenberg to advocate.”¹⁷ This is the real core of the split between these two camps, rather than the decision to examine repetitive behaviors (as Aarts, et al. accuse others of ignoring) or the idea of habituation as such (which Ajzen seems to reject on the basis of an inappropriately narrow definition).

Distinctively, Ajzen takes care to note and emphasize how fluid the relationship between the conscious and unconscious aspects of behavior appears to be. He suggests that most seemingly habitual behaviors “are best described as *semiautomatic response patterns* that involve controlled as well as autonomous phases” in which “the amount of deliberation varies depending on motivation and cognitive capacity.”¹⁸ He notes a long list of possible factors (rooted in past research) that might exert a lasting pressure on behavior that would complicate more automatic repetitiveness characteristic of common understandings of habituation:

. . . including personal or moral norms (e.g., Gorsuch & Ortberg, 1983),
anticipated regret (e.g., Richard, van der Pligt, & de Vries, 1995), desire to attain

¹⁷ Ajzen, p.108

¹⁸ Ajzen, p.109

a behavioral goal (Perugini & Bagozzi, 2001), self-identity (e.g., Sparks & Guthrie, 1998), and affect (Manstead & Parker, 1995).¹⁹

Ajzen's upshot is that "behavioral stability may be attributable not to habituation but to the influence of cognitive and motivational factors that remain unchanged and are present every time the behavior is observed (Ajzen, 1991; Eagly & Chaiken, 1993)."²⁰ What he is doing is distinguishing between the role of habit as a separate force, understood by framing the automatic response discussed by Aarts et al. as distinct from other psychological forces and motives, from the process of other mental processes being reinforced and more deeply incorporated into behavior over time. On Ajzen's reading of repetitive behavior, if factors like desires or values remain consistent, that alone is sufficient to explain the consistency of habitual behaviors without any need to appeal to some sort of alternative mechanism or pressure.

However, one potentially troubling aspect of Ajzen's analysis is the fact that he seems to focus his analysis of repetitive behavior on cases where the "stimulus situation" that an individual is responding to remains constant (which would suggest that changes in their intentions would be the only reason for changes in their behavior to occur when repeatedly confronting those identical circumstances).²¹ This simplistic way of framing the issue doesn't pass the intuitive "smell test" of relevance in that the "stimulus situation" in any two cases calling for an individual to respond is likely to be roughly analogous at best, rather than genuinely identical. For example, Aarts et al. found an

¹⁹ Ajzen, p.110

²⁰ Ajzen, p.110

²¹ Ajzen, p.111

effect from past behavior or habit in their experiments on decision-making about transportation even as they altered the details of the contrived problem over the course of experiments. Not only did their methodology involve generalizability by looking for linkages between frequently used transportation methods to specific *new* situations (rather than a specific usage of transportation under a recurring set of identical conditions), it also examined and identified variance in how participants acquired and used information based on past experience even as the specifics of the problems ahead of them changed. This evidence of the generalizability of repeated behavioral responses and “cognitive shortcuts” across similar but not identical situations seems to undercut Ajzen’s claim that other cognitive factors like intentions are fully sufficient to account for the increasingly automatic character of repeated behaviors, even if he is right to note a large body of evidence that various motives and mental pressures tend to be present behind these behaviors and that this should make us wary of treating the ‘automatic’ character of habitual behaviors as some sort of black box to be identified but taken for granted as ultimately simple.

However, one of Ajzen’s contributions is surely that he focuses the debate on the recognition that failures to deliberately shake bad habits or build good ones are good evidence that habitual behavior is hardly hidden in the realm of the unconscious, noting that such personal failures:

. . . do not escape the person’s attention. In fact, they are generally accompanied by a good deal of anguish and regret. It would be difficult to argue that, in these instances, the residual impact of past on later behavior represents the operation of

an automatic habit. People are conscious of their routine response tendencies—that is, their bad habits—and their behavior exhibits none of the hallmarks of automaticity: It is not performed quickly, outside awareness, with minimal attention, and in parallel with other activities.²²

Of course, such behavioral patterns clearly suggest that there is at least some degree of messy (and, at best, imperfectly predictable) conflict between conscious and unconscious behaviors that plays out in the formation of habit. In fact, even as he critiques colleagues such as Aarts, et al. for an excessively credulous focus on the dominance of the apparently unconscious aspect of habit, Ajzen seems to fail to recognize the possibility of a conflict between impulses to fulfill built-up automatic behaviors on one hand and conscious intentions and purposes on the other. In fact, there is no reason to discount the possibility that habit and intention might be conflict, requiring an individual (or a teacher or leader) to undertake deliberate effort to reshape the habits involved by replacing old cognitive shortcuts and impulses with better ones over the course of time.

That said, a key piece of Ajzen's position and *the* key reason for his rejection of the term habituation itself is essentially his rejection of the idea of habit as an independent mediating factor that would provide an alternative explanation to factors such as the more automatic and unconscious expression of more consciously formed intentions and perceived behavioral capacities. That more independent idea of habituation (which drops out consciousness) is how many other psychologists (particularly those in the behaviorist camp) seem to have used the term through much of

²² Ajzen, p.111

the 20th century, though it seems unfair to exaggerate the degree to which this feature persists in the work of more recent researchers such as Aarts. Conveniently, the more expansive classical characterization of habit and habituation, as represented by Aristotle, is best understood as a broader and more comprehensive account of the process of repetitive learning, belief formation, and the conversion of behaviors from consciously deliberative to unconsciously automatic that would encompass the very kinds of factors than Ajzen is interested in, rather than competing with them. Even Ajzen himself noted that the practical relevance of his perspective wouldn't differ much from Aarts ,et al., admitting that “[s]o long as the context remains relatively unchanged, routinized behavior is performed in a largely automatic fashion with minimal conscious control.”²³

The broad bounds of the terms “habit” and “habituation” are part of our problem here. In common daily language, we use them to refer to basically the whole range of repetitive behaviors or tendencies, without doing much to clarify what we are referring to more precisely. Things that are automatic and reactive, things that we develop a predisposition towards through familiarity, things that “feel natural” or easy in a non-conscious way but which we don't actually *do* without awareness, etc. all have certain similarities that Aristotle would recognize, but have important differences as well. The work done to explore some of the details and mechanics of these features of human behavior by recent researchers, including the competing camps represented by Aarts, et al. on the one hand and Ajzen on the other, should help others to build a clearer and more comprehensive account of habituation over time.

²³ Ajzen, p.108

In fact, both contemporary accounts (and the bodies of prior empirical research that they reference and build upon) support the basic features of Aristotle's prior account of moral habituation, but focus on different details that need further fleshing out. However, one difference between them proves crucial: the evidence that Ajzen notes in past research of habitual behaviors being largely driven by the unconscious and automatic activation or expression of existing attitudes and intentions (as opposed to direct unconscious response to stimulus cues with little or no involvement from other cognitive factors) suggests that the relationship between habituation and some of the other psychological mechanisms in play in our present investigation should be a deep one. Factors such as external incentives and group identity formulations could essentially be structurally baked in to how habits are formed and expressed, rather than factors that interact with habitual tendencies after the fact, with the question of identity having a particularly deep connection to questions of internalized values and intentions.

It is worth noting that Aristotle himself posits a feedback loop between repetition of behaviors, the development of particular moral beliefs, and the pleasure-pain responses humans have towards certain behaviors. While there is a clear need for more empirical research to tease out the nuances of how such factors interact (the narrow way that some of the terms and concepts involved have been defined by recent psychologists seems to have hampered attentiveness to some of these relationships in the design of experiments and research proposals), the existing findings on the topic *do* appear to reliably support Aristotle's basic observation that repetition of behavior and our (learned) expectations and intentions interact to reinforce the repetition of human behavior. More broadly, the

robust support for this basic relationship is extremely significant for understanding the relationship between the moral psychology of individual character development and organizational psychology. It suggests that morally relevant patterns of thought and behavior reinforced by an organization or its response to outside pressures are likely to develop a degree of “stickiness” that pushes individuals to retain them within and possibly beyond that immediate organizational setting.

Having seen that something very much like Aristotle’s holistic account of habituation seems to hold together well under continued empirical scrutiny from competing research frameworks, and that this most likely involves a mix of *both* an influence on an individual’s consciously held beliefs and preferences and a tendency to stimulate the development of less conscious default reactions, there is at least one more layer to the topic of habituation worth considering—the possibility that habituation might actually *malfunction*, rather than only reinforcing good and bad habits straightforwardly.

In a fairly recent article for the *Review of Philosophy and Psychology*, James Bernard Murphy suggested that exactly such a malfunction of habit might account for why observed human behavior across different situations sometimes seems to show inconsistent adherence to moral norms in many experimental settings. In his analysis of inconsistent moral behavior, Murphy draws on the field of transfer of learning research (which, as the name suggests, explores how behaviors that individuals learn in one setting are transferred into other settings that they encounter) to propose what he calls a form of “habit interference” as an explanation for apparent moral consistency, suggesting that much of the experimental evidence of moral inconsistency is actually a result of

situations in which “experimental subjects err by over-generalizing dispositions formed in prior situations” rather than of intentional hypocrisy or shifting beliefs and intentions.²⁴ As he puts it, the problem is “best understood as evidence of overly general, not overly specific, dispositions” and suggests that this faulty tendency to default to past behaviors in settings where they are no longer appropriate explains the results of Stanley Milgram’s infamous experiments (in which subjects displayed a disturbing willingness to follow directions by actors playing the role of experimenters to administer increasingly painful and dangerous electric shocks to actors playing the role of experimental subjects, despite often displaying increasingly extreme discomfort with the situation):

In other words, Milgram’s subjects, for example, had learned to obey authorities in familiar contexts and then over-generalized this disposition to obey inappropriately in experimental contexts. The general habit of obedience was interfering with the subjects’ abilities to act appropriately in this context . . .

The real issue in this case being not the absence of a general disposition built up by habituation but the pressure of a “more salient” disposition overriding any others in the context of that situation.²⁵ Murphy’s analysis suggests that the mismatch between habitual behaviors and their expression in social, institutional, and situational contexts different from those in which they originally fit appears plausible in light of the lessons on habituation that we can draw from Aristotle, Aarts et al., and Ajzen, respectively. It also provides reason for further caution and wariness in looking at how habits built in one set of circumstances that an organization’s members face might be misapplied elsewhere.

²⁴ Murphy, p.255

²⁵ Murphy, p.256

The basic takeaway from a careful study of each of these analyses is that the mechanism of habituation is potentially powerful, but is neither good nor bad in itself and can reinforce both desirable and harmful patterns of behavior over time. At a deeper level, if we keep an empirically refined Aristotelian picture of moral habituation in mind, coupled with an understanding of how habit can misfire dangerously under certain conditions, we can come away with a pair of extremely important insights for understanding moral behavior in organizational settings. The first is that we can reasonably expect frequently repeated behaviors and practices in any organizational setting to influence both the explicitly held beliefs and the less conscious quick reactive behaviors of members. The second is that observers should be attentive (and leaders proactive) in looking for cases where practices within an organization shape habits in ways that might plausibly become particularly toxic or particularly constructive when transferred across settings that the organization's members find themselves in. Both of these lessons turn out to be relevant to the case studies in the second part of this thesis, but the first of them is also particularly important to keep in mind when considering the topic of the next section: the formation of group identity.

Group Identity and Incentives

Philosophers and psychologists have long suspected that how we understand our own identities and those of others is another important piece of the puzzle of moral behavior. In some ways, questions of identity—“who and what am I?” and “who and what are you?”—are at once both incredibly basic and devilishly murky and abstract. Our answers to them are deeply subjective but deeply necessary cognitive tools that humans use to navigate the social dimensions of our world. How we understand ourselves, how we understand others, and how we understand the relationships between the two do, in fact, seem to have a deep impact on moral behavior with sweeping relevance for organizational settings.

In *The Honor Code*, which I referenced near the beginning of this work, Anthony Appiah explored the role that norms and practices related to honor, respect, and esteem have played in motivating shifts in moral behavior. In exploring these themes, he noted group identity to be a highly relevant factor in shaping moral norms and their transformation over time. As he framed it, “Because of the conceptual connection between honor and being respected, we can always ask whose respect is at stake. Usually, it is not the respect of people in general, it is the respect of some particular social group, which I will call an “honor world”: a group of people who acknowledge the same codes.”²⁶ The boundaries of the identity of such an “honor world” are naturally subjective, determined by individual evaluations of the status of people around them in

²⁶ Appiah, pp.19-20

light of cultural and social norms—as are all determinations of mutual group membership.

Appiah argued that because boundaries that a person recognizes as defining their “honor world” determine whose respect and evaluation they consider relevant to their identity and their honor, shifts in how those boundaries are defined can introduce deeply influential social pressures to change one’s behavior. When examining relevant historical records, correspondence, and other sources, Appiah found that concerns of just this sort helped bring about widespread changes in practices as different as dueling -- as the rise of the widespread press forced aristocrats to recognize and respond to the scrutiny of the broader public, eroding the exclusivity and respectability of the practice²⁷ -- and the binding of women’s feet, as Chinese elites in an increasingly globalized world came to see ending this practice as essential to maintain the shared honor of their nation in the face of newfound scrutiny from foreign powers.²⁸

Much like Appiah’s idea of the “honor world” is something that exerts a significant impact on self-perception in broader social environments, the ways in which specific organizations define group identity for their members are simultaneously subjective, social, cultural, and deeply motivational. However, while Appiah examined the way that these kinds of social processes shaped how individuals and groups assessed their conduct in light of how others would view them, the subjective social process of defining group identity also shapes how people identify the moral relevance of the interests of others and the extent of the moral obligations that bind them. How each

²⁷ Appiah, p.38

²⁸ Appiah, pp.91-93

person understands his or her identity in relation to that of others shapes that person's sphere of moral concern in the first place—it lays out the parameters of a their moral radar, so to speak.

Recognizing that how we treat other individuals depends upon the degree to which we recognize them as morally relevant is deceptively obvious. In truth, human beings don't inevitably or automatically recognize every person they see as someone to whom they owe a particular kind of treatment. It's telling that the famous biblical parable of the Good Samaritan is shared when a man answers Jesus' endorsement of the command to love one's neighbor by asking "And who is my neighbor?"²⁹ The point of the tale was precisely to broaden the scope of the listener's (and readers') moral radar. In much more recent times, some of the most notorious atrocities and war crimes of the twentieth century were justified at the time by claiming that the victims were somehow subhuman or didn't deserve moral consideration because of their status as an enemy of the group that targeted them. This is clearly an old problem and one that turns out to be crucial in understanding when and why people are inclined to engage in compassion, generosity, and reciprocity in some circumstances and in fraud, neglect, and violent abuse in others.

Adam Smith, one of the giants of early modern moral philosophy and social science, tackled this problem head-on in his major work on ethics and moral psychology: *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. A central thread that runs throughout Smith's exploration of moral psychology is his focus on moral imagination. Smith argued that

²⁹ Luke 10:29, NRSV

the starting point for moral behavior and moral standards is our ability to sympathize with others, which he describes as a necessarily imaginative process. He posits that “[a]s we have no immediate experience of what other men feel, we can form no idea of the manner in which they are affected, but by conceiving what we ourselves should feel in the like situation” by extrapolating from our own sensory experiences.³⁰

Smith argued that it has only ever been through this ability to imagine ourselves in another person’s position (materially and emotionally) that we have begun to care about their wellbeing and take their interests into account. Smith adds more rigorous observation and analysis to back up the common childhood advice to put yourself into another person’s shoes as an approach to moral reflection. At the same time, it should already be obvious based on this that the ways in which people do or don’t recognize one another as morally relevant are likely to matter a great deal in shaping how groups of people interact and in how membership in those groups influences the moral perceptions of their members.

Smith also suggested that this process of moral imagination and the resulting reaction of sympathy are more a function of context than of any deep psychological insight, insisting that when one person feels sympathy for another “the emotions of the bystander always correspond to what, by bringing the case home to himself, he imagines *should be* the sentiments of the sufferer” (emphasis added)³¹ and that it “does not arise so much from the view of the passion, as from that of the situation which excites it.”³² In

³⁰ Smith, pp.13-14

³¹ Smith, p.15

³² Smith, p.16

other words, the imaginative process of sympathy still involves a certain degree of removal from the actual target of that sympathy, as a person has to start by imagining him or herself *in the position of another* before ever hoping to somehow imaginatively access what the other person might truly be thinking or feeling. It stands to reason, then, that the human tendency toward sympathy with another person will be quite malleable and dependent on how individuals perceive their similarity with others.

Recognizing shared features of identity (in part through awareness of shared characteristics and circumstances) appears to be a natural part of how sympathy develops. To the extent that one person is able (or willing) to recognize a shared identity with another person in whatever way would form a precondition of being able to imagine one's self in that other person's circumstances, the door for sympathy—and therefore for moral behavior—is opened. It should be unsurprising then, that Smith posits that his own imagination (like those of people more generally) “more readily assumes, if I may say so, the shape and configuration of the imaginations of those with whom I am familiar.”³³ The degree of familiarity shaped by existing relationships and interactions, shared or similar roles and life experiences, shared group affiliations, and other such linkages provide some of the grounding for the imaginative process of sympathy, which forms the basis for one person recognizing another as subject to moral consideration. On the other hand, oppositional ideas of group identity that describe some group and its members as opposed to or alien to one's own should create barriers that weaken that kind of moral consideration.

³³ Smith, p.37

While more recent empirical research has not tended to probe as deeply into the subjective dimensions of moral imagination that Smith considered to be fundamental to the moral behavior and interpersonal interaction, researchers have built a body of behavioral findings that dovetail surprisingly well with what Smith's arguments suggest. For example, a recent critical review of experimental findings related to empathy and its connection to moral behavior by Jean Decety and Jason Cowell, which pays careful attention to the evolutionary roots and neurological mechanisms behind social behavior, provides the following summary description of the different key features of empathy so far supported by studies of human and animal behavior:

In this neuroevolutionary framework, the emotional component of empathy reflects the capacity to share or become affectively aroused by others' emotions (in at least valence, tone, and relatively intensity). The motivational component of empathy (empathic concern) corresponds to the urge of caring for another's welfare. Finally, cognitive empathy is similar to the construct of perspective taking.³⁴

The features of this contemporary summary of empirical findings on empathy are remarkably consistent with Smith's earlier perspective, but current researchers also seek to distinguish between different components of empathy, allowing them to work on more carefully isolating how each of them function at a neurological and behavioral level.

Decety and Cowell also note several other key experimental findings on empathy, including the existence of "kin and ingroup preferences" in how humans and other

³⁴ Decety & Cowell, p.529

animals respond to the distress of others,³⁵ evidence that deliberate steps to consciously imagine the perspectives of others prove to be “a powerful way to elicit sympathy and concern” and reduce bias³⁶, observations that even young children “view people as intrinsically obligated only to their own group members, and they consider within-group harm as wrong regardless of explicit rules; however, they view the wrongness of between-groups harm as contingent on the presence of such rules,”³⁷ and evidence that humans more broadly tend to take pleasure in the failures of “rival out-group member[s]”³⁸—a sweeping set of findings that reinforce many of the outcomes we would expect from Smith’s framework. Empathy indeed seems to be rooted in imagination and to have a strong determining influence on how humans are inclined to think of others and their moral obligations (or lack thereof) to them. This includes a clear preference for the wellbeing of members of one’s own perceived group and indifference or even hostility to members of groups seen as separate from or opposed to one’s own, with the imaginative process appearing to be both a basis for drawing the perceived boundaries of social groups and conditioned by perceptions of group identity in turn.

As we consider these findings and the earlier idea of a “moral radar” drawn from Smith’s framework, a pair of studies detailed by Karl Aquino, Americus Reed, Stevan Thau, and Dan Freeman provides some particularly interesting insights into how this can

³⁵ Decety & Cowell, p.529

³⁶ Decety & Cowell, p.530

³⁷ Decety & Cowell, p.531

³⁸ Decety & Cowell, p.532

play out in settings of conflict and intergroup hostility.³⁹ Focusing attitudes on violence conducted in the course of war, their starting point is the explanation that one important psychological factor supporting the human capacity to harm one another despite being socialized with certain peaceful norms of behavior is the execution of “various mechanisms of *moral disengagement*” (emphasis in original) from their potential targets, which serve to reconcile individuals’ awareness of their own hostile behavior with a “positive self-image.”⁴⁰ However, this very starting point warrants an important caveat in light of the insights proposed by Smith.

While moral disengagement is likely an important consideration, we should be careful not to assume that moral engagement is the default normal position. In fact, it stands to reason that any mechanisms of moral engagement or moral disengagement are pieces of the broader puzzle of who shows up on a person’s moral radar, which is itself a function of how that person conceives of the relationship between him- or herself and another. Different forms of moral engagement or disengagement plausibly seem to be an expression of whether a moral actor perceives another person as having a shared group identity that is subject to empathy and that demands behaviors of a certain kind, or as lacking such a shared identity—or worse, having the identity of an enemy group—that either inspires indifference or justifies hostility.

Keeping that caveat in mind as we move on, Aquino, et al. set out to test the interaction between “moral identity” (the way in which individual think about their

³⁹ Aquino, Karl, Americus Reed, Stefan Thau, and Dan Freeman. "A Grotesque and Dark Beauty: How Moral Identity and Mechanisms of Moral Disengagement Influence Cognitive and Emotional Reactions to War." *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 43.3 (2007): 385-92.

⁴⁰ Aquino, p.386

identity in terms of their standing as a moral person who adheres to certain moral standards) and processes of moral disengagement from empathy for others with a focus on:

two theoretical premises: (1) that people routinely establish psychological group boundaries that define those groups toward whom they feel connected and obligated to show social moral concern (Glover, 2000; Staub, 1989) and (2) that people feel a stronger moral obligation to show concern for the needs and interests of out-groups when their moral identity has high as compared to low self-importance.⁴¹

There are several additional points worth considering in light of these premises. First, it may be worth distinguishing between groups defined as in-groups or out-groups in terms of moral priority vs. an even more basic layer in which the delineation is between those recognized as sharing in one's identity enough to even read them as being on one's "moral radar" and subject to consideration at all. The complexity of human society and simultaneous membership in a variety of imperfectly overlapping social groups may, of course, mean that both sorts of recognition play out across a scale. Second, it stands to reason in light of the previous discussion of habituation that those organizational practices that rhetorically reinforce amoral values or incentivize amoral or immoral behavioral practices would tend to habituate members to give low priority to the construct of moral identity that Aquino, et al. focus on.

⁴¹ Aquino, p.387

In one experiment that factored in the emotionally loaded issue of retribution, they surveyed one hundred and four individuals in order to examine the relationship between the centrality of respondents' moral identity to their sense of self, their propensity for moral disengagement from others, and their evaluations of the morality of lethal vs. non-lethal responses to those responsible for the terrorist attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001. Interestingly, they found that "while moral disengagement was positively related to the choice of killing for low moral identifiers [...], there was no relationship between these variables for high moral identifiers".⁴² In other words, the high importance of morality to some subjects' sense of personal identity served as a check on the influence of moral disengagement on their willingness to condone retaliatory violence.

In a subsequent experimental study, they deliberately primed one group of participants to think about their moral identity while including a non-primed group as a control, this time while evaluating their emotional responses to reports of abuse and torture of U.S.-held prisoners in Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay. Much like in their prior study, they found that preexisting tendency toward moral disengagement tended to limit the negative emotional reactions of participants to these reports of abuse, while priming their sense of moral identity tended to cancel out this effect.⁴³

Their findings in these studies are interesting on two fronts. First, the relationship between moral disengagement and the preference for the maximally hostile and violent response offered as not just acceptable but as the most moral option available seems to

⁴² Aquino, p.388

⁴³ Aquino, p.390

reinforce the importance of perceptions of group identity in shaping moral behavior. Second, the fact that the importance of respondents' moral identity to their broader sense of themselves suggests one possible area of linkage between these issues of identity and the mechanisms considered in the previous and following sections. If, for example, individuals have been habituated or incentivized in ways that support prioritizing explicit moral norms in their self-concept, this provides one way in which those norms may tend to "stick" in their behavior over time. Similarly, if individuals undergo habituation or face consistent incentives in environments that consistently devalue, dismiss, or discourage prioritizing moral norms, that too may tend to stick in their behavior. Given the role that moral identity seems to hold in placing a check on moral disengagement, the latter case would likely also tend to shrink the scope of an individual's moral radar and to make them less sensitive to the moral dimensions of their interactions with others—particularly those outside whichever group or groups they understand themselves as belonging to.

Of course, this examination of the moral impact of subjective group identities and the social dynamics rooted in them provides another link back to Aristotle's account of habituation. Among the many aspects of social and political life that Aristotle treated as key components of habituation, he made special note of what he called friendship (*philia* in the original Greek, which Aristotle conceived quite broadly as involving a large range of different interpersonal relationships and affections, of varying distance and depth). Aristotle observed that friendship in this broad sense seems to be useful for character throughout life to the extent that those we are close to can provide guidance against

mistakes and insight and reinforcement for efforts at self-improvement,⁴⁴ referencing the poet Theognis in noting that “a sort of training in virtue emerges from good people’s living in each other’s company.”⁴⁵ By teaching us, correcting us, and otherwise providing us with opportunities to practice our virtues and cultivate our practical wisdom through cooperative endeavors and debate, our social bonds provide crucial soil for both sets of virtues outlined in Aristotle’s account. However, for much the same reasons of proximity and influence, the same social bonds can reinforce vices as well. The theories and observations of Adam Smith and the empirical research of more recent psychology provide strong evidence our membership in social groups provides not just an environment for our habituation but a crucial framework for our shaping our moral imaginations and recognition of others as worth aid or harm. The lines that we draw around and between our social groups can be just as important for the development of human moral character as the particular influences of our peers within those groups.

Having covered two mechanisms of moral development that may seem more exciting or evocative (and inspired particular attention from important moral and social thinkers in centuries past), it’s important to keep in mind a third piece of the puzzle that sometimes seems obvious and bland but is so ubiquitous a feature of human social organization that it’s often taken for granted. A great deal of the insight found in modern behavioral and social science research comes from the exploration of how humans respond to different kinds of concrete incentives that motivate them to pursue or avoid particular courses of action. In fact, many leaders in all forms of organizations rely quite

⁴⁴ Aristotle, p.143, 1155a

⁴⁵ Aristotle, p.178, 1170a

heavily (and sometimes crudely) on the use of extrinsic incentives—those tangible outside rewards and punishments that they can impose on others to pressure them to act in a desired fashion. The use of rewards and punishments to influence behavior is nothing new and is widely practiced in daily life by the educated and uneducated alike, without any input from (actual or self-proclaimed) experts on the topic. That proffering rewards or punishments can motivate people to behave in a desired way seems obvious to most of us.

However, the last several decades of work in fields such as economics and psychology have painted a more nuanced picture of how incentives actually function that provides adjustments to much of the common wisdom on the topic. Uri Gneezy, Stephan Meier, and Pedro Rey-Biel published a particularly thorough review and analysis of research on the relationship between extrinsic incentives and complicating factors, such as existing intrinsic motivations (such as the issues of goals, values, and identity discussed above), interest in image or reputation, and the force of habit.⁴⁶ Much of what they discuss examines the relationship between direct effect of an extrinsic incentive and the possible “indirect psychological effect” provided by other complicating factors, which can sometimes “crowd out the incentivized behavior”⁴⁷ and push individuals to behave in unintended ways.

For example, they note that the very presence of extrinsic incentives seems to sometimes have an unintended indirect effect on behavior through the information they

⁴⁶ Gneezy, Uri, Stephan Meier, and Pedro Rey-Biel. "When and Why Incentives (Don't) Work to Modify Behavior." *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 25.4 (2011): 191-210.

⁴⁷ Gneezy, et al., p.2

seem to convey (for example, whether the incentivized behavior might be undesirable without an inducement, or about the lack of trust the person offering the incentive places in them) or through undermining the value of the behavior to the actor's reputation as a signal of his or her existing character and motives.⁴⁸ In other words, there seems to be evidence that it's possible to mismatch the offering of incentives of particular kinds with desired behaviors in a way that produces backlash.

Gneezy, et al. draw on experiments involving cases that have ranged from offering residents of a locality a financial payoff in exchange for the presence of a nuclear waste facility to the performance of students participating in fund-raising activities when offered varying levels of personal material compensation. Across these cases, they found that “[f]or most tasks, if incentives are large enough, their direct price effect will be larger than the crowding-out effect in the short run,”⁴⁹ but that they can still have damaging long-term effects, to the extent that if incentives “signal some form of “bad news,” agents who receive incentives will update their beliefs about the task, their own type, or their assessment of their principal. As a result, their motivation to perform the task without the additional incentive can be reduced permanently”—though the incentivized behavior may still take on some habitual attributes if the “crowding out” effect does not outweigh the components of habit as well.⁵⁰ In sum, even if incentives motivate short-term behavior and may fuel the development of habits, using them

⁴⁸ Gneezy, et al., pp.2-3

⁴⁹ Gneezy, et al., p.3

⁵⁰ Gneezy, et al., p.4

inappropriately can also backfire and lead to negative changes in long-term behavior once the incentives are changed or withdrawn.

Gneezy, et al. even note a number of studies in which participants' short and long-term behavior changed based on how incentives help frame an interaction (for example, as primarily social or primarily monetary), thereby shaping the expectations and social norms considered relevant to the situation.⁵¹ For example, Enron (as we will see in the first case study below), relied heavily on immediate short-term financial incentives in ways that may have amplified employees' tendency to view interactions (both within the office and with those outside Enron) as fundamentally transactional (in the sense of one-off financial interactions), rather than as having a relational component that warranted planning around repeated interactions over time. This suggests that the 'crowding out' effect of incentive framing can combine with habituation itself in toxic ways.

Indeed, this possibility for incentives to backfire adds an interesting cautionary note to observations about the relationship between extrinsic incentives and habituation that go back as far as Aristotle. Considering the use of the rewards and penalties available to the legal systems of his time and place, he noted in his observation that "argument and teaching, presumably, are not powerful in every case, but the soul of the student must be prepared beforehand in its habits, with a view to its enjoying and hating in a noble way, like soil that is to nourish a seed."⁵² He suggested that the constraints on behavior posed by the presence of strong extrinsic incentives are important in shaping the development of an individual's character, and in fact seemed to see the capacity of law to

⁵¹ Gneezy, et al., p.11

⁵² Nicomachean Ethics, p.200, 1179b

reward and punish as *part* of the habituating process that steers a person's experience of pleasures and pains in a sufficiently orderly direction to make them amenable to moral example and instruction in the first place. The robust evidence for the importance of habituation discussed above suggests that this may still be a relevant part of how institutions function, but it seems that there's reason for some caution in leveraging this relationship to avoid unintended consequences twisting it in quite the opposite of the intended direction.

Modern research supports this cautious approach to using incentives as a tool for habituation, without rejecting the use of the relationship outright. As noted above, Gneezy, et al. found that studies exploring the use of extrinsic incentives to encourage healthy behaviors over a limited period of time have shown *some* success in pushing individuals to continue those behaviors after the incentives are no longer available, seemingly promoting a degree of habit formation—interestingly, an effect that seems to hold more strongly when other members of individuals' social groups are given the same incentives during the relevant period.⁵³ However, their analysis of the existing body of experimental evidence suggests that the long-term impact is neither perfect nor permanent and (at least so far) shows markedly less success at promoting lasting breaks with bad habits than with building good ones.

As we consider the relationship between extrinsic incentives and habituation, it is also important to keep in mind one final caveat: habitual behaviors are not always identical in duration. Although the very idea of a habit refers to a behavior that displays

⁵³ Gneezy, et al., pp.15-16

some level of durability over time, it may still simultaneously encompass patterns of behavior that gradually taper off over time, those that remain consistent unless and until some source of outside interference disrupts them, and those that prove strongly resistant to any pressure to change. Even as we acknowledge the important ways in which repetitive action shapes both conscious and unconscious drivers of behavior over time, habit—whether in matters of ethics or otherwise—is one among many factors shaping individual behavior in any situation.

Moving from Theory to Practice

The body of theory and research examined in the previous several sections provides useful insights into key mechanisms that can shape human moral and social behavior, but viewing these topics in the abstract can only push our understanding so far. Drawing adequate practical insights requires taking the time to more closely analyze how these mechanisms have played out in real historical settings, which is what the next three sections of this thesis will attempt. The purpose of these historical case studies is not to review the full and comprehensive history of each event. Instead, my aim will be to develop and provide a more actionable understanding of the mechanisms covered in past sections by highlighting a key set of related features and trends in each historic setting.

The introduction to this thesis drew attention to the ubiquity of intergroup competition in human life. The diverse set of case studies covered in following pages were selected to underscore that point—and to provide a sense of how the lessons covered in previous sections can and cannot be generalized—by covering a range of different organizational types and competitive environments. Enron will serve as a window into corporate settings and the realm of business competition. The Chinese Cultural Revolution will shift the focus to domestic politics, even as the situation escalates to involve open violence. The final case study, focused on the (largely) American prisoners of war held in North Vietnam during a time of war, will round out

the set. Each of these very different cases will further clarify the workings of the mechanisms of moral development discussed in the previous sections, while providing a better foundation for seeing how they might be applied in helpful ways in future settings.

I. Corporate culture gone awry: the case of Enron.

“The very qualities Skilling prized—the opportunity for creativity to run wild, the mixture of brains and hubris, the absence of gray hair and structure—turned Enron Finance into a chaotic, destructive, free-for-all. Over time, as that culture infected the entire company, Enron began to rot from within.”⁵⁴

For many Americans, the name Enron has become virtually synonymous with failures of business ethics and toxic corporate culture. It should come as no surprise that the mechanisms explored in the previous section of this thesis appear to shine a useful light on how and why the company and its employees ended up on a disastrous path. At the business level, Enron’s collapse involved the construction and eventual disintegration of complex a web of poor investments and increasingly convoluted financial mechanisms to shield the company’s failures from scrutiny by investors, lenders, and partners (which had the side effect of making it increasingly difficult for Enron’s own staff and executives to recognize and resolve underlying business problems). At the cultural level, the toxic organizational features that that fueled Enron’s poor business practices were

⁵⁴ McLean & Elkind, p.56

much simpler than the company's tangled finances. Warning signs that all was not well existed early. Cases of dubious financial manipulation and employee embezzlement dated back to the 1980s,⁵⁵ but unethical and unwise employee behavior became increasingly widespread in later years as the business transitioned from a focus on its original operations in the natural gas industry to one that relied ever more heavily on complex trading operations and infrastructure projects well outside that field.

The particulars of Enron's scandalous collapse couldn't have come to pass without many years of business decisions that shaped everything from the company's accounting methods to its levels of debt and risk. However, the toxic and dysfunctional organizational culture was influenced not just by Enron's competition with rival business enterprises but by competition and conflict within and between groups internal to Enron itself. Bethany McLean and Peter Elkind's landmark history of the company, *The Smartest Guys in the Room*, documents the development of this toxic climate in great detail. The interplay between habituation, the moral psychology of identity, and perverse incentives sheds important light on how poor business decisions and practices early on in Enron's development eventually produced an environment in which fraudulent and immoral behavior became the norm.

The rise of executive Jeff Skilling tracked closely with the increasing toxicity of the company's culture during its years of rapid growth. As he took over management of a division called Enron Finance, whose values he spread across the company as both it and his position grew, "Skilling believed that greed was the greatest motivator, and he

⁵⁵ McLean & Elkind, pp.18-24

was only too happy to feed it.”⁵⁶ This was reflected in Skilling’s promotion of a high stakes system called the Performance Review Committee, one of his earliest and ultimately most toxic contributions to the incentive structure within the company. The PRC system rated how each employee’s performance ranked relative to their peers, with a heavy focus on contributions to earnings (crucially, understood in light of an accounting system called mark-to-market that had problems of its own). High scorers earned huge bonuses and low scorers risked being fired, but employees soon found that they could manipulate this zero-sum game politically, perverting its meritocratic intentions and pitting Enron employee’s material interests against one another.⁵⁷

Meanwhile, one of the key conditions for both Enron’s later financial difficulties and for the development of dangerously shortsighted incentives was Jeff Skilling’s insistence that the company’s evolving operations begin using a practice called mark-to-market accounting. Rather than booking contract revenues “as they come through the door”, this method (borrowed from the financial industry) meant that after negotiating a deal Enron could “*book the entire estimated value for all ten years on the day you sign the contract*. Changes in that value show up as additional income—or losses—in subsequent periods” (emphasis in original).⁵⁸ This practice encouraged employees to focus on the closing of deals, but not necessarily on the maintenance of the resulting contracts and projects over time.

⁵⁶ McLean & Elkind, p.55

⁵⁷ McLean & Elkind, p.64

⁵⁸ McLean & Elkind, p.39

The trick was that the natural gas contracts for which Enron originally used this accounting method lacked the natural or transparent basis for valuation of more standard financial assets used by other companies employing the practice. Coupled with the PRC system described above, this created incentives for employees to claim unrealistic figures for their transactions to meet expectations or earn bonuses—a false degree of success which, insidiously, provided employees with a (successful) excuse to push the application of this accounting method to other parts of the business where it was even less justified.⁵⁹ This eventually promoted a continuing spiral of efforts to book new transactions that would help increasingly fanciful financial numbers meet or exceed the targets expected by executives or investors. With the politicized and zero-sum character of the PRC system factored in, Enron created an environment in which deceptive and exaggerated deal-making and undermining colleagues (effectively competitors) was the most surefire recipe for success—and hardly a morally healthy one.

Meanwhile, building on the seeds developed by leaders like Skilling, the culture of the increasingly influential trading operations within the company eventually (with more than a little self-flattery likely involved) came to reinforce a belief that “the market” (that is, the on-paper success of increasingly misrepresented transactions with opaque actual economic viability) was “was the ultimate judge of their work and their worth” and the only ethical arbiter of their conduct.”⁶⁰ It would be easy cast this as a standard caricature of the stereotypical greedy businessman, but it’s crucial to note that perceived market success was actually accorded a distinctly moral status. The trading culture at

⁵⁹ McLean & Elkind, p.40

⁶⁰ McLean & Elkind, p.216

Enron wasn't so much amoral as cursed with moral tunnel-vision, with members of the group defining ethics itself in terms of their understanding of the market instead of recognizing the market as part of a broader landscape of interaction permeated by various sources of value and standards of obligation. Mistakenly treating the market as a transcendent source of value instead of a space of interaction where other human values are brought into play is a common fault that can be misleading in the best of circumstances—and throughout the company's last decade in particular, the organizational environment at Enron could hardly be considered the best of circumstances.

Enron's ever-growing range of dubious accounting practices and shell-game transactions so obscured economic and fiscal reality that Enron employees' perception of the market turned out to provide an increasingly distorted picture of the best interests of the company and its shareholders, even with those interests construed very narrowly. Of course, with bonus practices that incentivized immediate accounting results instead of long-term profitability when making deals, individual employees' interests were set up to diverge even further from those of colleagues and shareholders.

Meanwhile, it was widely recognized that the company's Risk Assessment and Control department, which was ostensibly in place to manage risk and potential conflicts of interest, was actually effectively impotent to discipline unwise gambles and ethically dubious business practices.⁶¹ McLean and Elkind observed that “[o]ften, entire deals went to RAC just a few days before the close of the quarter, leaving little time to

⁶¹ McLean & Elkind, p.116

scrutinize transactions involving hundreds of millions of dollars, and putting enormous pressure on RAC to sign off, because the company needed the deals to hit its numbers.”⁶² By 2000, the environment had gotten to a point where traders regularly violated rules ordered by the RAC and faced no consequences whatsoever.⁶³ Part of what neutered the RAC was the very same performance review process mentioned above, due to the fact that “[i]ncredibly, traders and originators sat on panels that ranked the same RAC executives who reviewed their transactions. Everyone was supposed to act honorably, but there were clear opportunities for retaliation”⁶⁴

Clearly, the rules and controls that existed on paper and the incentives that played out in practice represented entirely different universes. Such evidence of impunity, of course, would reinforce expectations that rules encouraging prudence or cooperation were best ignored and subverted in any circumstances. This fueled the lopsided influence of mercenary incentives even further.

The combination of zero-sum internal incentives and a culture of aggressive competitiveness led to internal conflicts of interest when different business units came to see each other as the competition instead of as peers whose interests (and, for that matter, the interests of the company more broadly) deserved consideration. Consider this telling anecdote about the influential trading executive Lou Pai:

One former trading executive recalls that when finance executives approached him on the trading floor to obtain prices for selling the gas they’d acquired from a

⁶² McLean & Elkind, p.117

⁶³ McLean & Elkind, p.220

⁶⁴ McLean & Elkind, p.117

producer, Pai, behind his back, would secretly signal thumbs-down, meaning that the trader should quote a below-market price. And when a marketing originator came to the trader to get a price for *buying* gas, Pai would give a thumbs-up, to quote an above-market price. The effect of this would be to steal some of the expected profit spread for the trading desk from the deal makers.⁶⁵

The consistent message that Enron's leaders and their policies sent to employees was not that they were "all in this together" as part of a cohesive team with shared goals. Instead, they encouraged the perception of other groups within the company (and often of other individuals) as irrelevant at best and as adversaries to be overcome at worst. That this would lead to internal enmity and mutual sabotage should come as no surprise.

The factionalism grew even worse as Enron's ever-more-complicated bid to prop up its stock prices came to increasingly rely on quasi-independent business entities (largely organized by financial executive Andy Fastow) that conducted increasingly dubious transactions with Enron in order to massage Enron's financial numbers in service of maintaining growth in the stock price. McLean and Elkind's summary of the growing activity of Fastow's LJM business entity provides a sense of just how bad the problem became toward the end of Enron's corporate lifespan:

As the pace of LJM's deal making accelerated, Fastow made little effort to dampen the conflicts of interest he and other LJM officials faced. On the contrary: he positively embraced the conflicts and flaunted them inside Enron.

For instance, under an agreement Fastow struck with Causey, Enron employees

⁶⁵ McLean & Elkind, p.62

were allowed to work full time for LJM while keeping their Enron benefits and even remaining in their Enron offices. The arrangement institutionalized divided loyalties [...] At times, it was unclear who was negotiating for Enron and who was negotiating for LJM.⁶⁶

Any effective organizational reinforcement of norms of accountability, integrity, honesty, or cooperation seems to have disintegrated by Enron's later years.

Of course, the shortsighted and mercenary incentives within the company were reinforced from the outside as well. Credulous outside analysts and regulators fawned over Enron and failed to dig into its questionable practices for years, egged on by a broader myopic attitude toward stock valuation in the 1990s in which "so long as a company met or beat its earnings-per-share estimate, nothing else mattered. Cash didn't matter. Off-balance-sheet debt didn't matter. Even *on*-balance-sheet debt didn't matter."⁶⁷ And so, Enron executives themselves faced constant reinforcement in continuing to prioritize and reward employee conduct aimed at boosting what were increasingly imaginary numbers at any cost, in order to prop up a stock price on which their own compensation and the company's liquidity (itself otherwise compromised by the poor profitability of Enron's increasingly counterproductive business decisions) ultimately depended.

How truly perverse the incentives and norms at Enron became was particularly apparent when Enron employees doubled down on opportunities to extract short-term benefits from a crisis in the California energy sector when it was in the midst of

⁶⁶ McLean & Elkind, p.204

⁶⁷ McLean & Elkind, p.232

experimenting with deregulation, undermining the company's own broader interest in promoting deregulatory reforms that would give it long-term opportunities to compete in energy markets elsewhere in the country.⁶⁸ That long-term corporate interest isn't what Enron employees would be rewarded for in the short-term, nor was it what they had been trained to focus on over the long-term. Meanwhile, the depths of the mercenary factionalism promoted within the company were on full display in situations when Enron's team of wholesale energy traders gleefully exploited and undermined their retail market counterparts within the company⁶⁹ and when members of other divisions were seen "trading high fives" celebrating the hit to internal competition after the announcement of the failure of Enron's broadband internet division.⁷⁰ As one former executive described the corrosive culture that had developed, "You could see the green MBAs coming in, so happy-go-lucky and innocent [...] Within six months, they'd become assholes."⁷¹ The impression held even by insiders suggests that Enron's culture and practices tended to actually erode the positive traits of newcomers even as they tended to promote toxic ones.

In light of this, it's telling that after returning to the role of CEO in the final stretch before Enron's collapse, Ken Lay commented on the importance of restoring a focus on values within the company—right before launching into an obsessive focus on stock prices once again.⁷² When market valuation had become the de facto normative standard of choice within the company and other virtuous habits had been undermined

⁶⁸ McLean & Elkind, p. 267

⁶⁹ McLean & Elkind, p.300

⁷⁰ McLean & Elkind, p.335

⁷¹ McLean & Elkind, p.335

⁷² McLean & Elkind, p.353

and replaced over a course of years, it's no surprise that paying last-minute lip service to higher moral principles failed to right the ship. Even if Enron's finances hadn't become reliant on a veritable house of cards by this point, it is doubtful that the company could have managed to remain economically viable over the long-run after such a vicious culture had metastasized and begun to eat the business from within by undermining cooperation and strategy at a basic level. In the case of Enron, a combination of myopic incentives, failure to define shared group identities and purposes in a healthy way, and the accumulation of vicious habits as a result ultimately doomed the organization to competitive failure, even as it warped the individuals within it.

II. The Cultural Revolution as toxic politics

“Mao set about ensnaring his enemies with the precision of a trapper. But once the stage was set and the Cultural Revolution erupted in the summer of 1966, it took on a life of its own, with unintended consequences that even the most consummate strategist could not have anticipated.”⁷³

Readers in the United States and other liberal democracies are likely so accustomed to the mudslinging and corruption present in our own party politics that it may be easy to take the ugliness of political competition for granted. In order to avoid seeming trite and to examine the cross-cultural relevance of the dynamics in ethics and

⁷³ Dikoetter, P.xiii

organizational psychology I've been exploring, looking at a case study from an entirely different political setting should prove instructive. In an event formally known as the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in China, factional struggles erupted between wings of the Communist Party of China and the zealous Red Guard paramilitary groups mobilized by Mao Zedong as Mao struggled to reinforce the influence of his ideas and his personal leadership on the direction of the Chinese state. The resulting conflict fueled increasingly destructive political behavior and dealt a deep blow to communal ties and moral norms in the country.

Perhaps one of the most disastrous characteristics of the political climate during the Cultural Revolution was that the general population had already been pressured to engage in ruthless behavior during the mass starvation of the economically catastrophic Great Leap Forward industrialization project several years prior. The food shortages and impoverishment generated by the Communist Party's attempt to micromanage China's capital and labor force created an environment of extreme disruption and stress, in which "the very survival of an ordinary person came to depend on the ability to lie, charm, hide, steal, cheat, pilfer, forage, smuggle, trick, manipulate or otherwise outwit the state."⁷⁴ In other words, the almost unavoidable conclusion is that the process of moral habituation during this dark period had already steered much of the population to adopt behaviors that would normally be recognized as vices as a matter of raw survival in an exceptional case. When the national climate again began to threaten the lives and livelihoods of

⁷⁴ Dikoetter, p.20

common people (this time in a more directly social and political sense), those habits would resurface quickly.

The pump was further primed by an initiative known as the Socialist Education Campaign in the years immediately preceding the Cultural Revolution, in which the party and state aggressively feted folk hero figures to inspire students' loyalty to socialist ideology and to Mao himself, while reinforcing class hatred through "regular sessions of 'Recalling Bitterness'" that exposed students to harrowing (and carefully selected and framed) historical tales of atrocities perpetrated by groups identified as capitalists and nationalists.⁷⁵ Mao pushed these initiatives as his distrust of other senior leaders in the Chinese Communist Party grew and he came to fear that his personal influence and the principles of his revolution would be slowly shunted aside—something he would not countenance. The challenge Mao faced, as historian Frank Dikoetter notes, is that "Mao wished to purge the higher echelons of power, so he could hardly rely on the party machine to get the job done."⁷⁶ An outside force was needed.

By tapping into growing popular revolutionary sentiment to whip up indoctrinated students (who had the added advantage of being "impressionable, easy to manipulate and eager to fight"⁷⁷) into so-called Red Guard groups, Mao sought an alternative base of power to target other leaders and faction within the party, effectively fueling lasting inter-group contest in what was still officially a one party state. As these Red Guard movements picked up through the summer 1966 of Mao quickly launched a Cultural

⁷⁵ Dikoetter, pp.34-35

⁷⁶ Dikoetter, p.xiii

⁷⁷ Dikoetter, p.71

Revolution Group to oversee the initiative and succeeded in getting the Central Committee of the party to endorse the Cultural Revolution, including an August 8 statement in which it “proclaimed that the main target of the attack was ‘those in power within the party taking the capitalist road.’”⁷⁸ By this point, the pieces were in place to fracture the ostensibly one-party Chinese political system into an entrenched condition of factionalism.

The movement turned violent in short order: “On 4 August, three days after receiving Mao’s letter of encouragement, the students at Tsinghua University Middle School forced the principal and vice-principal to wear labels denouncing them as ‘Heads of a Black Gang.’ Over the following days, the Red Guards took turns to beat them.” Instances of labelling of school personnel as hostile elements, followed by increasingly extreme acts of violence, escalated to the point where a targeted vice-principal died after being beaten by a student Red Guard group.⁷⁹ These instances of violence based on perceived group membership of potential targets became a persistent feature of the Cultural Revolution. Even for the reluctant, the hostile framing of mortally opposed group identities provided an avenue for habituation to desensitize them to violence, as in this disturbingly representative case of one student Red Guard member:

The first time she saw a friend remove her belt to beat a victim until his clothes were drenched in blood, she recoiled. But she did not want to fall behind, so she persevered. At first she avoided eye contact with a human target, justifying the beatings by imagining how they were plotting the return of the old society. But

⁷⁸ Dikoetter, p.69

⁷⁹ Dikoetter, p.73

after a few beatings she got the hang of it. “My heart hardened and I became used to the blood. I waved my belt like an automaton and whipped with an empty mind.”⁸⁰

As such early instances of violence quickly began to escalate into outright massacres of perceived class enemies, local officials reporting the problem to authorities in Beijing found that those at the top of the official party hierarchy had no interest in intervening.⁸¹ The intergroup mob violence continued unchecked.

The growing obsession with political and class identity and the pattern of violence organized around those competing identities was no accident. In launching the Cultural Revolution, Mao employed rhetoric that called on party members and the population at large to engage in a political mission defined by opposition to a dehumanized cabal of enemies that he presented as a threat to the people. By focusing the goal on hostility to generalized classes of malicious enemies, Mao encouraged his listeners to exclude perceived members of these enemy classes from their moral radars. This move to combine dehumanization and fear in a classic “us-vs.-them” lens set the stage for abuse and violent escalation from the beginning. Even more dangerously, Mao and other leaders didn’t provide a clean definition of who might fall into the threatening category of “them”—“[the] rhetoric of the Cultural Revolution was deliberately vague, as ‘class enemies’, ‘capitalist roaders’ and ‘revisionists’ were denounced in general terms.”⁸²

⁸⁰ Dikoetter, p.77

⁸¹ Dikoetter, p.78

⁸² Dikoetter, p.xii

What this meant in practice is that all were potentially suspect, subject to the expediency and ulterior motives of whoever had a chance to level accusations.

Originally, the question of identity seemed more straightforwardly rooted in class. As Dikoetter notes, in the early stages of the Cultural Revolution “Red Guards were proud of their class background, and they tried to keep their ranks pure [.]” even going so far as to murder aspiring members from “bad families”.⁸³ Despite this, even within the first few months of the revolution in 1966, there was “a turning point in the Cultural Revolution, as the very meaning of the terms ‘red’ and ‘black’ [previously markers of reliably socialist or questionably capitalist persons and groups] began to shift” in accordance with ideological debates and clashing claims of revolutionary purity that upended earlier distinctions based on historical class affiliation.⁸⁴ By then, the Cultural Revolution had already become a moving battleground in which different factions continually struggled to claim the mantle of legitimacy, sought scapegoats, and thus turned the very definition of group identity into a dynamic field of contention with potential life and death consequences.

Mao continued to fuel conflict while standing as a stable center amidst a kaleidoscopic whirl of shifting factions vying for position, legitimacy, and survival. Eventually, everyone from the most powerless factory worker to the most exalted party official was incentivized to participate in the conflict, lest they fall under suspicion themselves. For the less benevolently-minded among them, the Cultural Revolution also provided another set of incentives: opportunities to advance one’s position and to settle

⁸³ Dikoetter, p.115

⁸⁴ Dikoetter, p.116

vendettas by targeting rivals and enemies as public threats through the tools of the revolution itself.

As the conflict went on, even the army came under political attack and promptly responded by seeking to co-opt the Cultural Revolution for its own interests, leading to a dangerous new point when “students, workers and government employees split into two factions, those who relied on the army and those who opposed it. Both sides claimed to represent the true revolution although often they were hard to tell apart.”⁸⁵ The bleak truth is that the competing claims to one’s own revolutionary authenticity and one’s opponents’ heresy had become unmoored from anything other than mutually exclusive identity claims around which to rally (and in the case of one’s preferred heretics, to target for destruction).

One of the darkest extensions of the warped approach to identity-based violence promoted by the Cultural Revolution occurred in a town called Wuxuan, where demonization of “class enemies” descended into an organized orgy of ritual murder and cannibalism.⁸⁶ Of course, the structures of the Communist Party and Red Guard factions and the rhetoric of their leaders also tapped into participants’ understanding of their own identities and interests as much as their recognition of others as hostile. As Dikoetter described the dynamics of the conflict after it had metastasized:

No one wanted to give up. Those on both sides were fueled by mutual hatred, but also by the belief that they, rather than the opposition, were faithful followers of

⁸⁵ Dikoetter, p.142

⁸⁶ Dikoetter, pp.176-177

the Chairman. Most of all, the rebels and the royalists were fighting for their own political survival. They were defending their past choices.⁸⁷

To back out of the cycle of recrimination and destruction would call one's own identity into question—and risk making one's self a target.

After the violence and disorder had served its disruptive purpose over the course of two years⁸⁸, Mao finally managed to draw the bloody conflict between Red Guard factions and elements of the party and state to a close, but the damage was done. The toll in human lives, in damage to material quality of life, and in the social and cultural bonds that secure any society's future was extraordinary and continues to echo to this day. The mass movements of the early Cultural Revolution also set the stage for years of additional infighting and disastrous policies during the remainder of Mao's life.

The cynical deployment of combative but shifting identity politics, combined with frenetically uncertain motives for self-preservation and personal advantage, reinforced cycles of toxic habituation that sundered human relationships and steered ordinary people toward extraordinary violence. Although there is a strong argument to be made that the Cultural Revolution itself was a nearly unique case in serving as a deliberately *engineered* social and moral catastrophe, it serves as a lesson in how infusing the highest stakes of material wellbeing and survival into the definition of identity can impose distinct and dangerous incentives of its own, and in how dramatically habituation can steer the most ordinary and reluctant people to seamlessly engage in extreme behaviors.

⁸⁷ Dikoetter, p.145

⁸⁸ Dikoetter, p.179

The warnings to future generations left by the Cultural Revolution are by far the grimmest among these historical case studies.

III. Warfare beyond the battlefield in the ‘Hanoi Hilton’

“In that grim, sustained, and bloody struggle, the Vietnamese held all the trumps, save one: our determination to resist, to hang together, to communicate with and support each other, to bounce back when they broke us, and to frustrate them in their sordid mission.”⁸⁹

-James R. Stockdale

Carl von Clausewitz, perhaps the most influential philosopher of war, may have famously described his subject matter as “politics by other means,” but the people who have lived it are often more inclined to describe it in the words of the U.S. Civil War General William Tecumseh Sherman: “war is hell.” The ugly and brutal life and death struggles of armed combat leave very little room for abstraction. They embody higher stakes and perhaps the most pressingly distilled experiences of the dynamics we’ve explored so far. This is often as true behind the frontlines as it is on them.

Few American students now pass through their schooling without being regularly reminded of the profoundly disruptive political effects of the Vietnam War, but the final case study in this thesis will focus on the conflict from a rather different angle. As the

⁸⁹ Rochester & Kiley, p.593

war ground on, a growing group of American military personnel became prisoners of the North Vietnamese. Those held in the North Vietnamese prison network, including the infamous “Hanoi Hilton” facility formed a movement to govern themselves as they struggled to survive and resist their captors. Although it may seem counterintuitive after case studies that examined the corruption and distortion of organizations and their members in the realms of commerce and politics, this prisoners’ resistance movement actually serves as a study in how organizational norms and practices (even ad hoc ones) can help individuals develop a degree of moral fortitude in even the most painful and bloody of circumstances.

The very real suffering endured by the PWs⁹⁰ in North Vietnam still occupies an infamous (if increasingly vague and distant) place in the American public consciousness. However, their efforts at self-organization and resistance during their captivity are less well remembered. In fact, the long conflict between American PWs and their Vietnamese captors may be rightly recognized as a sort of war within a war. The PWs were not simply kept imprisoned because the North Vietnamese and their guerilla proxies needed to do something with them other than executing them or setting them free, nor were they subjected to abuse only out of malice (though the logistical realities and emotional hostilities inherent in warfare surely suggest that both of these motives played a part). Rather, captives and captors were in conflict over their own sets of mutually incompatible strategic priorities in the context of the broader war.

⁹⁰ To maintain consistency with source material, I have followed Rochester & Kiley’s usage of the abbreviation PW, rather than POW, to refer to prisoners of war.

In one of the most comprehensive and definitive treatments of the topic, historians Stuart Rochester and Frederick Kiley describe the context of the PW ordeal as follows:

As isolated and disconnected as their situation was, the majority of PWs never considered themselves divorced from the war effort. For them the prison camps became just another theater, albeit a unique one, with its own peculiar logistical and tactical demands. Their mission had changed, from one of active fighting to one of resistance and survival, but they still had a soldierly function to perform—to disrupt, to stymie, to exhaust the enemy, finally to defeat him, in this case on the battlefield of propaganda and psychological warfare.⁹¹

The basic conflict was simple: the jailors wanted to exploit their prisoners to obtain useful military intelligence and propaganda to shape public opinion for strategic benefit, while the prisoners wished to deny them those advantages to protect the safety of fellow servicemen and the strategic interests of their own government. The treatment of PWs and their resistance should be understood in the context of that struggle.

There are several other important background details that shaped the experience of the prisoners' resistance movement. The fact that the conflict between the United States and North Vietnam was not an officially declared war gave the prison camp officials cover to ignore typical legal protections for prisoners of war, while the shifting and uncertain course of U.S. involvement in the conflict fueled North Vietnamese continuing interest in manipulating the prisoners for strategic advantage as the situation

⁹¹ Rochester & Kiley, p.129

evolved over time.⁹² Meanwhile, the preceding Franco-Viet Minh War had given much of the North Vietnamese leadership and personnel a “rehearsal” for tactics of torture and indoctrination that they would eventually use against American prisoners, including specific attempts to impose competing leadership structures within the captive population to disrupt cohesion and discipline, undermining a stable understanding of group identity.⁹³ Even during this prelude, Viet Minh officials who later became part of (or forbears to) the North Vietnamese prison administration used lessons from the Chinese to develop “a Pavlovian system of reward and punishment, alternating carrot and stick to gain the desired confession or information.”⁹⁴ Thus, the question of incentives cut both ways for later American prisoners of war under North Vietnamese control. Just as they sought the use of various standards and tools to maintain and bolster one another’s conduct in support of both mutual survival and the broader war effort, their captors were using similar sets of tools to try to weaken, turn, and manipulate them and had extensive past experience to draw on. This raised the stakes considerably.

By August 11, 1964, the North Vietnamese had placed their first American PW, Everett Alvarez, Jr., in the Hoa Lo prison—the one which would come to bear the nickname “Hanoi Hilton.”⁹⁵ Although it was ultimately only one of several facilities in the North Vietnamese prison system, its name still stands out in the public consciousness as representative of the prisoner of war experience in Vietnam. Accounts of even the earliest prisoners indicated that “[almost] from the moment they were apprehended, even

⁹² Rochester & Kiley, pp.11-14

⁹³ Rochester & Kiley, p.14

⁹⁴ Rochester & Kiley, p.17

⁹⁵ Rochester & Kiley, p.88

on the trip to prison, the Americans were pressed for information, peppered with propaganda, and exploited at every turn for the consumption of foreign reporters and local crowds.”⁹⁶ This pattern of multipronged efforts at exploitation would continue throughout the captivity of the American PW population, relying on a range of tactics ranging from brutal coercion to transparent attempts at ideological manipulation.

A crucial component of North Vietnamese exploitation efforts was to rely on the sense of isolation of individual prisoners to manipulate them more easily, so one of the crucial moves by early prisoners was aimed at challenging North Vietnamese efforts to block them from communicating. In response, the PWs began using a tap code to communicate covertly, sharing information, coordinating resistance plans, and building camaraderie even as their captors worked to make them more pliable and to dissolve any sense of group identity through that imposed isolation.⁹⁷ The widespread use of covert communication methods, “both a tonic for morale and a source of vital news and information,”⁹⁸ proved to be perhaps the most vital component of the prisoners’ resistance movement throughout the war.

By remaining in communication, the American prisoners of war were able to maintain a degree of cohesion, attention to one another’s well-being and interests, and sense of shared commitment to an ongoing warfighting mission that could not have existed had their captors’ ongoing efforts at isolation been successful. In fact, the human aversion to loneliness and isolation meant that continued involvement in communication

⁹⁶ Rochester & Kiley, p.98

⁹⁷ Rochester & Kiley, pp.101-103

⁹⁸ Rochester & Kiley, p.106

with and recognition and respect by comrades in the communication network was itself a crucial incentive for continued adherence to the U.S. military's Code of Conduct (and later modified guidance provided by senior PWs) that gave them a push to resist under extraordinary pressures.

When Jeremiah Denton (who would serve as a key senior officer in the PW resistance as they sought to maintain functional chains of command within their varied and constantly shifting confinement arrangements) arrived at Hoa Lo, it was through this cover tap code system of communication that he was able to further reinforce group cohesion by disseminating key instructions: "Everyone would observe the Code of Conduct. Everyone would stick together when he ordered a resistance tactic, such as a hunger strike. Everyone would report key events in their experience [...]"⁹⁹ This helped organize tactics, but it also reinforced a sense of group identity for the prisoners as part of the U.S. Armed Forces with a shared mission, even when their captors sought to erase their understanding of themselves in those terms. By nourishing that sense of shared identity and purpose, communication itself became, in Denton's words, "the heart of our existence," worth risking torture and even death to maintain.¹⁰⁰

Unfortunately, the fact that their shared identity led the prisoners to prioritize adherence to the strict limitations on disclosure of information stipulated by the Code of Conduct meant that they faced a sense of emotional and moral catastrophe when increasingly brutal North Vietnamese torture eventually pushed them beyond the possible

⁹⁹ Rochester & Kiley, p.112

¹⁰⁰ Rochester & Kiley, p.120

limits of resistance.¹⁰¹ As the North Vietnamese escalated their efforts at coercion beyond human endurance, the typical reaction of early victims was one of “acute shame and guilt” rooted in the very sense of purpose-driven group identity that was so important to their survival and resistance.¹⁰²

However, it was the same covert communication network that held them together before that gave them an opportunity to continue to adapt and resist under these devastating pressures. The PWs had the challenge of defining what standards they would collectively adhere to when full adherence to the Code of Conduct was no longer possible. The senior officers among the PW population eventually developed a more pragmatic stance on concessions that aimed to maximize the effort required by the North Vietnamese and minimize their reward, so as to do their part for the war effort by constantly stretching the enemy thinner.¹⁰³ By reinforcing the shared sense of identity and mission within the group while acknowledging that strict adherence to the Code was no longer possible or a valid benchmark, they were able to heal some of the psychological and moral damage (if not the physical damage) imposed by North Vietnamese torture in order to right their collective course. This succeeded in motivating extreme degrees of resistance even in the case of some of the most egregious torture campaigns perpetrated during their captivity.¹⁰⁴

Experimental new attempts by the Vietnamese to calibrate their coercion and manipulation, like the so-called “Cuban Program” (so-called for the foreign specialists

¹⁰¹ Rochester & Kiley, p.144

¹⁰² Rochester & Kiley, p.164

¹⁰³ Rochester & Kiley, p.165

¹⁰⁴ Rochester & Kiley, p.210

behind it, who were thought to be Cubans by the PWs), upped the pressure even further over time as they sought to adapt to the PWs' resistance.¹⁰⁵ Meanwhile, the North Vietnamese were capable of holding tantalizing carrots out as much as sticks, including arranging early releases of PWs that strained the cohesiveness of the resistance movement and forced its leaders to outline standards of conduct to govern responses to offers of release.¹⁰⁶ Despite this, the PWs continued to resist North Vietnamese attempts to fragment or co-opt them. Even at the peaks of the torture and abuse, there were stories of PWs who were struggling themselves still straining to care tenderly around the clock for comrades who were in even worse condition.¹⁰⁷

In the words of Rochester and Kiley, "In almost all cases, a spirit of cooperation and solidarity, spurred by an understood commonality of interests, prevailed over personal ego and service parochialism"¹⁰⁸ all despite continuous efforts to undermine their organization and break them apart. It was precisely the use of a network to reinforce shared identity, to offer solidarity as an incentive, and to ingrain habits of effective resistance that made their extreme conditions manageable in ways that they never would have been for most prisoners in isolation. James Stockdale, who eventually became one of the most vocal high-ranking survivors of the camps, it was the resistance movement itself as an organization that provided a consistent moral compass to its members:

¹⁰⁵ Rochester & Kiley, .398

¹⁰⁶ Rochester & Kiley, p.366-371

¹⁰⁷ Rochester & Kiley, p.403

¹⁰⁸ Rochester & Kiley, p.139

Men of goodwill of the sort that inhabited those dungeons, faced with a torture system that made them write, recite, and do things they would never think of doing in a life of freedom, wanted above all else to enter a society of peers that had rules putting some criteria of right and wrong into their lives.¹⁰⁹

Ironically, the more relaxed treatment that emerged in the last years of the PWs' captivity posed its own threat to cohesion and resistance as the sense of urgency and severity of the situation faded somewhat under new circumstances.¹¹⁰ Even then, PW leaders managed to restore and maintain discipline and cohesion during the latter years by careful use of strengthened communication networks and the reinforcement of clear standards of conduct.¹¹¹ After years of opportunities for ambiguity and mistrust to slowly build up, one of the key watersheds came when one of the most senior officers among the PWs, who had been largely isolated, finally gained access to the communication chain and used his authority as a senior ranking officer to announce a general amnesty for past slips in behavior in his orders, which encouraged forgiveness of past grievances and the dropping of mutual suspicions.¹¹² The cohesiveness of the group and its role as an anchor for conduct was reinvigorated by such measures.

Ultimately, American involvement in the war ended and the surviving PWs were scheduled for release and repatriation, with the organization of the resistance movement having served as a crucial factor allowing many to do so with a sense of their honor as still intact. The end result of their struggle is perhaps most evocatively represented by the

¹⁰⁹ Rochester & Kiley, p.297

¹¹⁰ Rochester & Kiley, p.442, pp.497-498

¹¹¹ Rochester & Kiley, p.511

¹¹² Rochester & Kiley, p.534

following passage, recounting the point when a North Vietnamese camp official (nicknamed “Dog” by the PWs) officially announced the release of prisoners that had been negotiated with the United States:

As Dog dismissed them with the admonition to continue to obey regulations and “show good attitudes” right up to release, they remained impassive while Colonel Risner “did a smart about-face with all the dignity and military bearing within him.” As Risner barked, “Fourth Allied POW Wing, Atten-hut!” and almost 400 men snapped to attention, “the thud of eight hundred rubber-tire sandals coming together smartly was awesome....” And when the squadron commanders returned Risner’s salute and in unison dismissed their units with a “Squadron, dis...missed!,” the open display at last of their military organization “sounded damned good.”¹¹³

Though the prisoners’ resistance movement should be understood as a success, it is also important to recognize certain additional lessons from their experiences with torture and indoctrination and their resistance to their captors. The first lesson, something of a caveat, is that any behavioral habituation has its limits—even extensive military training and experience reinforcing adherence to the Code of Conduct couldn’t prove to be an infinite reserve of behavioral decisiveness when exposed to brutal tortures that produced an unending supply of excruciating pain and threatened permanent physical or psychological disfigurement. The PWs had to recover and adapt from these experiences, rather than count on never breaking at all. The second lesson is that the

¹¹³ Rochester & Kiley, p.572

group identity, cohesion, and shared sense of purpose provide a crucial context for response to incentives—indeed, the maintenance of a sense of shared identity and purpose can actually be a tangible incentive that meets core human needs and motivates behavior in powerful ways.

Ultimately, to the end of their captivity, the American prisoners of war in North Vietnam maintained their cohesion and discipline to a remarkable degree while succeeding admirably in their struggle to avoid becoming mere props of their captors' psychological warfare campaign. Guided by capable leadership within their ranks, they maintain a network of communication and mutual support that steeled their resolve and stood up to North Vietnamese efforts to break them or goad them into treason. Above all, perhaps the deepest lessons we can learn from their story in this case are also twofold: that the relationship between habituation, group identity, and incentives can operate at an even more subtle level than at first expected, and that these mechanisms can be used in a positive way to build and bolster heroic and admirable traits in even the darkest of circumstances.

Concluding Lessons and Reflections

I will now take stock and tie together some of the implications of these observations. Both the prior theory and research explored in the first main part of this thesis and the historical case studies considered in the second part suggest that habituation, concepts of group identity, and extrinsic incentives play a key role in shaping human moral behavior in group settings in ways that are particularly important for understanding how human behavior is shaped under conflict.

In light of a range of classical analysis and more recent empirical evidence, there are certain key takeaways regarding these mechanisms in general. Repetition of behavior does seem to create a bias towards repeating that behavior in what an individual perceives as similar situations, by shaping both conscious perceptions and unconscious reactions. The way that a person's own identity and that of another person are defined in group terms also seems to shape the degree to which the former recognizes and responds to the interests of the latter, while the degree of centrality of their understanding of their moral values to their sense of identity seems to influence the scope of an individual's moral radar in settings of conflict. Meanwhile, clear incentive structures seem to be capable of

facilitating desired behaviors and habits when carefully designed but at risk of promoting negative unintended reactions if they signal conflicting information or values.

When viewed in the context of a range of historical case studies, these underlying mechanisms of moral and organizational psychology seem to hold their relevance across different kinds of organizations and different forms of conflict or competition. That they appear to be useful tools to make sense of moral behavior in settings of commercial competition, political factionalism, and wartime alike suggests that the findings on these mechanisms are well supported and that it's reasonable to expect them to play a consistent role in shaping moral behavior across a wide range of organizational conflicts in the future. Clearly, they merit close attention.

While the historical cases covered in the prior part of this thesis have highlighted the influence of habituation, identity, and incentives across different organizational contexts, they have also provided a basis for something more. Having seen these mechanisms in practice, we can begin to derive some practical lessons for how to shape organizations to be more morally resilient, steering their members in mutually beneficial rather than destructive directions. One of the things that becomes clear in light of the case studies is how consistent and multifaceted the relationships between the three mechanisms of moral development explored in this thesis turn out to be in practice. As we've seen, incentives can both build and undermine habits, while healthy concepts of group identity are both a motivating incentive in their own right and something that has to be actively cultivated to encourage individuals to tune their 'moral radars' effectively.

The “stickiness” of healthy or toxic moral behavior is a product of these kinds of interaction between the three mechanisms.

This suggests that if we hope to steer an organization and its members in a more morally resilient direction, we should focus on areas that seem to target the relationships between these key mechanisms of moral development. Careful attention to any one of them in isolation can only go so far. As an example of how this approach might help to frame the issue, consider the idea of an organizational mission as a lynchpin for a discussion of some of the enduring lessons that can be drawn from the analysis so far.

This idea of a goal, mission, or purpose as a lynchpin for evaluating ethical problems is hardly a new fad peddled by buzzword-bearing management gurus and popularizing “thought leaders.” In fact, it is exactly how Aristotle himself organized his approach to ethics. Aristotle’s evaluation of virtues, vices, and character development was anchored in a serious attempt to identify the goals or purposes of human life, rooted in turn in an understanding of human nature.¹¹⁴ One needn’t accept Aristotle’s view of human nature or the good life to gain some clarity from this sort of approach.

If an organization’s purpose or mission is clearly and appropriately¹¹⁵ defined, it can provide an anchor for a better understanding of what habits, ideas of group identity, and incentives an organization should seek and of whether its existing practices are

¹¹⁴ As discussed extensively in Book I of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

¹¹⁵ The question of appropriateness, of course, is one open to a whole new host of debates in areas such as business ethics, just war theory, and political philosophy that are beyond the scope of this project. For now, I will play the agnostic on what the purposes of any particular organization should be and stick to the question of how its avowed purpose can serve as a focal point to tie together the mechanisms of moral and organizational psychology discussed so far.

consistent with that. Is the organization's compensation structure set up in a way that reinforces habits conducive to its mission? Do members of the organization face messages that reinforce an understanding of themselves as part of a bigger team organized around that mission, or ones that encourage them to think of themselves first and foremost as members of smaller groups that may have goals in conflict with that mission (or as individual mercenaries with no stake in a shared mission or goal in the first place). Of course, the pressures of conflict more narrowly constrain the directions group identity and incentives tend to be framed and to create heightened stakes and time pressures that accelerate the process of habituation, which suggests that these kinds of issues should be considered early and often. Attempting to course correct a morally toxic organizational environment after conditions are already reaching extremes will often turn out to be too little, too late.

The ubiquitous nature of inter-group conflict as a feature of human life means that no one with leadership responsibilities or interests in ethics can afford to avoid attending to these issues. As it stands, there can't help but be a great deal of judgement involved in figuring out how to effectively apply an understanding of habituation, the moral psychology of group identity, or the moral impact of extrinsic incentives in any particular organizational setting, but such an understanding provides some of the basic tools needed to do so. For those interested in further research to clarify these issues, there are several apparent opportunities to extend this discussion by exploring issues like the role of leadership, organizational structure, and ritualized social behavior in steering how these mechanisms of moral character development play out. Hopefully, this project will have

served as the basis for a better understanding of how these aspects of applied ethics and organizational psychology fit into our shared moral lives. The importance of sound moral character for individual flourishing, organizational success, and broader social health will not be diminishing any time soon, so it behooves us all to consider issues like this more carefully.

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Biography

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