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Personality and personal control

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This much is beyond contention: in 1968, an extraordinary psychologist, Walter Mischel, published an extraordinary book, *Personality and Assessment*, the 40th anniversary of which we celebrate here. Of course, the book itself engendered decades of ebullient dispute; one factor elevating the stakes in the “person–situation debate” is that capitulation to the “situationist” perspective (Ross & Nisbett, 1991) appears to compel us “beyond freedom and dignity.” Kihlstrom (2008) laments a “dark side” of social psychology, clouded by a “long-standing” alliance with behaviorism, an impression that social psychologists have not always discouraged: Bargh and Ferguson (2000) contend that social and cognitive psychologists have produced “rather obvious evidence that even controlled mental processes are themselves controlled and determined” (p. 939). As a result, the person–situation debate sometimes seems a proxy war for another even more ancient conflict: philosophy’s free will and determinism controversy (Doris, 2002, in preparation).

Many participants in the person–situation debate appear to assume, more or less explicitly, that personality influences entail freedom and responsibility, and situational influences entail determinism and exculpation (Mischel, 1997; Zimbardo, 2004). This dichotomy is misleading; we should be wary of equating *dispositional influences* on behavior with *personal control* of behavior. As research on implicit personality shows, many important aspects of personality are only imperfectly captured

by explicit self-reports (e.g., Back, Schmukle, & Egloff, submitted for publication), suggesting that their influence on behavior may proceed outside of conscious awareness (e.g., Vazire & Funder, 2006). Indeed, recent research has shown that some facets of personality may be more accessible to others than to the self. In particular, informant ratings of how a person typically behaves are at about as accurate as self-ratings (Kolar, Funder, & Colvin, 1996) and, more importantly, informants’ ratings capture some of the variance in behavior that is not captured by self-ratings (Vazire, 2006; Vazire & Mehl, 2008). Thus, one factor that is frequently cited as an impediment to personal control, lack of conscious awareness (e.g., Wegner, 2005), may obtain as much for personal variables as for situational variables. Failures of self-awareness may accrue to personality as much as to situations, and either sort of ignorance may be implicated in breakdowns of self-control. In short, personality may pose no less of a threat to free will than do situations.

Therefore, understanding personal control requires that we eschew diametric opposition of person and situation; indeed, if personal control is possible, it is made possible only by recruiting both personal and situational resources. As Mischel (1997) remarked of his classic delay-of-gratification studies, “The fact that these distinctively human efforts also require the strategic utilization and support of situations undermines neither the role of the person nor of the situation, but requires attention to their interplay [...]” (p. 184). How exactly person and situation combine to effect the sort of personal control that comprises the ethical singularity of the human organism is not yet completely understood, but it is clear that the past 40 years of research and debate have brought us closer to understanding it.

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