Ethical and Moral Leadership in the Military

Activity Statement:
- View the movie *Saving Private Ryan* and discuss the importance of morals and ethics for military leaders.

Affective Lesson Objective:
- Value the importance of morals and ethics for military leaders.

Affective Samples of Behavior:
- Explain how an officer's responsibilities establish their priorities for making decisions.

- Defend why unlawful orders must be disobeyed.

- Defend the need to recognize and ignore illegal/immoral orders.

- Describe the ethical dilemmas imposed during war/conflict.

- Describe the ethical issues surrounding killing prisoners of war/ enemies.

- Actively participate in classroom discussion regarding ethical considerations in war.

ETHICS THEORY FOR THE MILITARY PROFESSIONAL

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The United States is increasingly concerned with ethics. More professors are teaching courses in ethics and more students are studying ethics than ever before. Incidents in Vietnam and Washington have reminded us that people in all walks of life are vulnerable to doing what is wrong. Professional groups—lawyers, doctors, teachers, engineers, business managers, and others—are structuring codes of ethics for their members. Throughout the past decade, military professionals at the service academies and educational centers have shown increasing interest in the study of ethical principles. Most officer training schools now include at least an elective on professional ethics, in which officers are encouraged to construct codes of ethics for the military service. Perhaps we are realizing that right and wrong may differ from common practice, majority opinion, or what the system will tolerate. Perhaps we as a nation are beginning to see the fallacies in the ethical relativism of "doing your own thing." We may even be ready to acknowledge the complexity of ethical decision making and move beyond the dominating principle of personal or public happiness. Some of us are ready to assert that, in addition to such preeminent values as beneficence and justice, ethical behavior also involves past commitments, present relationships, and future hopes.

This article will probe some of the complexities of acting ethically within the military system. I propose to direct your thinking in three ways: (1) to identify the fundamental pressures that are upon us all, that is, the ethical bases or theories to which we are responsive; (2) to highlight the importance of certain areas where ethical problems abound; and (3) to reaffirm some basic principles to guide us.

THE COMPLEX ETHICAL PRESSURES

The complex ethical pressures upon the military professional are the rules, goals, and situations that provide the context and criteria for determining what is right and wrong, good and bad. The moment of decision making or action taking for the military professional is crowded with signals emanating from rule-oriented obligations, goal oriented aspirations, and situation-oriented demands. Each individual is responsible for juggling the moral claims from these sources and for determining which signals merit priority.

Rule-Oriented Obligations

Rules most commonly provide the primary criteria for ethical judgments. The questions "What ought I to do?" and "What is right for me to do?" reflect not only a sense of obligation but also an awareness that a standard exists for establishing what is obligatory and what is right. Originally, these were religious questions referring to the will of God. They now have become questions for the citizen and military professional.

Military personnel, more than most citizens, live under a sense of obligation, aligned with a strong base of order, obedience, and discipline. We have taken oaths admitting us into the ranks of the military. As officers we affirmed a commissioning vow. We swore to "support and defend the Constitution of the United States."

As citizens we are also obligated to honor constitutional justice, civil law, and the social and ethnic mores of our communities. The primary ethical pressures upon us, however, are such formal mandates as telling the truth, keeping promises, respecting property, and preserving life. These constitutive or universal norms are the mortar without which social institutions would crumble. While such norms need not be regarded as absolute moral restrictions, the burden of proof is always upon those who would take exception to them.

Rule-oriented living has a long history in Western religions. The orthodox Jew, by the beginning of the Christian era, lived under an elaborate complex of conditioned and unconditional laws. The covenantal requirements of Mosaic Law consisted of 613 injunctions, 365 "thou shalt not" prohibitions and 248 "thou shalt" obligations. Far from burdensome, the Law clearly defined what God would have the believer do and not do; it provided the moral framework for life.

For the Christian, law has been redefined as living in an obedient relationship with God through heeding the teachings of Jesus. The Sermon on the Mount, the ethical catechism of the early Church, and the Thomistic understanding of moral law have provided a deontological* interpretation of morality. The pressure upon the Christian is not to be conformed to this world but to be transformed in order to prove what is the good and acceptable and perfect will of God (Romans 12:2).

*As relating to the ethics of duty or moral obligations.

Today the followers of Islam are more rigidly fundamental than either Jews or Christians in their understanding of morality as obedience to a set code or to religious leadership. Islam means "to submit," and a Muslim is "one who has submitted." The Koran, the recited teachings of Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam defines the essential duties decreed by Allah and binds the believer to loyal subjection.

The rule-oriented approach to ethical theory establishes in given standards the criteria for determining right and wrong. Dilemmas exist when two or more obligations conflict. One must sometimes choose between what one believes God commands and what the state requires, between what a superior officer orders and what regulations prescribe, or between what law exacts and what personal conscience dictates. The philosopher Immanuel Kant

is the premier exponent of a method for determining fundamental obligations. For Kant the supreme principle of morality is good will, and "the first proposition of morality is that to have moral worth an action must be done from duty,"[1] irrespective of consequences. The subject maxim by which duty is determined is the categorical imperative, that which is binding without exception. Two expressions of the categorical imperative are especially meaningful. The first is: "I should never act in such a way that I could not also will that my maxim should be a universal law."[2] For example, should I submit false reports—whether of body counts, flying hours, or materiel readiness—when I perceive my best interest lies in false reporting? No, for this maxim cannot be universalized without destroying the maxim by rendering all reporting invalid. A second valuable expression of the categorical imperative is: "Act so that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of another, always as an end and never as a means only."[3] (We will return to this self-explanatory binding rule later.) Kant did not discuss what one should do when categorical imperatives conflict.

Goal-Oriented Aspirations

In addition to citing rules, we determine which decisions and actions are ethical by referring to goals. The previous question was "What ought I to do?" The questions here are "What is good?" or "What goal should I seek?" The criteria for determining right and wrong are no longer historical standards but future consequences. The good decision or action is measured by its ability or promise to attain a desired goal. Aristotle defined the good all men seek as happiness.[4] Jeremy Bentham elaborated this happiness principle of ethics as the principle of utility, "that principle which states the greatest happiness of all those whose interest is in question, as being the right, proper, and only right and proper and universally desirable, end of human action."[5] In the hands of John Stuart Mill, the greatest happiness principle was enlarged to include the general good of all: "the happiness which forms the utilitarian standard of what is right in conduct, is not the agent's own happiness, but that of all concerned."[6] Popularly stated, this goal is "the greatest good for the greatest number."

For the military professional, goal-oriented aspirations are a combination of the public good and personal happiness. On the public side is an array of national goals and military objectives. Our aim is to assure the security of the United States, defend against aggression, and aid our allies. The more immediate objective is accomplishing the mission. This may range from training personnel and maintaining weapon systems to delivering personnel and supplies, striking targets, or defeating enemy forces. On the personal side, we want job satisfaction, recognition, promotion, financial security, high OER/APR ratings, a happy home, and an overall sense of fulfillment in life.

I have identified the ethical theories by which we judge right and wrong as pressures because the signals we get from these theories are frequently in tension. Our goals are often at odds with each other. Conflict between goals and rules, moreover, is also common. This confusion in life may be likened to a football game. While ultimately the goal is to score points, immediate choices have to be made among short-yardage plays, long-yardage plays, passing, running, kicking, field goal, or touchdown efforts. Whatever

the decision, all actions are governed by set rules and called plays. If the ball is advanced but the rules violated, the team can be penalized valuable yards. If the signals are ignored, a broken play and lost yardage may result. Sometimes when the quarterback sees that the play called in the huddle will not work, he resorts to calling an "audible;" that is, he adjusts to an unexpected defensive alignment. The audible introduces us to a third type of ethical judgment, the situation-oriented decision.

Situation-Oriented Decision

In the early 1960s a popular way of making moral decisions received new definition: situation ethics or the new morality. Both leading proponents, Joseph Fletcher and John A. T. Robinson, were churchmen. The significant questions they asked were "What is appropriate to the situation?" or "What is fitting?" In situation ethics the particular circumstances of a situation provide the criteria for determining right and wrong. Here, each situation is unique, without precedent. Judgments must be relative to the circumstances; the circumstances determine what actions should be taken. Without the binding and unexceptionable absolute of love, situation ethics would have mirrored the permissive society in which it emerged. Of rule-oriented judgments, Fletcher said, "Situation ethics keeps principles sternly in their place, in their role of advisers without veto power."[7]

A major limitation of situation ethics is its focus on the unusual, once-in-a-lifetime circumstance. It is not geared to day-by-day living; it provides no game plan. The situations in which we must make ethical decisions, after all, have a sameness about them to which rules or goals do apply. Any realistic person knows that under certain conditions we must act situationally. When shot down behind enemy lines, we know we will lie or steal to survive and return to friendly forces. This admission, however, does not mean that ethical theory should tolerate lying or stealing or should make easy my evasion of the formal mandates on which civilization is structured. While none would fault the importance situationists place on acting in a loving manner, love is a motive, an attitude; love is not a program with content. Situation ethics resists systematization; it can never be normative. Without appropriate checks and balances, situation ethics could lead to ethical anarchy. Military professionals do occasionally find themselves in circumstances where regulations and mission objectives fail to provide sufficient guidelines. In those rare instances the aptitude for innovative leadership can be a virtue.

When followed inflexibly, any of the three approaches to understanding the bases for our ethical judgments can result in moral aberration: exclusive attention to rules can result in legalism; rigid adherence to Mill's utilitarian goal of the greatest good for the greatest number can promote a tyranny of the majority; and preeminent attention to situations can result in loss of directives and moral chaos.

THE PREDOMINANT ETHICAL PROBLEMS

Studying ethics theories without relating them to the predominant ethical problems of military professionals would be merely an intellectual exercise. These theories are tools to help us think more clearly about our decisions and actions. Three overlapping areas in which our theories may be applied to problems are people, integrity, and career.

People

Human needs are a military commander's prevailing problem. I asked a newly appointed group commander what he considered the hardest part of his responsibility. Without hesitation he replied, "Making people decisions is the most difficult part of being a commander." He was rapidly discovering the complexities of leading people. People have needs, they have frailties, and they have great potential. People need consideration, recognition, stroking, and encouragement.

In 1976 as a group project, students of the Air Command and Staff College prepared Guidelines for Command: A Handbook on the Management of People for Air Force Commanders and Supervisors. Chapter 2 is entitled "Solving Problems Involving People." This chapter lists 57 entries on problem situations from AWOL to weight control. It makes no mention of such human problems as abortion, incest, homosexuality, sexual deviance, gambling, marital problems, moral problems, religious problems—the kinds of problems chaplains confront on a regular basis. These are problems people have which a commander cannot ignore. A recurring complaint included in the 1970 Army War College's Study on Military Professionalism is this: "Across the board the Officer Corps is lacking in their responsibility of looking out for the welfare of subordinates."

Being a commander is working with people. The military is people. America is people. The military exists to serve the people of America. However it may have been understood in the past, military leadership is now measured by management and motivational skills. Leadership is more than giving orders; anyone can give orders. The skilled leader knows how to motivate the people on whom he depends to accomplish the mission. People are the focus of every command and the heart of every mission.

Integrity

The second major ethical concern for military professionals is probably integrity. I asked the commander of the North Carolina Air National Guard what he considered to be the greatest ethical problem in the Air Force; he answered: "Integrity, especially in reporting." The Army War College's Study on Military Professionalism (1970) supports this perception. Integrity is a major concern of that study. Typical of the remarks from questionnaires were these:

CPT: …reluctance of middle officers to render reports reflecting the true materiel readiness of their unit. Because they and their raters hold their leadership positions for such short periods, they feel that even one poor report will reflect harshly upon their abilities.

MAJ: I am concerned with honesty—trust—and administrative competence within the Officer Corps. …Commander influence impairs calling a "spade a spade."

MAJ: The system forces unethical reporting and practices and punishes variation.

This last remark is especially significant, for it places the blame on the system. The system does create pressure, and it is certainly not errorless. Integrity, however, is a human concern; people operate, perpetuate, and validate any system. Responsibility for moral integrity cannot be shifted. Some systems may make honesty more difficult than others, but the system only reveals what an individual's values really are. Ethically alert military personnel will always be disturbed by the variances between the ideal standards proclaimed by the services and the actual practices that overtly deviate from those standards. At a meeting of the Inter-University Seminar on Armed Forces and Society meeting at Maxwell Air Force Base in October 1976, a graduate of the Air Force Academy voiced his great disillusionment after only four months at his first assignment. The discrepancies between the ideals espoused by the USAF Academy and the operative standards of an Air Force base were leading him to consider resigning his commission.

Career

Integrally related to the problem of integrity is the problem of placing career before honor. The military professional should be concerned about his or her career. Achievement ranks high in the officer's code of values. A fine line, however, separates valid concern of one's success in the military from excessive, unhealthy careerism. Crossing this fine line is a problem not unique to the military. John Dean's Blind Ambition and John Ehrlichman's Washington Behind Closed Doors confirm the prevalence of excessive careerism. Whatever the profession, personal ambition can cloud ethical judgment and make fools of us all. In the military, preoccupation with career can lead us to be yes-men for the commander instead of constructive critics. It can lead us to cover up for the commander. It can lead us to keep unwelcome reports from him. It can lead us to cover for ourselves in our effort to look good at all costs. It can lead us to do what we know is morally wrong. As one officer in the Study on Military Professionalism observed: "It takes a great deal of personal courage to say 'the screw-up occurred here' rather than passing the blame to the lower level."

The September 1977 issue of Human Behavior magazine reported the results of a survey of 173 American generals conducted by Brig Gen Douglas Kinnard (U.S. Army, retired). All the generals had served in Vietnam between 1965 and 1972. This article was summarized by the Washington Post and reprinted in local newspapers. The summary reads:

> Kinnard found an uneasiness among generals over handling of the war. More than half, for example, felt search and destroy missions at the center of the American strategy should have been better executed. Asked why generals had not spoken out during the war, Kinnard, now a political science professor at the University of Vermont, said, "The only thing I can think of is careerism."[8]

Gen George C. Marshall once observed that decisions requiring moral courage are much harder to make than decisions pertaining to physical courage. The reason? "This is when you lay your career, perhaps your commission on the line." Establishing priorities between goal-oriented career aspirations and rule-oriented obligations may be the most difficult moral choices officers face.

THE ABIDING ETHICAL PRINCIPLES

Military professionals can never stray from the time honored principles of "Duty, Honor, Country" and remain true to their calling. The three ethic theories outlined—rule-oriented obligations, goal-oriented aspirations, and situation-oriented decisions—are useful in the service of "Duty, Honor, Country." These theories together with the three abiding principles can be applied to the difficult problems suggested under the subtopics of people, integrity, and career.

Duty: Conduct and Person-Oriented Leadership

The military services are just that—services. They exist to defend and support human values. The key personnel in the military for promoting these services are the military professionals. The duty of the military professional is to conduct person-oriented leadership, leadership consistent with the fundamental commitments of this nation.

Most military professionals are aware that those they seek to lead are people first and soldiers, sailors, or airmen second. They have entered the military with unique personalities and individual sets of motivations, interests, attitudes, and values. They share basic needs for survival, belonging, esteem, and self-realization. Each of these needs must be met in turn for the next to become operative. Although servicemen wear uniforms, they also participate in an intricate network of civilian relationships. They have wives, children, husbands, parents, hopes, fears, dreams, religious ideals, and names. The successful leader remembers that he or she is dealing with whole beings, people who are infinitely more than mechanics, clerks, typists, technicians, artillerymen, or pilots.

In our desire to achieve our military missions successfully, we are sometimes tempted to depersonalize those with whom we work along with those against whom we fight. The latter attitude is especially prevalent. We reduce the enemy to objects; we take away their names and nationalities and call them "Huns" or "Gooks" or simply "little yellow bastards." We try to protect our own self-image by pretending that the enemy we are killing is less than a human being with a name and with a family. Similarly but more subtly, we depersonalize our associates in the military when we treat them as hands or troops who are there to do our bidding or to advance our careers. Person-oriented leaders respect the personhood of each individual in the command, they establish I-Thou rather than I-It relationships. Kant's dictum applies: people are ends in themselves, never means. The real obscenity in the world is objectifying people, treating them as things rather than as persons. I like the counsel of a staff officer associate. He advised me as follows: "I have never gone wrong by treating those under me as people and respecting them as such."

Honor: Exemplify Moral Integrity

Any code of ethics devised for military professionals undoubtedly will contain articles that emphasize the importance of professional and personal integrity and that recognize the professional officer's responsibility to be an example of integrity for subordinates. The current chief of Army chaplains, writing for Parameters some years ago, reported on a study of ethics among businessmen conducted by Harvard Business Review. The study revealed a double-edged situation: some businessmen felt pressured to compromise their integrity in order to please their superiors, others felt pressured by bosses who expected integrity. The study concluded: "If you want to act ethically, find an ethical boss."[9] The lesson for the military is: If you want integrity to prevail in the military, act ethically yourself and expect ethical actions from your subordinates.

Integrity, like person-oriented leadership, is a whole-person concept. A former chief of Air Force chaplains reminds us:

Integrity is not just truth telling, or kindness, or justice, or reliability. Integrity is the state of my whole life, the total quality of my character, and it is witnessed by the moral soundness of my response in every life situation.[10]

Integrity is not something that can be turned on and off. It reflects the value systems in which our lives are grounded. The recent series of articles on integrity in TIG Brief has purposefully sought to generate discussion and thought about integrity throughout the military. The remarks by Gen Bryce Poe II, commander, Air Force Logistics Command, merit particular attention. He said:

We must remember the complete meaning of "integrity," not just honesty but also sincerity and candor. Our code of behavior must not tolerate shallowness, expediency, or deception. This rigidity and uncompromising adherence to standards does not in the least mean that we must be self-righteous or lack compassion. On the contrary, individuals who recognize that people make mistakes, even when they are doing their level-best, not only display integrity they reinforce that of their subordinates.

In the last analysis, integrity is an entirely personal thing. Important to anyone, it is absolutely vital to the military professional who has responsibility for human life and public property. As General Douglas Macarthur once said, our code "embraces the highest moral laws and will stand the test of any ethics or philosophies ever promulgated for the uplift of mankind. Its requirements are for the things that are right, and its restraints are from the things that are wrong." Whether we label that code, "Duty, Honor, Country," or simply, "Integrity"—the requirement is the same.[11]

Few officers have tried so vigorously to inculcate an appreciation of integrity among those for whom they had responsibility as Adm James B. Stockdale. While president of the Naval War College, he inaugurated a course on the "Foundations of Moral Obligation." His course was built on principles that became profoundly meaningful for him during 2,714 days of imprisonment and torture in Hanoi's Hoax Lo prison. He claims that he was sustained as a prisoner of war (POW) more from what he had learned in philosophy than from what he had read in survival manuals. He knew that man needs more than buzzwords and acronyms; he needs the enduring principles articulated by mankind's most thoughtful spirits. His students read from Job, Epictetus, Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Mill, Emerson, Dostoevski, and the existentialists. He said:

I think this is the only way to teach a sophisticated audience "duty, honor, country." I'm not trying to make fundamentalists out of them. I'm not trying to make warmongers out of them. I'm trying to make more self-confident leaders who will realize half of what comes into their baskets is crap and that they should worry about things that are important.[12]

Admiral Stockdale would have us regain our moral bearings and rediscover the power and the courage available when we have committed ourselves to fundamental integrity.

Country: Initiate Moral Concern in America

The moral quakes of Hiroshima, My Lai, and Watergate have fractured the confidence of many in America's current commitment to honor, integrity, and high humanitarian ideals. Those events have changed the way Americans think about themselves: they have produced a tidal wave of moral uncertainty, self-doubt, alienation, and rebellion. Just as thinking well of self is vital for personal mental health, so apparently must a nation have a good self-image for its corporate well-being. One of the great national tasks for the 1980s, therefore, is the recapturing of a spirit of moral integrity in America. Military professionals with their avowed commitments and goals occupy a favorable position in the United States. They can lead the way. They can become the catalysts who initiate throughout society a reawakening of integrity and moral awareness.

Through philosophy and ethics, is it possible for the military—and through the military for the nation—to regain its moral concern and its concomitant moral self-confidence? Wilson Carey McWilliams has projected this possibility. In *Military Honor After My Lai*, he tentatively conjectures that "perhaps the Army may, in its own interest, help free civilian America to rediscover its own honor."[13] He implies that the Army can first find its own moral compass. McWilliams and Sir Thomas More have similar hopes. Long before he

was made Henry VIII's Lord Chancellor, More debated whether moral philosophy had any place "in the council of princes." His conclusion was yes, but only subtly and obliquely. "You must strive," he wrote, "to guide policy indirectly, so that you make the best of things, and what you cannot turn to good, you can at least make less bad. For it is impossible to do all things well unless all men are good, and this I do not expect to see for a long time."[14]

The wisdom of More has supplied a necessary clue to the reality of the human situation. Military professionals can pioneer a return to fundamental integrity, though not by bold frontal attacks. They must start with themselves as individuals who, like Thomas More, commit themselves to first principles and to selfless goals. They must be courageous people who place "Duty, Honor, Country" ahead of careers, people who say the cover-ups stop here. The exploitation and objectifying of people can stop if leaders in sensitive positions consistently treat people as ends, never as means to ends; consistently perceive enemies, peers, subordinates, and superiors as persons of great value. Dishonesty, misrepresentation, and false reporting can only be reversed if key professionals insist on honor and exemplify integrity. Selfish careerism that exalts personal advantage above the well-being of others and of the whole can only be reduced if commanders stop rewarding self-aggrandizement and become models themselves of responsible service. Reshaping the moral climate within the military and the nation needs only a few dedicated professionals to make a beginning. Then, beyond the level of individual example, must come unit example—a squadron, a company, a battalion, a group, a base, a post, a division, a major command, a service. To that noble end studies of ethics in the military are committed.

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Notes

1. Immanuel Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Lewis W. Beck (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1959), 16.
2. Ibid., 18.
3. Ibid., 47.
4. Aristotle, *Nicomachaen Ethics*, trans. Martin Ostwald (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1962), bk. 1, pt. 4.
5. Jeremy Bentham, "An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation," in *The English Philosophers from Bacon to Mill*, ed. Edwin A. Burt (New York: Modern Library, 1939), 791.

6. John Stuart Mill, "Utilitarianism," in English Philosophers, 908.
7. Joseph Fletcher, *Situation Ethics: The New Morality* (Philadelphia: Westminister Press, 1966), 55.
8. Charlotte Observer, 21 August 1977, sec. A, 22.
9. Kermit D. Johnson, Chaplain (Col), USA, "Ethical Issues of Military Leadership," Parameters 4, no. 2 (1974): 38.
10. Henry J. Meade, Chaplain (Maj Gen), USAF, "Commitment to Integrity," *Air University Review* 28, no. 3 (March–April 1977): 88.
11. Bryce Poe II, General, USAF, "Integrity," *TIG Brief 20* (October 1978): 2.
12. Charlotte Observer, 16 April 1978, sec. A, 2.
13. Wilson C. McWilliams, *Military Honor After My Lai* (New York: Council on Religion and International Affairs, 1972), 32.
14. Thomas More, *Utopia*, ed. H. V. Ogden (Arlington Heights, Ill.: AHM Publishing Corp., 1965), 23.