

file 62A6
C-1000

Officership and Moral Virtue:
A Philosophical Perspective on the Question,
"How Shall We Incorporate Ethics Instruction
in Military Education at All Level?"

By

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Washington, D.C.

December 1986

The question "How shall we incorporate ethics instruction in military education at all levels?" is significant.¹ It not only reflects a healthy concern that those in the military profession conduct themselves ethically, but also seeks a solution to the difficulties inherent in the military profession, difficulties which I will address later.

Unfortunately, the question presupposes that everyone knows what ethical conduct is and why it is important to the military professional. The fact is, however, that even though we all have some notion about what constitutes genuine ethical behavior, there is bound to be some disagreement over the precise content and purpose of such instruction. This is not unexpected for such differences have spanned the centuries from Socrates through more recent moral philosophers such as John Rawls. But if we are to make genuine progress, we must be clear about what we are endeavoring to teach and why. For as Aristotle pointed out in his moral treatise The Nicomachean Ethics, "A good beginning is more than half of the whole inquiry, and once established clears up many difficulties."²

It is not my intent to answer the question above; my intent is to put this question into perspective because it seems to me that proper answers usually depend on an appreciation of the context. In putting the question into perspective, I hope to point the way toward its solution. I will do this by discussing two aspects: first, the reason ethics is important to military professionals and secondly,

the environment in which military professionals operate.

The first thing one should be clear about is why military professionals should take the trouble to teach ethics. This question is, given our nation's pragmatic tradition, a natural one to ask. The answer which immediately suggests itself for those in uniform has to do with the nature of service itself. The military profession is dedicated to service. Service, in the military sense, implies virtue based on sacrifice and selflessness. Virtue, of course, entails high moral standards.

Some will argue that service no longer implies sacrifice or selflessness, that the all-volunteer force makes the military profession just another occupation. It takes more than higher pay to change the nature of the military profession, however. The threat of war, frequent family separations, continuous moves, and the ever constant demand for readiness make service more than just another job. Certainly, some servicemen sacrifice more than others but that has always been true.

There is another reason for the servicemen's particular interest in ethics; for they recognize that one who would lie, cheat, or steal is untrustworthy. Such a person is not oriented to service but to self. It is, perhaps, this knowledge that led General P. X. Kelley, Commandant of the Marine Corps, to comment that there is more to being a good Marine than just being good at one's job.

It is certainly true that military professionals ~~all~~ want

to go to war, if they must go, with someone who is technically proficient. But technical proficiency is not, in itself, enough. They want to know that the person beside them has courage. If he is courageous they know they will be able to depend on him. Courage, of course, implies discipline.

Moral fault, on the other hand, implies the opposite. A person lies, for instance, because he does not have the discipline to face undesirable consequences or circumstances. He would cheat or steal for much the same reason. Now the very word 'undisciplined,' evokes strong, negative reactions from seasoned military professionals because discipline is the cornerstone of combat effectiveness and the sine qua non of success in battle. It is discipline that enables servicemen to achieve the difficult ends they often seek. Discipline also allows them to continue the struggle through what Clausewitz rightly called the friction and the fog of war. It takes great personal discipline to stand and fight one's enemy. And it is personal discipline that provides the foundation for unit discipline.

Discipline is inherent in the moral virtues. Aristotle believed that one can achieve moral discipline by habituating oneself to it. Again, in his moral treatise, he writes that It is by our actual conduct in our intercourse with other men that we become just or unjust, and it is by our conduct in dangerous situations, accustoming ourselves there to feel fear or confidence, that we become cowardly or brave. So, too, with our appetites and angry impulses: it is by behaving in one way or another on the appropriate occasions that we become either temperate and gentle or profligate and irascible. In short, a particular kind of 'moral disposition' (hexis) is produced by a corresponding kind of

activities. 3

If he is right, as I believe he is, then military professionals must prepare for the demands of war, not just physically but mentally. This is easier to understand once one appreciates that while we often talk of "physical courage" it is simply a manner of speaking. Intellect and will, not physical strength, conditioning, or toughness, determine whether one will stand firm in a struggle. This does not imply that physical conditioning is not important. Clearly, one must be in peak physical condition to endure the hardships of battle. It does imply, however, that value and desire are of fundamental importance in building successful combatants. It also suggests that military professionals should devote more attention to moral virtue or excellence than they presently do. Moral discipline will not only help the officer withstand great pressure, it will facilitate doing the right thing in adversity, whether in peace or war. This will be possible because the officer with moral discipline will have "accustomed" himself to putting his duty above self.

It turns out, then, that lying, stealing, cheating, and other moral faults are weaknesses which cannot be tolerated in military leaders because they seriously undermine personal honor and discipline, the very qualities which are essential in the leaders the services require.

Schopenhauer, among others, once observed that "to do something, one must be something." This view melds well with

the military conception of officers as men of character, men who are expected to do the right thing morally.

The second thing that should be addressed is the context itself, i.e., the officer's environment and his responsibility in it. The basic responsibility for morality in a society is, in general, shared equally by the competent adults who make up that society. It follows that the military officer shares this basic responsibility in our own society with all other American citizens. There is a greater share of responsibility, of course, for those who are appointed over others.⁴

The reason for the increased responsibility is that leaders are often called upon to take actions which affect the lives of those who work for them or fall within their purview. Thus, the actions of a leader are morally significant for two reasons. First, because they have consequence for others; secondly, because they are able to influence others toward good or evil.

The military officer's share of moral responsibility increases even further when the decisions he makes affect the survival of his men. Decision-making of this nature, of course, is most often found in time of war but not exclusively so. Military officers make decisions, even in peacetime, which affect the present or future safety of those in their charge.

I am not suggesting that moral awareness is important only for those who have the lives of others in their hands.

This would have the absurd consequence that the need for moral awareness in an officer could actually change with each assignment. Nor do I suggest that every decision which affects the lives of those in our charge is, de facto, a moral one.⁵

The gravity of military decision-making, however, places great moral responsibility on officers. This responsibility clearly dictates that military officers ask whether actions they are contemplating are morally right or wrong. Their need for moral awareness is even more evident when one fully appreciates the nature of the environment in which they find themselves.

The military officer is in a highly structured society, one which places a great premium on doing one's duty. Now, doing one's duty is most often understood (particularly by younger, less experienced officers) as doing what one is told or doing what the "old man" wants. This can lead, if one is not careful, to a kind of moral poverty in which an officer might easily defer, in matters of moral judgment, to the wishes of his superior. Thus the officer might think that in "doing his duty" he has survived moral dilemmas and responsibility altogether. This, of course, is not true.

The problem I have just described is exacerbated by the severity of the military profession. Every officer is taught from the beginning of his career that adherence to orders is admirable and that questioning is undesirable. Questioning may cause delay, and delay may cost lives, mission failure,

or both. There can be only one commander and the services are structured so that there will, in most cases, be just one; he makes the important decisions.

The commander of a military unit is vested, of course, with great power over his men, their present and future. It is considered wise, therefore, for an officer not to oppose his commander and, if he does, not to make it a habit to do so. This perception often works against the possibility for open communication, especially on sensitive issues. It also increases an officer's tendency to refer moral judgments to his superior. Yet few would applaud the moral agent who acted in accordance with another's moral judgment simply because he deemed it his duty to obey the latter in all things. For we recognize that, ultimately, it will be the knowledge of the moral agent, not his superior's which must be assessed in determining whether an action is genuinely moral. Moral responsibility cannot be relinquished by anyone.

Now it is obviously misleading to suggest that it is an officer's duty to obey his superior in all things or that an officer should think that it is. Officers are, in fact, educated about what to do when an illegal order is received. But difficulties arise for the moral officer when it turns out that an immoral order is not illegal or at least not manifestly so. It is the authoritarian nature of the military that makes this issue so delicate. The institutional bias is such that the burden in disobeying a

senior's orders falls directly, and heavily I might add, on the subordinate. The senior has authority and institutional force behind him. In fact, the subordinate is usually urged to carry out questionable orders, even when he thinks they are wrong, and report them later through the chain of command. He is told to refuse his orders only when he knows they are radically wrong.

Even in an authoritarian organization, however, one's own moral understanding or interpretation of duty is, without exception, essential in determining what one should do. ~~But this understanding is incomplete without some knowledge or sense of one's moral duty as a human being.~~

→ An officer who takes moral responsibility seriously, then, must ask himself whether the action he is contemplating or being directed to perform is morally right or wrong. The nature of the military profession, in view of the comments above, seems to restrict an officer's ability to do so. Some think that we can improve in this area by creating an open environment, i.e., one in which it is acceptable to raise moral questions whenever one chooses.

One facile solution, which obviously represents the extreme, would be to create an open environment by making moral questions part of an organization's 'checklist.' This would guarantee such questions since, presumably, no one would have reason to avoid them. But it is not clear that such extreme measures would increase one's motivation to do the right thing which is, of course, the ultimate purpose of

asking moral questions. There are two reasons for this: first, military officers operate on different moral planes and secondly, even those who are best developed morally sometimes make mistakes about what is right or wrong.

The first problem clearly would not be resolved by creating an environment conducive to asking moral questions. Those who are unsympathetic with or unaware of the significance of moral questions would remain so. And there is no reason to believe that either group would be transformed simply by the acceptability of asking such questions. The second problem is inherent in man's nature. No one makes perfect moral judgments. Life is, after all, complex and so are the problems.

Given this framework, it is inevitable that there be instances of immoral action in the military (or in any sector of society for that matter). I am not suggesting that the services are filled or even scattered with moral scoundrels. Few would believe that. Unfortunately, as much damage can be done by those who have neglected their own moral sensibilities as can be done by the unscrupulous. Perhaps an open environment would help those who have let their own moral fabric erode through disuse. These may need little more than a reminder. For those who lack moral education or consider morality secondary or unimportant, however, this step would be of little value.

Be that as it may, it is clear that military leaders are especially uncomfortable with the suggestion that they should

foster an open environment. And rightly so. That kind of environment would seriously undermine a military leader's authority and, at the same time, his unit's ability to fight effectively. The context, then, presents an apparent difficulty: the services, if I am right, require moral awareness and discipline in order to fight effectively yet the authoritarian nature of the military vitiates these by limiting the free exchange which would foster them.

The most direct and efficacious solution to ensuring moral awareness and discipline, then, is to educate officers in such matters at every opportunity. These officers will in turn guarantee the necessary moral leadership and environment. It is for this reason that there is no better alternative than the moral education and development of military officers. The morally developed officer will be better prepared to handle the difficulties he will face in his career and he will, for the most part, make sound moral judgments. He will also be better suited to face the extraordinary demands of military service in conflict. In teaching ethics--and I do not restrict this to formal education alone--the services reinforce the ideals of duty and honor with strength of character achieved through discipline.

While service guidance, and perhaps the Code of Conduct to some extent, have been useful, the services would benefit from an ethical code which explicitly reflects the unique requirements of the military profession and delineates the

expectations of senior military professionals. This code would consolidate military values and principles in a single place for officers and serve as a reference point for them throughout their careers. Above all, it should be inextricably bound to the notions of duty and honor, notions which have always been fundamental to American servicemen. It should be filled with the spirit of all that is highest and good in man. Admittedly this sounds idealistic, but morality is not bound by what is, but rather what ought to be. This does not mean that ethics is concerned so much with what ought to be that it has no practical value for human beings. The ought implies can, i.e., that men and women are capable of conducting themselves in this way if they desire to do so.

In summary, I have argued that moral virtue strengthens military leaders, reinforces unit discipline, and enhances combat efficiency. I have also argued that military organizations are authoritarian, of necessity, that they purposely create an environment wherein the presumption is that the superior knows what he is doing and that one ought to obey his orders. Such organizations are structured and trained the way they will fight. Open environments in which one might freely or constantly question a superior's orders would erode combat effectiveness and cause excessive casualties or even total defeat. It is important, therefore, to take other steps which will ensure ~~that~~ high moral standards--unit discipline and success in conflict demand it.

The military services must do all that they can to encourage moral behavior in officers. They must teach officers about their duty and responsibility to be good and faithful servants, which encompasses doing the morally right thing throughout their careers. This means, of course, that they must understand their moral obligations and responsibilities, a fact which clearly justifies the requirement for ethical instruction.

Moral values support our professional aims: to fight and win. If we adopt a code, we must teach it; but more than that, we must live it. For we all know that actions speak louder than words and that, ultimately, to live a code is to teach it best.

ENDNOTES

¹I would like to thank Joseph Brennan, LtCol J. R. Stewart, USMC, and Tonya Lewis for their kind assistance. I greatly appreciate the many helpful suggestions they have made. Any difficulties contained herein are entirely my own and are attributable in no way to them.

²Philip Wheelwright, ed., Aristotle (New York: The Odyssey Press, 1951), p. 170.

³Ibid., p. 182.

⁴These remarks are in no way intended to provide a definitive account of social morality. They provide only a reference point for understanding an officer's position in the social structure.

⁵This was pointed out to me by Joseph Brennan who is Professor Emeritus at Barnard College, Columbia University. He is presently Elective Professor at the Naval Command College, Naval War College, Newport, Rhode Island.

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