

Careerism: A Moral Analysis of Its Nature, Types, and
Contributing Causes in the Military Services

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In attempting to do a careful inquiry into careerism, we are immediately faced with the problem of clarifying just what we take careerism to be, and, as part of this same problem, deciding just what it is about the careerist that we find morally culpable. While I would not characterize this initial step as an overwhelmingly difficult one, it warrants a certain amount of care, for in our everyday discourse, the concept is more often than not muddled and ambiguous. If we hope to take steps toward rectifying this problem for the military services, we must first overcome these conceptual and definitional difficulties.

Eliciting examples of careerism, or finding individuals we are willing to disparage with the label of careerist, is a woefully simple matter; yet when pressing for an underlying principle, we encounter difficulty. Two approaches might at first blush seem plausible, but are ultimately unsatisfying. In the first approach, still more examples of careerism are produced in hopes that, even though a precise formulation is difficult or elusive, enough exposure to the sin will sharpen our 'intuitive' moral grasp of it; reminiscent of a position once taken in

the debate over the nature of pornography, this approach has it that while we might not be able to say exactly what careerism is, we can surely know it when we see it. Unfortunately, our senses of recognition are never quite unanimous in the verdicts they render. Even if they were, we would still be left with the more important work of trying to determine just what it was that 'ticket punching,' certain types of job hunting, 'boot licking' (and other less flattering military colloquialisms for the same sort of activity), 'back stabbing,' and even sending troops to unnecessary death merely for the sake of good appearances all have in common; all of these disparate types of behavior seem to be examples of careerism. The second approach goes a little further, and asserts that careerism is the attitude and activity that places one's career above everything else, where everything else is usually couched in terms of responsibilities to others in particular or one's profession in general; while better than the first, this approach is still wanting for lack of completeness. I hope to develop a more encompassing definition that will still account for these notions, but that provides a better conceptual framework for determining just what does and does not count as careerism.

To be more precise, ambition, in and of itself, is not a moral defect. Indeed, a desire to develop professionally and assume as much responsibility as one's

talents will permit is usually taken to be normal, healthy, or even virtuous. Long hours and hard work, taking on the tough assignments, and a love of one's job that even excludes much free time and recreation are all viewed as admirable qualities, even if promotion or other rewards are hoped for or expected as a result. Plainly, we can place our careers above a great number of other things and still not commit what is normally called careerism. In fact, in a sense, there is only one thing that will make us guilty of careerism: the compromising of some moral principle or principles in order to advance one's career goals.

While this is certainly not a profound revelation, keeping this in mind helps to bring forth some points that otherwise might not be completely obvious. First, careerism is what I would like to call a derivatively blameworthy activity, in that we do not find the pursuit of career goals in itself to be a problem, but it is the means employed in that pursuit that we find distasteful, insofar as they compromise or totally dispense with some moral principle or principles. Moreover, seen in this way, it becomes clear that careerism is not a single sin, but a collection of moral transgressions, united only in that they are committed in the same context. Lying, cheating, being disingenuous in one's personal relationships, causing needless death or suffering, violating special trusts and the like are all wrong, whether they happen to be engaged

in to gain a financial advantage, satisfy emotional needs, further a career, or any other end that could also be pursued without moral compromise. This being the case, it will always be pertinent to ask just what particular moral rule a person has broken that justifies applying the careerist label; simply referring to the general category of careerism will not do, for this is, once again, not a moral defect per se, but rather a loose collection of more definable defects related only in how and where they are displayed.

From what has been said, it is obvious that careerism is closely related to the moral shortcoming of selfishness, and a comparison of the two might improve our grasp of both. Self-interested motivations, in and of themselves, are not blameworthy. It is only when we ignore the interests of others while acting on self-interested motivations, when we ought not to, that we are guilty of being selfish. What can constitute self-interest in the context of selfishness seems almost unlimited: we can pursue health, wealth, romance, happiness in general, or even promotions in a career. On this count, it would seem that careerism might be considered a subset of selfishness. Selfishness and careerism also seem amenable to comparison in terms of the moral violations which characterize them. Just as we saw to be the case in careerism, the collection of moral rules that seem to apply to selfishness is a

diverse one, and might even be an all-inclusive set. Lying, neglecting the duty of charity, ignoring the rights or legitimate distributive justice claims of others, breaking promises, or nearly any other moral transgression will do--if committed in the pursuit of self-interest, it appears to qualify as selfish behavior. Yet, to anticipate, there is a critical difference between how we assess blame to someone for being selfish and how we label someone a careerist. In judging a person to be selfish, we look to whether a person has rightly balanced the legitimate duties they have to themselves and the claims of other moral rules; as I hope to show later, there is no duty to advance one's career, at least one that would carry any weight into a moral conflict. There is no 'balancing' to struggle with.

Given that careerism is in reality a large and varied collection of moral transgressions, it will be helpful to do some rough categorizing of the various common types. We can begin by pointing to what I would like to call the 'easy' cases of careerism; in these, the activity engaged in is plainly immoral, and could never be morally justified as a means of furthering one's career. Moreover, in these easy cases, the moral principle being violated is a simple matter to ascertain. Needlessly risking (or even spending) the very lives and safety of those under one's command for the sake of career progression would be an example of such a case. Here it is obvious that leading soldiers into

battle is not, in and of itself, blameworthy; nor is it morally suspect for us to promote leaders based in part on their combat experience. The offensive element in this scenario is the fact that lives and safety are disregarded in a cavalier manner, which would be renounced as blameworthy or reckless in any context; intentionally causing death and injury, without some grave and powerfully overriding justification, is a grievous offense. Beyond this, in the military environment (as it might be in other environments as well, such as the law enforcement or medical professions), such a disregard is exacerbated by the fact that those led invest a special trust in their leaders to take the best care possible of their lives and safety, and that trust is being breached.

A number of other 'easy' cases come to mind, but I will assume that the process of teasing out the particular moral rule or rules being broken would be as simple and obvious as in the case of causing needless death cited above. Blatant lying and cover-up activity, where only one's own career is at issue, is an 'easy' case. So are illegal contracting practices, such as passing sensitive information to bidders, taking bribes and kick-backs, and a host of other related activities I am sure one would need an expert background in the government procurement process to understand and appreciate fully (at least when these activities go beyond simple thievery and are meant to

advance the culprit's military or post-military career). Actively sabotaging another's work or reputation for self-serving motives is another plainly reprehensible undertaking, and would be wrong irrespective of the circumstances (though, as we will discuss in more detail below, a good motive might mitigate the wrong inherent in the act, even if simple career motives could not).

I hope, perhaps naively, that the particularly nasty collection outlined above is not commonplace or representative. The damage done to the military's popular image in recent years notwithstanding, I believe that the types of activity typical to our 'easy' cases, insofar as the moral transgressions are blatant, severe, or both, are, if not rare, at least relatively uncommon. Unhappily, another group of career advancing practices, often characterized by less blatant and less severe violations of our moral rules, are all too easily found.

Cultivating disingenuous personal relationships in order to advance one's career is a ubiquitous phenomenon, and is such a fixture in our professional life that it is often engaged in by the offender without any conscious calculation. General Halftrack's boot-licking Lieutenant Fuzz is a comical caricature, but the real-life manifestations of this type of careerism are shameless and depressing displays. Often cloaked in or confused with respect for a superior, this practice fails to make the

distinction between the military virtue of paying the respect due to a superior's rank or position, and ingratiating one's self to the superior qua individual in hopes of currying favor. It seems incredible that anyone would fall victim to this sort of manipulation, especially when we consider how often we can observe, as disinterested spectators, the 'boot-licker' at work. But the practice is nonetheless all too common, and is successful often enough to produce a favorable cost to payoff ratio. This points to what I am sure is an almost universal feature of human nature--we are vulnerable to flattery, and only the hardest and most cynical among us are immune. Yet however widespread the phenomenon might be, it is still blameworthy. The relevant moral transgression here is using one's fellow man to further one's ends without consent, through deception, manipulation and trickery. The con artist or the flim-flam man is guilty of the same kind of immoral conduct toward different ends, as would be any purely self-serving manipulator of others, whatever the context. Naturally, the violation of the hoped for trust between military superiors and subordinates aggravates the severity of this moral shortcoming.

Another extremely widespread practice generally regarded as a form of careerism is often called 'ticket-punching.' A service member knows that certain schools, certain jobs, certain assignments, and so forth,

more often than not significantly enhance her chances for promotion. Consequently, these apparent prerequisites for promotion are pursued with single-minded vigor, often to the neglect of primary duties, genuine professional development in one's specialty, or the real and pressing needs of the service. The moral rule being violated here is less clear; indeed, one might argue that it actually requires some moral courage to resist this form of careerism. After all, the service itself seems to encourage and reward the behavior and in some sense punish those who decline to participate, even if to its own detriment. What then, is the moral transgression here? I would not go so far as to liken this to taking advantage of a mental defective, but I do find something analagous in not returning an overpayment, or not pointing out an oversight, in say, a telephone bill. In contracting for phone service, all the administrative trappings of the billing process are designed to facilitate fair compensation for service rendered; should something go awry due to one party or another's error, systematic or otherwise, it would seem a duty to point out this deviation from the fair and equitable relationship that was presupposed by both parties. Likewise, any relationship between an employer and an employee makes tacit assumptions of good faith between them, whether it be positively in the way of conscientiousness or negatively in the way of prohibitions

of dishonesty through omissions. In the military, even more than a simple contractual relationship is effected (in spite of common sentiments to the contrary)--we take a solemn oath of office which binds us even more firmly in this duty to discharge our responsibilities in good faith. For even if the military "hopes for one thing but rewards another" (and for this observation, I am indebted to Captain Bill Rhodes of the USAF Academy), it is incumbent on us with at least some force to recognize this 'square filling' problem in the promotion processes as an aberration and to treat it as such. While we might leave resignation, or more slowly but just as surely, the consequences of non-selection for promotion, to the more heroic among us, at the very least we would seem obligated to point out the problems inherent in 'ticket punching' or 'square filling' to decision makers as clearly and emphatically as we can. Additionally, we should do whatever is necessary to minimize the impact of these problems on discharging what would surely be the enlightened desires of our 'employer' in a good faith arrangement. To our credit, recent reforms in the Air Force have been reasonable steps toward ameliorating this type of careerism; some effort is being made to encourage and reward the actions and career progressions that best serve the mission of the service.

No doubt a more thorough inquiry could list other types of careerist behavior and carry out a similar

analysis of the relevant moral principles being violated. Even so, with this short exposition of the various stripes of careerism in mind, I hope the claim I made initially is clearer: to repeat, careerism is not a particular moral defect, but is a collection of transgressions united only in the context in which they occur. Careerist acts are of various types and severities, and we might, in a more detailed investigation, observe more completely how they pan out into categories; but this distinction and the pluralistic nature of careerism it exposes are for the most part neglected or remain ambiguous in discussions of the problem. When we say careerism, do we mean lying? Disingenuous personal relationships? Playing along in an easy way with a defective system? Failing to fulfill the legitimate expectations of others created by our role in society? Or something else? Whenever we use the term, we would do well to be precise about what we mean, for the various types of careerism involve different moral breaches, and consequently require different sorts of responses.

As I hinted previously, I would also posit that in evaluating the gravity of a person's careerist behavior, and in determining the severity of moral judgement we should pass, we need only evaluate the particular transgression of moral rule involved, independent of the fact that it was committed in the pursuit of career goals.

This assertion being made (that is, that the moral evaluation of any particular case of careerism can be made based solely on the demerits incurred by the compromise of the relevant moral principle or principles), it is necessary that I defend it against some possible objections.

First, my view has it that, at least in evaluating a careerist act or motive, the career advancing context is irrelevant. But in evaluating any act's morality, is the context always irrelevant? Surely such factors as consequences, conflicting duties and responsibilities, and concomitant motives and desires should, and invariably do, bring something to our evaluation. Yet admitting that consequences, conflicting duties, and a number of other factors enter into our moral deliberations and judgements, is not to admit that the context of career advancement has any relevance in forming our moral judgements as to the gravity of careerist behaviors. It is not my position that career advancing motives are irrelevant because such motives are never relevant (they plainly are in many cases); rather, I believe the career advancing context does not count because career advancement simply does not carry with it any intrinsic moral element, good or bad. Evaluating the means is the end of our work.

Of course, we could entertain what some might take to be a plausible thesis to the contrary. Could we have

directly, or perhaps derivatively, a moral duty of some sort to advance our careers? Would this necessarily be deviant or culpable? If this turned out to be true, might not this position be used to defend careerist behavior, at least in some instances, in terms of a conflict of duties (depending on how strong a claim was presented by the duty to advance one's career)? I believe that anyone who finds this initially plausible is mistaken, but to refute this I must first take a moment to show how common ways of viewing duties and motivation can lead to this error (which will, on my view, amount to rationalization).

Duties are often thought of as if they were compound entities, in that a particular duty might be taken to have several justifications, or be an aggregate of several component duties. For instance, a duty to care for one's health, which we could view as a simple entity in regard to the actions it dictates, could be justified in a number of ways: is this duty rooted solely in some intrinsic requirement that we care for ourselves, or could the potential burden we would place on our family and others be part of the justification? Leaving aside the difficult philosophical question of what it is that makes up and justifies duties, I will make what I take to be the relatively safe claim that most people do, on a practical level, take into account related, and sometimes conflicting justificatory considerations when trying to determine their

duty. Moreover, these related considerations are sometimes mixed in our minds when they should remain distinct, giving rise to confusion about where the real justifications lie in what we feel motivated to do. It is just this sort of confusion, I think, that opens the door to the error committed when someone thinks that they have any sort of moral duty to advance their career, considered as an end in itself.

I must assume that anyone wishing to support the position that we have a duty to advance our careers would look to any available moral justifications. For instance, we might have an obligation to provide as comfortable a life as we are able for our families. Perhaps we are obliged to serve our military to the best of our abilities, and doing the most good might require us to be promoted to the highest rank possible. Related to this, we might have a duty to ourselves to develop our potentials as completely as possible; since our chosen profession is one that deals in leadership, this duty would plainly require that we see to it that we are promoted, since the best opportunities to lead or grow as a leader involve progression in rank. Along more pressing lines, it should be obvious to any member of the military that the consequences of not being promoted at various points in one's career will result in dismissal; could we say that we have a duty, for various reasons, to keep our job? Yet all these considerations make promotion

instrumental in doing some other duty. Would the duty to see to one's own advancement, if there is such a thing, bring weight into a moral conflict if considered in isolation from these other elements? I believe that if we reflect carefully, we will conclude that a quest for advancement, if viewed apart from any intertwined motivations or duties, would never justify breaking a moral rule.

We must keep in mind the critical point that the careerist needs some moral duty of advancement (whether intrinsic or instrumental), with the claims it would take into a conflict, as a justification for violating other moral rules or duties in the pursuit of career goals. Would any of these just mentioned ancillary or related justifications bring such weight into a conflict? It is conceivable that someone with a hungry family might justly violate some less pressing moral rules to ameliorate his desperate situation; it is less plausible to sanction moral shortcoming in order to procure luxury. Perhaps the threat of losing a job could bring moral, in addition to practical or psychological, pressures to bear. The other justifications cited are less likely candidates for providing any good reasons for breaking moral rules. They seem much more like rationalizations than reasons, but it is not necessary that we come to a consensus on this before moving on. While any of these factors might move us toward

advancing our careers, we can safely say they bring varying degrees of moral weight into conflicts; some seem more plausible as justification for breaking moral rules than others. If there are institutional practices, such as up or out promotion policies, that actually might lend moral legitimacy to careerism in the mind of the careerist, we should consider reform.

The thing to notice about these analyses of candidates for justification is this: we can carry on the weighing of these various justifications against the pertinent careerist moral shortcomings without reference to the fact that the conflict is occurring in a career related context. I think it important that none of this is incompatible with my central assertion about the moral irrelevance of career considerations viewed in isolation; all other things being equal, they collapse as justification under even the slightest conflict. Even a little white lie seems culpable (as a little white lie) when committed in the exclusive pursuit of career progression and promotion. The career motivation seems to carry, in and of itself, no moral weight at all, and screams for any moral support that the intertwined secondary or concomitant justifications and motives might provide. When we prune out those elements of career advancement that are justified by reference to other related or underlying duties, there seems to be little left.

In fact, I would like to assert that a duty to advance one's career, if there is such a thing, would never, without additional weight added by other duties, carry enough weight on its own to override the claims of any moral obligation. If we characterize a duty as a moral injunction that carries at least some weight, we could argue that we have no real duty at all to advance our careers (unless we subscribe to some Nietzschean uebermensch ethical system). Counter to the idea that we might have even a weak duty in this regard, dropping out of the 'rat race' is often viewed as a good thing. Choosing to be a happy craftsman, or reaching a certain level of responsibility in the business world and choosing to go no higher, carries with it no moral blame; indeed, this type of action is often viewed as praiseworthy resistance to a senseless quest for advancement that serves no further ends.

To summarize, I believe that careerism involves compromising some moral rule or rules in the pursuit of career advancement, and it is this compromise in and of itself that is the source of what we find blameworthy, not the career-pursuing context in which it was committed. On this view, it is clear that careerism is not a single sin, but a collection of sins tied together only by this common context; there are almost as many different types of careerism as there are moral rules to be broken (although some are in fact, for various reasons, more common than

others). Further, these various types of careerist behavior carry with them varying degrees of culpability, from barely blameworthy to heinous. A possible apology for careerism would have it that we have a duty of some form to advance our careers, and this duty brings weight to conflicts that may rightly override other moral considerations. In response to this, I hope I have shown that any moral weight brought to bear in overriding the moral rules that suffer in careerist situations would come not from a duty to advance one's career in and of itself, but as something derivative or collateral in nature. The justifications offered can be considered alone, for if there is such a thing as a duty of career advancement, the absence of weight it brings into any conflict at all allows us to factor it out of our deliberations as moot.

I will, in observance of our time constraints, defer further discussion of some germane issues. What sorts of careerism most affect the military profession, which sorts we can hope to do anything about and just what we ought to do, and some of the contributing and aggravating causes of various forms of careerism will not be addressed in this presentation. Still, I hope that what I have presented concerning what careerism is at bottom will help us to continue pursuing answers to the pressing practical matters before us.