

The Other Kind of Military Courage
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I

Courage is a very special virtue for the military. The military talks more about courage (and bravery), encourages courageous behavior, and rewards courage more than any other profession or human institution. This is not to say that this virtue is unimportant to those who are not in the military. We all admire the courageous prosecutor who goes after the mob, or the fireman who saves the child from a burning building. We also admire the doctor who takes personal risks in order to treat the ill and the suffering. Indeed, the virtue of courage is so important to so many people that philosophers have identified it as one of the four cardinal virtues. Courage, along with temperance, justice and wisdom, has each been said to be needed to explain fully what constitutes moral excellence. (David Carr, The Philosophical Quarterly, April 1988) Still, largely because when military people do their special work during war they put their lives at risk more than other professionals and non-professionals do when they engage in their distinctive work, those in the military inevitably look at courage in a very special way.

But if courage is talked about, encouraged and rewarded in the military as much as I am suggesting it is, why is the military (allegedly) having so much trouble getting its people to act courageously when facing an egregiously erring superior officer? Why, as well, is the military (allegedly) having trouble getting its people to courageously report the truth to their superiors when, for example, fewer than half of the tanks and trucks in the motor pool are battle ready?

One possible explanation is that we are dealing with two basic kinds

of courage, one having to do with battle and the other not; and that it is possible for military people to be brave with respect to the first kind, and be lily-livered cowards with respect to the other. But are there two basic kinds of courage? The following formula is helpful in taking the first step toward answering this question.

X is courageous (or brave) when he/she does (or resists doing) act A (or acts like A) even though he/she is threatened with T by Y in context C.

In this formula, X stands for the person who is contemplating a courageous action (or actions like) A. With respect to A, the formula is stated in such a way that X can act courageously on one or a series of occasions. The letter T in the formula identifies the threat to X. That threat can pertain to loss of life, the onset of pain, or any sort of disagreeable event. Y stands for the person or persons who make and can administer the threat. The letter C stands for the context or setting in which the act is (acts are) performed.

It should be clear that this formula does not represent a definition of courage since it contains a cognate of that word. Rather than a definition, the formula should be thought of as a device for articulating the structure of the concept of courage. Thus although it is not a definition of courage, it can be viewed as a preliminary step toward developing one.

Using this formula, and focusing especially on the letters C, Y and T, a case can be made for distinguishing two kinds of courage: external and internal. External courage is the kind military people face in battle. Here the C (the context) is war, Y (the one threatening X) is the enemy, and T (the threat) is the possibility that X (the actor) will lose his/her life. This kind of courage is external since the threat to X has its

source outside the military group to which he/she belongs. In contrast, internal courage is exhibited when C is some setting within A's own military organization, Y is one of X's own people, and T usually is not life threatening. Given this distinction, the questions posed earlier can be restated as: 1) Are external and internal courage basically different from one another? and 2) Whether they are or not, is it possible or likely that military people can exhibit one kind of courage without exhibiting the other? Two further questions can be asked profitably. 3) Assuming that the military is having lots of trouble engendering internal courage, why is this so? 4) Again, assuming a shortage of internal courage within the military, what can be done about it? By the end of this paper I will have only started dealing with these last two, very difficult, questions.

II

In order even to start dealing with all these questions it is important to take a closer look at how external and internal bravery or courage differ from one another. As has been noted already, the T factor in external courage is the loss of life, or the loss of good health. The enemy threatens to kill or maim X. The threat usually associated with internal courage is of lesser import. When X criticizes his/her superior officer, execution or physical maiming is not the usual consequence. That being the case, it would seem as if it would be easier to exhibit internal as against external courage since, at most, what can be lost is a career. To be sure, that is serious enough especially if one has a family, finds military life very satisfying and has, in fact, no idea what to do with his/her life outside of the military. But if anything, if we focus on T (i.e., the threat itself), the puzzle increases rather than decreases as to

why the military is (allegedly) having as much or more trouble with internal as against external courage.

A shift of attention to C, the context, will help solve this puzzle. With external courage, part of C is the battlefield. Another part of C is the backing X receives from the whole of his/her military organization. In a well-run military organization this means that everybody on X's side will be backing him/her. That, in turn, means that X will have been encouraged before battle to fight bravely. As a part of this process, stories about heroes of the past will have been told and retold. Also, the tradition of the unit and the military organization as a whole will have been recalled in various ways. The whole institution will be geared to encouraging X to act bravely when the enemy comes into view. If it turns out that X does fight bravely, there might even be a medal or a promotion to look forward to. There is, of course, the flip side to all this. If X acts in a cowardly manner, the whole institution will condemn him/her. But, however X behaves, he/she is not likely to receive mixed signals about what happens. The whole institution will be ready with praise or condemnation depending on the kind of performance that is forthcoming. In part, this will be so because the standards of performance when C is war will have been made (relatively) clear well before the war began.

C is quite different with internal courage. So is Y. Both now have their source from within the organization -- where now there will be division rather than unanimity. X will be on one side, Y on the other. Perhaps not always, but certainly very often, Y will not be encouraging X to be internally courageous the way he/she encouraged X to be courageous externally. Why? Well, obviously, X's criticism will often be personally embarrassing to Y, or worse. It is even possible that X's honest and brave

criticism could affect Y's career since it is Y's errors X may be exposing. In that case, X's internal courage will engender a struggle where either X's or Y's career will be in jeopardy. At this point lily-livered cowardice almost looks like a virtue since if X simply keeps quiet neither his/her or Y's career will suffer.

X may be fighting more than Y in trying to exhibit internal courage. The whole organization (C) may be sending X mixed signals. "Yes," X will be told, "truth telling is important; and yes, honest criticism should be encouraged." But X will also hear that obedience is a virtue. So is discipline and loyalty. So now X must deal with a conflict of virtues; or, as it might be better put, a conflict of duties. One has a duty to tell the truth and, at times, a conflicting duty to be obedient and loyal.

There is another institutionally caused conflict facing X. The military encourages a can do attitude among its people. "This is your assignment and you will carry it out." "Yes sir" is the preferred, if not universal, response here. Later, after the event in question, X will be tempted to file a we-have-done-it report even if "it" hasn't been done. Unlike the conflict of duties in the previous paragraph, this conflict will, in part, be personal in nature. X will not want to be seen as a non-doer. Promotions, it seems, are not highly correlated with not completing one's missions. But personal concerns aside, Y and his/her superiors may not even want to hear about failures. More than likely, they will want their reports to their superiors to look good. So X is doing them a favor, it seems, by saying that the task was completed even if it was not. Y and Y's superiors may be preaching truth telling and openness to criticism but, if my portrait is at all accurate, they are not likely to be practicing what they are preaching. X is not so likely to receive praise, a medal, or

a promotion for being internally courageous as he/she was for being externally courageous.

III

Question 3 above has already been answered. There are several reasons the military is having trouble dealing with what I am calling internal courage. However, all of these reasons come down to saying that internal courage cannot help but divide the house in which it is being exhibited. The division can be simply between an individual person who is acting (X) and a single superior, or it can be at the other extreme between an individual or a group of individuals acting in such a way as to challenge a large portion of the military establishment. Whichever way it is, internal conflicts of one sort or another will result. There is no unity when internal courage is being exhibited the way there is with external courage; and, the argument has been, this is one major, perhaps the major, reason the military is having difficulties - if indeed it is -- in encouraging its people to practice truth-telling, exhibit constructive criticism, etc. within the organization.

What about question 1? It asks: Are internal and external courage basically different from one another? If 'basically' means 'definitionally,' the answer is probably "No." The reason for being hesitant here is that no actual definition of 'courage' is being offered in this article. Instead, only a formula is being offered, one which exhibits the structure or elements that need to be taken into account in actually developing a definition. Still, based on that formula, no reason has been uncovered to suggest that external and internal courage are structurally different from one another. Both forms of courage fit nicely into the same

formula.

However, although the two forms of courage are probably not definitionally different and certainly are not structurally different from one another, they do differ empirically. The context of external courage is war, and in particular, battle; while the context of internal courage deals with the workings of the military institution in which those who would be courageous find themselves. Further, the Y element in the formula, that is, the source of the threat to the actor, is different. With internal courage, Y is someone inside one's own organization, while with external courage Y is the enemy. Even T is different with the two forms of courage where externally T represents possibly death, where internally it represents loss of status. So the two forms of courage are, in fact, quite different even if, in both cases, to be courageous or brave means the same thing.

Now what about question 2? Is it possible for X, or anyone for that matter, to fail to exhibit one kind of courage while exhibiting the other? No doubt it is certainly possible for X to be courageous in both ways, or a coward in both. With the former, X has, perhaps, a don't-give-a-damn kind of personality; with the latter, X may be afraid even of his/her own shadow. Although, then, the two forms of courage are different in important respects, they share enough in common so that we all are familiar with examples of both kinds of people -- the completely courageous person and the complete coward.

But are there enough differences here as well to make it possible, or even likely, that X could be courageous in one way but not courageous in the other? There are two possibilities here, the first being that X could be courageous in the field and not so courageous when dealing with

superiors. Is that a real possibility?

It would certainly seem so. X could be the kind of person who finds it difficult to question authority; or be the kind who dislikes interpersonal conflicts that need to be resolved through discussion. X just may not be the verbal type. Yet, in war, X may know how to let a gun talk for him/her. There are lots of people like this.

What about the other possibility? X is afraid in battle but has the guts to stand up to a superior when it is important to do so? I suspect, although I don't know how to prove it, that there are actually fewer of this type than the type who are externally brave but internally not so brave. The internally brave person very likely is verbally skilled and has the guts to stand up to authority; yet that same person may not be physically strong. Or it may be that this person has never been in a fight, or participated in "contact" sports. Human personality is varied enough so that, I am arguing, all the possibilities listed above in fact exist.

Now to deal with the last question. Let us assume that I have been right in arguing that the lack of internal courage is a real problem for the military. Our fourth question is: What can be done about this problem? The correct answer, I believe, is "Not very much." Why? As it was discussed earlier, the source of much of the trouble is in C. That is another way of saying that the problem is institutional. If that is so, it will not do much good simply to encourage individuals to "Speak out" or "Speak the truth." Simply urging people to be heroic internally while leaving the institution structured in such a way as not to make such heroism rewarding is not going to yield many good results.

But then the obvious question to ask is: But why not change the

institution? I suppose some changes could be made to help mitigate the problem. The situation is not totally hopeless. More effort could certainly be made to reward those who exhibit internal courage, and, whenever possible, to make these rewards public. But even if these and other things were done to improve things somewhat, results would still likely be meager. The fact remains that even if some who are internally courageous are rewarded, others will still pay the price by sacrificing their career. This is not just a personal loss. Others who might have spoken up had the penalty been not so severe will be silenced by this sacrifice. But what is worse is that, by sacrificing the brave, the military will be operating on the anti-evolutionary doctrine that the weakest will survive. There will be a tendency for many bad people to stay in the service, and a tendency for many good ones to leave.

IV

Three final comments are in order. The first is that I do not mean to be picking on the military especially in this negative assessment of what can be done about maximizing internal courage. The military's problems are those of any hierarchically organized institution. Business with its boards, presidents, vice-presidents, and department heads have the same problems. Those within the organization who criticize their superiors often pay the price of being dismissed or of not being promoted. The same is true with educational and religious institutions. The problems discussed in this paper may be more severe in the military because its hierarchy is, given the work it does, necessarily more structured than other institutions. The problems may also be more severe because military personnel do not have the option of joining the competition when they get

fired from their own outfit. But the problem is not basically different.

The second comment is that the discussion thus far has been oversimplified in portraying it exclusively in terms of the concept of courage. At one point in the discussion the conflict facing X was characterized not in terms of doing the right thing versus self interest, but as a conflict of one duty (e.g., to obedience and loyalty) versus another duty (e.g., to tell the truth). It is the former kind of conflict of duty versus self-interest where courage is required. The latter kind of conflict has less to do with courage than it has with making difficult moral judgments. Thus, doing the right thing where there is a conflict of duty involves not just courage but, additionally, clear thinking about ethical problems found within the military. If I am right here, we can understand even more than before why dealing with the problems of truth telling and challenging superiors when they err are not ever going to be easy ones.

The third and final comment is by way of a disclaimer and perhaps even an apology. Looking in from outside the military, I may be missing much of what is going on. There may be reasons people in the military have for exhibiting or failing to exhibit internal courage (and good ethical judgments) that I have not mentioned. But I am not claiming to be giving an exhaustive picture of internal courage and other related phenomena. Rather, what I have tried to do is lay out a structure that might help those interested with these problems to think about them more clearly. Beyond that, I have merely made some tentative suggestions about what the nature of the specific problems is and whether, and how, they might be dealt with. More than anything else these suggestions are being made by way of stimulating thought about these concerns, rather than by way of

announcing that these concerns have been resolved.

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