

**DEVELOPING CHARACTER:
ENDS, MEANS, AND HONOR CODES**

**A paper prepared for presentation to the
Joint Services Conference on Professional Ethics XIV**

Washington, D.C.

January 30, 1992

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(The views presented herein are entirely those of the author and do not represent the official position of the United States Military Academy, the United States Army, or the Department of Defense.)

West Point's most succinct statement of the end to which its honor code (as well as other programs) is directed. As a starting point from which to explore the ends for which honor codes are adopted, let us begin with character.

Defining Character

To define character we begin with values. Aristotle suggested that "to like and dislike the things one should is thought to be of greatest importance in developing character."¹ As human beings, we assign value. We "learn to want things, learn to admire things, learn to care about things, learn to treat things seriously in word, deed and tone of voice, learn to be revolted by things, learn to respect, approve and back things, learn to scorn and oppose things and so on."² We value some things in a non-moral sense--a "good" play, a good dinner, a good book. But, we also may value being a "good" person and doing the "right" thing, implying a moral dimension in our values. What we individually mean by "good," to include "being good" and "doing right," defines our set of values. And, that set of values is a critical feature of who we are, each of us, as a unique person.

Who we are is linked to *what we do* by a bridge we call character. Character is the acquired disposition of bringing one's passions under the control of one's reason--the inward toughness to do the "harder right." By strength of character we bring forth actions which are true to our values. Two people, both faced with a given morally-challenging situation, may share similar values and, thus, may well agree on what they ought to do. And, at a purely rational level, they may both want with equal intensity to do the right thing. But, when it comes to carrying out the right action, of the two people, the one of strong character is more likely to succeed than the one of weak character.

Varying in strength, character is ultimately measured by actions. Just as the needle of an electrocardiogram machine traces one's heartbeat, so one's record of

in the day-to-day world, we would want to learn to reason in moral terms, to decide what our moral principles would suggest that we actually do in the "this-wasn't-in-the-book" situations of life. In addition, we would want to learn by such reasoning an appreciation for certain rules or norms of behavior, those widely accepted in our groups, organizations, professions, and society. We would want to learn to be disposed to obey those rules, to develop habits of following those rules, even when costly to ourselves, out of respect for the underlying moral principles. But, we would also want to learn not to accept those norms indiscriminately. Rather, we would learn to accept final responsibility for our own beliefs and conduct, to assess the norms of our social groups, and, if we should find them to be questionable, to challenge them and promote improvement. Each of these ends deserve further comment.

Principles

To decide what one should do in morally difficult situations, it is necessary to appreciate some fundamental moral ideals or principles. Where do these principles come from? The answers depend ultimately upon one's world view. From the world view of a theist, moral principles may arise from, for example, expressions of the nature or character of God. For non-theists, they may arise from traditions honored by the society or nation, or they may arise from a preservation of rational consistency. For example, if we recognize certain human value or rights in ourselves, then to be consistent we must respect equally that value and those rights in other people. Irrespective of one's world view, we find there is wide agreement with certain fundamental principles, ones for which civilized people across all time have shared respect: beneficence, justice, truthfulness, dignity of the human being, freedom from violence to person, free expression, love, equality, etc.

regarding plagiarism is an application of fundamental principles to the situation of incorporating the words and ideas of others into one's own writing. A moral rule is, then, a mental shortcut for applying moral principles to particular recurring situations, just as learning a rule in arithmetic is a shortcut to save applying basic axioms each time a particular arithmetic problem is encountered.

Disposition

Knowing what one ought to do is only half of a good character. Doing it is the other. Resisting the pull of passion, instead "to choose the harder right instead of the easier wrong," in the words of the Cadet Prayer, is the other half of character-- probably the tougher half. From whence comes that disposition to choose to obey moral rules and norms, even at disadvantage to oneself? For some, that courage derives from religious sources; for others, from their respect for the moral principles underlying those rules or respect for the humans with whom moral principles deal.

Such dispositions are sometimes called the virtues. Mayo suggests that virtue speaks not so much of actions, but of the actors. When we say that a certain action was courageous, we are referring primarily to the kind of person by whom it was done.⁸ To teach the virtues is to teach a devotion to morality. It is an education of the will or the heart.⁹ According to Aristotle, virtue is achieved by practice: "Men become builders by building houses, and harpists by playing the harp. Similarly, we become just by the practice of just actions, self-controlled by exercising self-control, and courageous by performing acts of courage."¹⁰ As the old folk saying puts it: Sow a habit and you reap a character.¹¹ And yet, that moral practice must be fashioned so as to accommodate yet another end of character development, one which may be the most important of all, moral autonomy.

-unquestioning obedience of legal orders--override one's revulsion at the immoral basis and effect of *some* orders?

Obedience to authority has been a military virtue inculcated by the West Point experience. One Academy professor, at the turn of the century, observed proudly that, "The entire existence of the cadet is one of subordination.... An order from a superior has the force of a cannon shot. To resist is not consistent with reason."¹⁵ It was his view that such an understanding of one's duty "simplifies ... all complex questions of practical ethics."¹⁶ Perhaps it simplifies them too much.

Other observers argue that in a democracy--*especially* in a democracy--Army officers caught in these dilemmas should be *more* willing than they have been in the past to challenge the moral grounds of their civilian commanders' orders.¹⁷ Such individual moral courage was a commodity in short supply one frightful morning in the village of My Lai in Vietnam and in its aftermath. It was the incredibly few individual soldiers who displayed moral autonomy that day who give any scant redeeming value to the moral disaster which occurred there. Afterward, hearing the stories of the My Lai massacre from his buddies, former enlisted man, Ron Ridenhour, exhibited moral autonomy. Though he had not been part of the lawbreaking itself, he would not rest with the knowledge which he had stumbled onto, because to do so would be "to take part in this horrible crime."¹⁸ When he saw no one else taking action, he finally addressed a personal letter to members of Congress, which invoked the investigation which eventually brought the truth to light. That it took an enlisted man to bring My Lai into the light should be an embarrassment to the numerous officers who were, I assume, also in positions to acquire similar or better information. To teach leaders moral autonomy is a moral imperative.

Teaching leaders moral autonomy does not suggest anarchy. To the contrary, it implies holding each person responsible to a transpersonal standard--that when one makes a moral judgement one is claiming the judgement will be warranted by a review

probably well understood by most members of the JSCOPE audience, so I will abbreviate my comments on them to a few notes.

The first point to be made from this list is that character development is advanced on multiple fronts, not just by the honor code. For example, the powerful effect of role models in teaching values at the academies, it appears to me, is underestimated by many Academy observers. Plato suggested that values are learned in the same subtle manner that language is learned, picked up gradually in the daily intercourse with parents and friends--from everybody in general and nobody in particular.²⁰ By one's exposure to "other people's examples, expressions, utterances, admonitions and disciplines," one may "come to care deeply about the things that they care deeply about."²¹ The research on this subject confirms that the influence which role models have on one's values is much stronger than the influence of words or compulsion.²² The effect on cadet novitiates of being surrounded for four years by practitioners and exemplars of particular values is powerful. The observed fact that USMA graduates as a group stay in the Army longer than officers from any other source of commissioning is, I believe, attributable to the high valuation of national service they acquired from influential role models at USMA and in the Army.

One of West Point's longest traditions is its Honor Code. It states that, "A cadet will not lie, cheat, or steal, nor tolerate those who do." It is a code of honor that developed quite gradually during the 19th century, arising from the officers' code of honor, central to which was truth in one's word. From the earliest days of Sylvanus Thayer forward, a cadet's word was accepted as trustworthy. The Code at West Point developed slowly, consisting at first of the prohibition against lying only. Initially, stealing was treated as a violation of military law, but later was added to the Code. Cheating on examinations was treated differently at various times, but was added to the Code finally in the 1920s. Last to be added to the formal Code was a tenet prohibiting toleration of violators (though this tenet was informally enforced earlier).

sense, a practice in character, choosing to hold one's immediate desires in check in the interests of a longer-range goal.

The unquestioning acceptance of rules required by the disciplinary regulations and Honor Code are, however, in contrast to the ends pursued in the classroom. The cadets' classroom studies and the extracurricular Honor Education program contribute to their appreciation of moral principles and their capacity for moral reasoning and autonomy.

All cadets are required to take a one-semester course in ethics during their sophomore year. The course is divided into three parts: logic, foundations of moral thought, and applications of moral reasoning to situations that arise in warfare.

That course is joined by numerous other required courses in literature, history, psychology, leadership, military science and social sciences--as well as a broad array of electives--all of which enhance the cadets' appreciation of the obligations and responsibilities of human beings toward one another. These courses urge cadets to think critically and to adopt positions based upon their reasons, rather than on the basis of authority alone.

The cadets' formal coursework is supplemented by a series of classes known as the Honor Education Program. These classes are taught by cadets and officers from the staff and faculty who form teams assigned to each cadet company. The teams includes tenured and non-tenured faculty members, the Tactical Officer who supervises the company, the senior cadets who are in positions of command authority within the company, and the cadets who have been elected by the cadets as their "honor representatives" to the Cadet Honor Committee. The classes are spread out over the four-year cadet experience.

Initially, the classes introduce new cadets to the tenets of the Honor Code and their applications in cadet life. For example, new cadets hear a talk from the academic dean about honorable living as applied to scholarly pursuits, a talk from the athletic

Whether the means employed at West Point give adequate weight to each of the ends may be questioned. Does the Academy give too little effort to teaching moral reasoning and too much to habituation? While, in my opinion, that is a pertinent question, I do not propose to pursue it here, because my main interest in this paper is the civilian college and its applications of the academies' experience in character development.

Applying The Framework to Colleges in General

The framework of ends and means which I have proposed invites discussion of several matters which would be less clear without it. I will state my conclusions on these matters in advance, and then attempt to develop my reasons for them. First, the relative importance attached to some ends and not others reflects a bias and source of division and conflict among moral educators, a conflict which, I believe, can and should be resolved to insure that none of the ends is neglected. Second, honor codes may be formulated in different ways, such that in one form they support different ends than in another form. Third, the choice of ends to be supported by an institution's honor code should be a conscious choice by the institution based upon the stage of moral development of its students and the relative priority among ends suggested by the institution's purpose.

I begin with the conflict which divides many moral educators. Most programs of positive moral education face a serious criticism: that the means used to advance the ends of teaching rules and a disposition to obey rules invariably employs coercion--reward and punishment, praise and blame. Coercion is present, for example, in West Point's honor system in that a student's failure to comply with approved behavior is sanctioned in severe terms. But, the use of coercion appears to oppose the equally important ends of developing moral reasoning and personal moral autonomy, the importance of which has been emphasized already.

circumstances. They propose to maintain a total neutrality toward all values (as if that were possible).²⁵

The opponents of this view argue that such a reaction is too severe. They believe that abandonment of all efforts to inculcate values is wrong-headed, because the problem to be solved in most young lives is not an excess of values, but a dearth. Their early value set is not like an overgrown jungle which needs chopping down; it is rather like an arid desert that desperately needs irrigation.²⁶ If young people are denied a foundation mooring in values, they have no point of departure from which later to exercise autonomous, reasoned choices. How can they improve upon the received wisdom if they have not received any?

Resolving the Conflict

The conflict between these opposed views can be resolved if one accepts the proposition that moral development is a dynamic process, extending from childhood through youth and into adulthood. The growth of a human being is a passage from the tutelage of the child to the freedom of adulthood (and its responsibilities). In the course of that passage, people's capacities for moral reasoning and autonomy develops over time. Their forms of moral reasoning, if they advance at all, advance from self-oriented forms to society-oriented forms and, last, to autonomous-reasoning forms.²⁷ As people grow from youth to adulthood, they can most successfully learn moral reasoning and autonomy *later* in their development if, *early* in their development, they have learned moral principles and rules, and acquired a will to adhere to them. Israel Scheffler, a modern moral philosopher strongly committed to individual freedom and reason, agrees. He contends, "The moral point of view is attained, if at all, by acquiring a tradition of practice, embodied in rules and habits of conduct. Without a preliminary immersion in such a tradition ... the concept of choice of actions and rules for oneself can hardly be achieved."²⁸

While West Point provides an example of the one kind of honor code, Duke University offers an example of the other. The Duke Student Honor Commitment prohibits academic cheating, but it also directs the students' attention to several moral principles of "honesty, truth, fairness, civility, and concern for others." It incorporates adherence "to the established and required community code of conduct," but also goes further, "beyond the requirements of any code or law" to the exercise of "personal honor and integrity in all matters large and small."²⁹ It invokes enforcement of the conduct code "according to the dictates of my own conscience," operating at Duke without sanctions or coercion. To follow such a code obviously requires the exercise of moral reasoning and autonomy.

The application of the honor code to teaching reasoning and autonomy, as at Duke, does not imply that the teaching of rules and disposition must be foregone. All colleges maintain rules to guide the conduct of their members. The disciplinary system at West Point, for example, represents a means available on every campus for teaching moral rules and disposition. Some campuses call it the student judicial code or the conduct regulations or something of the sort, but every campus requires it. As Harvard's past president, Derek Bok, put it,

Universities need to ... have rules that prohibit lying, cheating, stealing, violent behavior, interference with free expression, or other acts that violate fundamental norms. Such rules not only protect the rights of everyone in the community, they also signal the importance of basic moral obligations and strengthen habits of ethical behavior.³⁰

On nearly every campus, such rules usually include a means of enforcement, adjudication, and punishment of violators. Such student conduct systems use coercion to enforce their rules, and by so doing they can teach not only the rules themselves but also the moral principles underlying them and a disposition to live by

honor codes at this point in their history because of the long-standing, useful traditions behind them. The attempt could be more destructive than helpful, they contend. Such arguments leave unresolved the question of how to teach adequately moral reasoning and autonomy to cadets. One answer may be to increase the relevant coursework in logic and applied ethics. Another may be to stress in various ways, as West Point does, the "spirit of the Honor Code,"³² emphasizing those positive moral principles (truthfulness, fairness, respect for persons and property) which underlie the rules in the Honor Code.

Such arguments carry less weight in most colleges and universities, however, where students are clearly in the phase of their development in which moral reasoning and autonomy should be given equal or greater emphasis than that given to the acquisition of rules and disposition. The institution which chooses to use its honor code to teach habitual obedience to rules reinforces the effect of its conduct code but forfeits a means to reinforce moral reasoning and responsibility for acting upon one's own judgments.

The conduct system and honor system in colleges can be supplemented further by the other means of character development employed at the service academies-- inspirational examples, role models, ethics instruction, religion, etc. The resulting array of means can be an effective approach to achieving all five ends of character development.

Summary and Conclusion

As one of several means for achieving the ends of character development, honor codes should be considered within a larger framework of ends and means. In the framework I propose, the ends of character development are several: appreciation of moral principles and moral rules based thereon, a disposition to act upon those rules, a capacity for reasoning in moral terms, and a willingness to take autonomous

ENDNOTES

1 Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, section 1172a, Book X, 1. From the translation of Martin Ostwald, (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1962), p. 273.

2 Gilbert Ryle, "Can Virtue Be Taught?" in R. F. Dearden, et al, eds., Education and Reason, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), p. 52.

3 Anthony Quinton, "Character and Culture," reprinted from the New Republic in Sommers and Sommers, Vice and Virtue in Everyday Life, (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989), p. 614.

4 William Frankena, "Toward a Philosophy of Moral Education," Harvard Education Review, Fall 1958, vol. 28, no. 4, p. 303.

5 Frankena, p. 303.

6 Israel Scheffler, "Moral Education and the Democratic Ideal," in Scheffler, Reason and Teaching, (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1973), p. 140.

7 Drucker, Management: Tasks, Responsibilities, Practices, (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 369.

8 Bernard Mayo, "Ethics of Virtue vs. Ethics of Principle," in Frankena, Wm. K. and John T. Granrose, eds., Introductory Readings in Ethics, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1974), p. 232.

9 Frankena, p. 309- 311.

10 Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, 1103b, trans. Ostwald.

11 Anonymous.

12 Frankena, p. 307.

13 William K. Frankena, "Moral Education," in Goodpaster, K. E., ed., Perspectives on Morality: Essays by William K. Frankena, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1976), pp. 163.

14 Dillard, Walter Scott, "The United States Military Academy, 1865-1900: The Uncertain Years," Ph.D. dissertation, Univ. of Washington, 1972, University Microfilms International. Dillard notes (p. 9) that "The officers and men of the army often found themselves in sympathy with their Indian foes rather than with the government they served, particularly that part of the bureaucracy charged with the administration of Indian affairs, the Indian Bureau." Sherman (p. 10) commanding in the West in 1866, pointed up the dilemma of army troops who must treat Indians as hostile and protect settlements and routes of travel from them, while by law and executive action the Indians are under the guardianship and protection of civilian agents. "Hugh L. Scott, within a year of his graduation from West Point, was embittered by the policies of the Interior Department, and tended to side with the Indians for the rest of his career, which included a tour as Chief of Staff of the army in WWI. He especially objected to driving the Indians off their lands." (p. 11) "Scott's classmate, James Parker, shared similar sentiments.... Otto L. Hein, who graduated from West Point six years before

Honor Commitment reads in entirety as follows: "A unique aspect of a liberal education is its attempt to instill in the student a sense of honor and high principles that extends beyond academics. An essential feature of Duke University is its commitment to an atmosphere of integrity and ethical conduct. As a student of Duke University I accept as my personal responsibility the vigorous maintenance of high standards of honesty, truth, fairness, civility, and concern for others.

My devotion to integrity establishes that I will not cheat in academic work, and that I will adhere to the established and required community code of conduct. According to the dictates of my own conscience, I will report behavior in violation of such established standards. In addition, and beyond the requirements of any code or law, I confirm my own commitment to personal honor and integrity in all matters large and small."

30 Derek Bok, The President's Report 1986-87, reprinted in Harvard Magazine, May-June, 1988, p. 45.

31 The argument offered by advocates of the status quo is a utilitarian one suggesting that the risk of indoctrination of cadets is more than balanced by the reduction of risks to national security from military leaders whose disposition to obey is unreliable.

32 The content of the "Spirit of the Code," a paper used as part of the Honor Education program at West Point, is as follow:

The Cadet Honor Code describes the minimum standard of ethical behavior that all cadets have contracted to live by, not an abstract ideal to strive toward. Easy to understand and meet, it is the expected-baseline behavior of cadets, not some ultimate state of purity hard to attain.

If the Code is the minimum standard for members of the Corps, what is the ideal that cadets should strive to reach?

That ideal is the "Spirit of the Code," an affirmation of the way of life that marks true leaders of character. The Spirit of the Code goes beyond the mere external adherence to rules. Rather, it is an expression of integrity and virtue springing from deep within and manifested in the actions of the honorable man or woman. Persons who accept the Spirit of the Code think of the Honor Code as a set of broad and fundamental principles, not as a list of prohibitions. In deciding to take any action, they ask if it is the right thing to do.

It is the Spirit of the Code that gives rise to the specific tenets of the Honor Code itself:

- * The Spirit of the Code embraces truthfulness in all its aspects. The Honor Code prohibits lying.

- * The Spirit of the Code calls for complete fairness in human relations. The Honor Code prohibits cheating.

- * The Spirit of the Code requires respect for the person and property of others. The Honor Code prohibits stealing.