

**Military Leaders and Ethical Decisions**  
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***“What the bad man cannot be is a good sailor, or Soldier or airman.”***

***-General Sir John Winthrop Hackett***

## **Introduction**

After the attack of September 11, 2001, some have argued that the attack was an act of war and that we must retaliate against the enemy with military means. Today, our nation is currently at war, but against the “War on Terrorism.” As Leaders, we expect our orders to be obeyed. When orders involve questions of morality, we must have good ethical reasons. Leaders who fail to recognize this risk may give arbitrary and conflicting orders. Thus, few subordinates would want to follow such a leader. As we fight this “War on Terrorism,” many leaders can’t avoid making ethical decisions. While this is not controversial, selecting the best method to resolve ethical issues can be problematic. This controversy becomes harder to resolve because military ethical values are often in conflict with non-ethical values. Military culture calls on its service members to follow rules and accomplish the mission. Sometimes, leaders can’t do both and when a leader can’t do both, the likelihood for ethical crises occurs. These crises weaken the strength of the military and divert attention to things that do not directly relate to ensuring combat readiness. For this reason, a leader’s ability to determine right and wrong is essential to promote and maintain the long-term health of the military. In this paper, I will discuss ethical decision making, a problem some military leaders are faced with in today’s Army. These problems are centered on three different approaches; rule-centered, utilitarian and virtue ethics. Of the three approaches, rule-

centered and utilitarian seem to catch most people's sixth sense regarding the way military leaders make ethical decisions.

To begin, I would like to illustrate these two scenarios:

### **Scenario One (Rule-Centered)**

A senior NCO is out on scout patrol alone conducting a recon and crosses paths with the enemy who fired upon him. The senior NCO retaliates and fires back. However, during the engagement the enemy weapon jammed. Does the senior NCO continue to engage fire upon the enemy or capture the enemy? In a recent interview with 20 senior NCOs at the Sergeants Major Academy, 96% stated they would continue to engage fire upon the enemy and the other 4% would capture the enemy. Should the senior NCO continue to fire upon the enemy or capture him?

### **Scenario Two (Utilitarianism)**

A platoon is on a rescue mission. Two of their men are trapped on a hill and under fire. Both men were seriously wounded and would be dead within a few hours if not rescued. A minefield lies in between the platoon and the men obscuring the only rescue path. The platoon leader notices a civilian walking through the minefield, clearly walking around the mines as though he knew where each one lay. After detaining the civilian it becomes clear that he has no intention of helping the platoon get across the minefield safely. Should the platoon leader violate the laws of war and torture the individual into telling him how to get across the minefield or should he leave his men to die?

### **Rule-Center Theory**

In a rule-center approach, moral action and conduct is accomplished by what is professionally right according to the rule. As Soldiers, we can't know the moral status of any state of affairs without some accurate account. In scenario one, there are two rules that could govern the senior NCO moral action and conduct. One set of rules, the Geneva War Convention make it clear the he must capture the enemy. And the other set of rules, manual on the laws of war or the Rules of Engagement tell him he could fire upon the enemy. Which rule does he follow?

### **Utilitarian Theory**

In a Utilitarian approach, an action is right if it produces a much or more of an increase in happiness of all affected by it than an alternative action and wrong if it does not. In the Scenario Two, if the platoon leader decision is to torture the civilian, violating the laws of the Geneva War Convention, he might reason that his platoon as well as the two men on the hill is happy. On the other hand, he may decide that he does not need to consider the happiness of any particular non-combatant or Soldiers and instead appeal directly to considerations of military necessity. He final decide than any action he take will be morally justified. So what should the platoon leader do?

### **Virtue Theory**

Virtue approach avoids most dilemmas because the focus is no longer on deciding between two conflicting rules or two inept outcomes, but on being a better or virtuous person. Virtuous leaders do not assign values to outcomes or preferences to duties. They have habituated dispositions that make them the kind of person who do the right thing. To get a deeper understanding of what virtue is, let's look at the following example. A platoon sergeant (male) stands at the head of the line in the dining facility; he is simply following a

rule. If he knows this rule is supposed to make him a more caring person, he should begin to notice things. For example, the cooks may be giving out unusually small portions, the food is not cooked as well as it should or could be or there is a lack of variety from day to day. There is nothing in the rule that requires him to do anything about these things. Noted, the only requirement of the platoon sergeant is to stand at the head of the line and make sure every Soldier gets fed before he does. Since the platoon sergeant knows that this rule is supposed to make him a more caring person toward his Soldiers, he is motivated to act to correct these things. This may seem like a simple and inconsequential example, but I think this same dynamic works in a great many situations. Another example is a newly promoted Master Sergeant appointed as a First Sergeant. He or she follows all the rules, but later, after doing it long enough with a properly critical and creative attitude, he or she makes a transition to where he or she is actually disposed to be caring. Once this happens, this individual is no longer simply following rules. What motivates the First Sergeant to adopt this attitude was an understand that is not enough to do good, it is just as important to be good.

In my research, Major Tony Pfaff, United States Military Observer Detachment-Kuwait, stated, "Virtue ethics is what the United States military leaders need to follow—especially in the times when moral decisions can cause suffering." He also stated, "Military leaders should use "special virtues" to determine the traits that have moral worth. For example, a Soldier must fight in war regardless of how he or she feels about it. Although this sounds like moral duty, this line of work serves as moral ends, which constitutes moral value allowing the Soldier to desire the traits needed to accomplish the mission. Another example is leadership. It is a morally valuable trait. Military leaders must establish a list of virtues they would need such as duty, honor, integrity and courage in order to accomplish this trait.

## **Conclusion**

Neither of the first two approaches provided adequate guidance on making an ethical decision in the two scenarios. So what should the senior NCO and platoon leader do? There is no 'virtuous' answer to the question, for that would be very hard to determine. Under the virtue approach, each decision must instantiate all virtues to be morally correct; particularly when one is in a no-win situation. To act morally, the senior NCO and platoon leader would have to be able to employ all virtues without overlooking any traits. To conclude, doing what makes one the better person is the desirable outcome. The goal is not the virtuous decision but rather the virtuous person. Bottom-line, it's not "being a good leader," but rather "being" a good leader.