

Ethic Paper:
The Need to Transform Our Ethics Education System

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Ethics education and the need to transform, by SGM Ronald Cook

Is the Army ethics education a functional concept for our transforming force? Consider the release date of FM 22-100, the Leadership manual (31 Aug 99). The Army ethics has shifted from an act-centered moral thinking (Leader acts and Soldiers emulate) to an agent-centered moral thinking (Army directs and Soldiers memorize) concept. A major concern is not the nature of the shift, but the rapidity and momentum of the embraced thinking. The Army has aggressively implemented an Army core values system complemented by new manuals, mandated instructions, and even issuing of a core values card to augment a Soldier's identification tags. This accepted convention advocates that "America's Army is a values-based institution," and with an understanding of the core values will adequately equip Soldiers for the modern battlefield. Without surprise, mainstream American rhetoric has launched a daily barrage of sound-bytes rooted in virtue ethics to a degree that words like respect and tolerance has become ingrained in the popular culture. This has created real concern that the current ethics education system might need to transform with the Army.

What is ethics? To the ancient Greeks, the word meant "character." To Aristotle, the study of ethics was the study of excellence or the virtues of character. Ethics has evolved to mean the study and practice of the "good life," like the kind of life people *ought* to live. The concept of ethics has broadened to include the characteristics of the good person and the "best practices" in various professions, which include law, medicine, and the military. Theodore Roosevelt once said, "*To educate a person in mind and not in morals is to educate a menace to society.*"

Ethics is the systemic reflection of morals. Morals could pertain to a set of standards and values, even manners and customs to a specific group of people at a particular time. The majority of people act on the basis of a certain moral using a particular standard and value. But

what are standards and values? A standard is a rule, a guideline for behavior. An example of a standard could be politeness. Standards should guide us towards a certain objective, a certain value. A value is the objective of a standard. The example “politeness” could be the standard and “respect for another as a person” is the objective. This example illustrates that a standard is empty without an underlying value and therefore has little purpose. If there is no respect behind the expressed politeness toward an individual, then politeness without a standard has no meaning or value.

A value could be an idea, something to pursue, or even something one tries to achieve. Values are things that people say are important and that something is valuable or has value. For example, in the Royal Netherlands Army (RNLA) their mission statement refers to a number of values and standards that are important to their Army and the execution of the tasks. Two values in particular is peace and security. These two values form a significant justification for the deployment of their military personnel. With the basis of these two values they can establish rules of behavior that apply to all members within their armed forces. Values should form the basis for action during both peace and war. The American Army should consider transforming their ethics and values education system to support both peace and wartime missions.

Integration of an improved professional military ethics curriculum could support both the peace and wartime missions. A vision and goal development for the improved curriculum could serve as a beacon of ethics, excellence, and character for the military, and ultimately for the entire nation. Some goals could include; enriching the intellectual life of all service members in the field of ethics; enhance the teaching of ethics throughout the military educate and training systems, and beyond; and perhaps integrate or offer executive and other outreach programs in ethics for our leaders.

The post 9/11 Army core values approach has great potential of failing due to the inability to effectively communicate and instill ethics beyond even the most superficial levels. The reasons for these concerns of the inability to communicate have two parts. The first part refers to the Army values lacking the application to war fighting as they are not directive or normative even in a broad or general sense. This means that the current program relies on these core values as though this were the case, appealing to them for supposed resolution of ethical conflicts. The second part deals with the instability of maintaining personnel, which is not conducive to the values program. With the struggling retention rate and the average enlistment, this compounds the fact that units Mission Essential Task Lists are expanding with the increase of deployments. The clear result of these personnel issues is that lower echelon units, squad, platoon, and companies simply do not have sufficient time to engage in a quality ethical education system with a broad base, values approach necessities without degrading their war fighting capabilities.

This view is not to attack our virtue ethics in general, but to address views that our current core values program is not suitable for this transforming Army. The current program needs modification to support our wartime mission. The NCOs and Officers should continue receiving ethics education within their unit professional development programs and within the professional service schools. However, ethical education at the Soldier and unit levels must result from realistic training, which indoctrinates concepts and rules, specifically the rule of war if Soldiers are going to benefit in a meaningful way.

The import of the core values appears quite significant, something no Soldier ought to forget. Fortunately, they neatly align into the easily registered acronym LDRSHIP, which stands for Loyalty, Duty, Respect, Selfless Service, Integrity, and Personal Courage. With even the most minimal reflection, leaders will face the looming threat that these LDRSHIP values are rather

arbitrary. These current values were most likely adopted as the Army's own values not due to their bedrock values of the military profession, but through the doctrinal staffing process bureaucracy. The initial draft of FM 22-100 advocated "fairness" and "wisdom" as core values. For some unknown reason, these virtues were deleted during the staffing process and replaced with integrity. This shows that there is no firm bedrock that the entire values system rest upon. There is no reasonable explanation about why integrity is an Army value while wisdom does not qualify as an essential trait for leaders of character and competence. Nothing currently prevents these values from being altered or even replaced as new leaders take the helm.

The deficiency is camouflaged in a philosophy of consistency and codependence similar to Aristotle's doctrine of unity. "Army values are consistent; they support one another. You can't follow one value and ignore another." This supposed strength is illusory at best and actually reduces the core values to vague superficialities that fail to have any degree of normative content. The consensus could be that "we do not want our military men and women to enjoy killing the enemy and destroying their cities." This is a solemn task. "If it is an honor and privilege to bear arms for one's country, as we understandably tell our Soldiers, part of the honor is being trusted with activities that are a necessary evil, being trusted not to enjoy their evil aspects, and being trusted to see the evil as well as the necessity." However, the values are not specific enough to shape the character of our Soldiers. Instead, the core values are so broad that they are applicable to a multitude of organizations, not just our Army.

Consider this hypothetical example. Let us imagine a dictator institutes a core values program for his military. Could he choose the same seven values that we have? With some slight modifications it's believed that he could. Loyalty would make no sense if it referred to the Constitution of the United States. So, it would be altered to bear true faith and allegiance to the

empire. Selfless service and personal courage translate without change to values held in any close knit organization from an army to a sports team or even the Mafia. Duty and Integrity are laced with the caveat to fulfill moral obligations and might seem more problematic. However, this requirement is so general that there is ample room for philosophic maneuvering. The caveat about moral obligations says nothing in relation to international law (*jus ad bellum*) considerations made by the dictator, which can be viewed as wholly unconnected. By the same reasoning, respect is also accommodated. As long as Soldiers are not taking advantage of innocent noncombatants and are fighting other combatants, they can reasonably uphold this value as we do while engaging enemies of the United States. Since the other six values can be supported, honor basically succeeds by default.

It is conceivable that a dictator could institute the same core values program that we uphold. Even if we imagine the dictator to be a rather evil man bent on imperialistic expansion, there is little conflict with the core values. I am not implying that the dictator himself lives up to these, for he need not. In fact, that consideration is irrelevant for them to apply to his military. The Soldiers in his armed forces can still be virtuous people regardless of the character of their political leader.

The previous consideration of the superficiality of the values ought to point to a serious and deeper weakness of them – they lack any normative aspect whatsoever. Because they are so vacuous, they are easily adaptable by a multitude of military organizations as demonstrated above. However, telling a soldier how he should be might be useful in peacetime but does not easily translate into fulfillment of wartime missions. The professional ethics of a military ought to relate to its primary functionality, but the core values do not.

Consider this example. CPT Smith is the commander of an infantry heavy company team. His unit's mission is to seize a vital bridge that the enemy is planning to retreat across. The capture of the bridge will result in the enemy being cut off forcing them to surrender. This in turn will give friendly forces a decided advantage and should expedite the end of the war. Of course, CPT Smith cannot destroy the bridge, as it is critical for follow on operations. As Smith advances towards the bridge, he comes upon a small village (approximately 25 houses) bisecting the road his unit is traveling on. Due to the terrain, it is impossible to bypass the village. As the lead Bradley Fighting Vehicles (BFVs) approach, they take heavy small arms and anti-tank fire. Approximately a platoon of enemy soldiers is in the village along with a significant number of civilians still present. Smith is urged by higher headquarters to keep moving and seize the bridge. What should he do?

Let's ask ourselves if the values contribute to the resolution of CPT Smith's complex situation. The answer should not be surprising. The core values lack any normativity and offer CPT Smith nothing. Pulling out his dog tags and looking at his values card is fruitless despite the claim that the values are the "fundamental building blocks that enable us to discern right from wrong in any situation." In this case, loyalty, selfless service, personal courage and honor are tertiary considerations at best. Duty would include following the laws of land warfare, which would provide some guidance. However, duty does not readily distinguish between the rightness of option such as dismounting and clearing the village with infantry, or attempting to fight through mounted, or calling 155mm artillery fire and even an air strike on the village. It is unclear what respect mandates but a prohibition against killing the civilians in the town is not readily apparent. Integrity instructs Smith to do what is morally and legally acceptable, yet that is precisely what is at issue. The demands of military necessity are in conflict with

noncombatant immunity. The core values offer no mechanisms, like the Doctrine of Double Effect or any other imperative by which resolution could be achieved. The values and upholding them might have improved Smith's character, which helps him to realize the competing moral issues, but the values offer no substantive way out. The lower the level of the soldier, like the specialist BFV Gunner or the PV2 Rifleman, the less relevance the values seem to have to mission accomplishment. The values might have utility in peacetime for the development of leaders of character, but they offer very little in the way of normative problem resolution to the soldiers who follow in combat.

This type of situation is not unique or unrealistic. Countless others can be imagined and considered, and in each case, the values, as written, contribute very little to problem resolution especially in combat. They do not help to clarify the gray areas of the law of land warfare and the like. Therefore, they should not occupy a primary ethical role, but only a secondary one in which they augment some other normative foundation.

Since it is not feasible to undertake a values education program in units at the soldier level, we should simply abandon any attempt. Rather than schedule content empty classes that regurgitate seven words, soldiers need to gain practical knowledge that will help them fulfill their wartime missions within an ethical framework. Soldiers need to know the rules of war, what they can and cannot do on the battlefield. As leaders, we must achieve this goal through realistic training that challenges our force. When we go to the MOUT site, incorporate civilian role players into the exercise forcing Soldiers to discriminate while acquiring targets. Make them confront the problems associated with prisoners, civilians, noncombatants head on during training. In this way, they learn the rules by discovering what they can and can not do. The chief drawback is only that a greater effort is directed by commanders and staff. This might

seem like indoctrination, but at the lowest level, this is not wholly bad. If Soldiers realize that their leaders are the men and women that they aspire to become, they have little need to continually question and challenge authority. Instead, they will emulate their superiors, unconsciously internalize the core values that are now nothing more than another item to remember for the next promotion board or guard mount. Leaders of character must instill the Army values in our Soldiers through action instead of meaningless rhetoric.

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