

ABSTRACT-

Modern Operations place great demands on the skills and expertise of our military personnel. Some legal demands may be unclear or open to interpretation. Practical judgment and personal moral integrity is an important part of officer training. This article suggests that training for officer cadets integrates a component on duty and virtue. Although this would have a philosophical basis it would be part of a practical approach to any applied ethics training.

(The term Western Military Forces in this instance encompasses Australia, Great Britain the United States of America and Canada. The generic term soldier is used for soldiers, sailors, airmen and marines.)

“DUTY AND VIRTUE IN MILITARY ETHICS”

Dr. Gillian Griffin

Both combat and peace keeping operations, have become increasingly complex since the end of WWII. Combat has moved from the more traditional forms such as army against army into what is now recognised as the asymmetric battlefield. Briefly this is a term used to describe an attempt by a conventionally weaker force to shape the conditions of combat, so that the morally scrupulous stronger force cannot advance without violating the laws of war. The Western Military Forces including Australia, although having superior weaponry and operational and strategic strength, face enemies who will resort to means such as using children as soldiers, civilians as human shields and suicide bombers amongst other means. For example service on the battlefield is very different to a situation in which the task is to keep the peace between two warring parties.

Modern situations such as the examples above often place the modern military leader under a great deal of ethical stress. Yet the expectation of the general public, even in these changed and demanding circumstances, is that soldiers will use restraint and perform to the highest ethical standards. Not only does increased developments in media technology, ensure that situations both good and bad appear in one's living room, there is also an increased awareness of human rights within civilian society. In humanitarian terms the Western Military Forces are tasked to serve the common good even though there is acknowledgement that there are political, security and economic ends of any mission. The ultimate end however is to 'bring about peace'. Even though the means, to do this may be necessarily violent.

Those responsible for training in the military forces are aware that moral integrity is as important as expertise and technical skills. The aim is to train young cadet officers who have chosen to serve in the military not only in the necessary leadership and technical skills to achieve the mission to which they have been assigned with minimum loss of life, but to act within military law and with moral integrity. To carry out their work ethically and legally, soldiers are trained and disciplined to the highest level possible. Duty is synonymous with military service. All members of the military services acknowledge and accept duty as being

the most important aspect of military service. Soldiers are expected to obey and be obeyed. This is necessarily so and without this sense of duty to obey, the military simply could not function. Cadet Officers are taught this in the very beginning, before they begin their career. They are also taught that orders must be legal and fall with the Rules of Engagement, that is, what is and what is not acceptable and allowable. However, despite the concern of the military forces with the personal ethical behaviour of its members, the main thrust of the military role in the world generally remains a concern with means and ends and legality will take precedence over morality in complex and dangerous situations.

Duty should be enough, one might think, in any profession, but duties can conflict and the “perfect” duty may not be recognised. Many war crimes have been committed under the plea, ‘I was only doing my duty’. This weakness in duty indicates that there is either another moral theory that can provide ethical guidelines for every situation and circumstance, or there may be no one moral theory that will provide the answer of what to do in every situation. The military have tried to fill this perceived moral gap, by drawing up lists of values, often drawing upon the ancient military virtues of honour and chivalry.

The weaknesses of a duty only ethic have become obvious. These values are the moral goods held by military leaders as being essential to the ‘moral dimension’ of their profession. They are lists of ideals or organisational attributes, some of which are moral and some non-moral. Those that have a moral meaning, such as loyalty, courage and honesty, are moral imperatives. They are not a choice. A soldier is not expected to choose whether to be courageous or not. Values are a requirement of duty and are expected to be obeyed. However, values, again as with rules, are not a perfect solution to ensuring the ethical behaviour of the professional soldier. For example there have been many cases where loyalty, an important ‘military value’, has been misplaced and cover-ups have occurred. Values are not intended to motivate good behaviour and will always be open to a bias of meaning. Loyalty in the context of the military may be interpreted in many different ways.

Rules and military values are not going to always provide the answers, because ultimately character is what counts. There have been suggestions in various articles that there should be some form of training in military virtues. The problem with this is that virtues can simply supplant lists of values and that virtue theory may be presented as a panacea for all ‘moral ills’. Virtue theory will not fulfill this role. There is often a misunderstanding by teachers of the role which virtue plays in decision-making. In fact, except for radical virtue theorists, very few moral philosophers would agree that one ethical theory could perform all the tasks of making an ethical decision. The reason for this is that ethical theories, by their very nature of trying to stand alone, can become reductionist, relativistic and emotive.

The strength of virtue is that the teaching of virtue theory helps one to understand where one’s true duty might lie, and gives substance to, and an understanding of what military values actually stand for. Importantly virtues are directed towards an end and virtue can be understood more clearly when the true end of the mission, which is ultimately to bring about peace and stability, is seen to be the ultimate goal.

If the goal of ethical education is achieving good behaviours, it should insist on awaking moral sensibility, helping new officers to make sound moral judgments, inducing moral motivation and encouraging moral virtues. Possibly, some people would argue that ethical education is only about developing moral reasoning skills. This is not enough. What does it matter if students know how to reason well in ethics if they are not motivated to act ethically?

Therefore, in my view, ethical education requires not only the development of intellectual skills but also the development of attitudes for good behaviour.

The character of the individual is going to play a major role in making any kind of ethical decisions but, unlike rules and lists of values, the acquisition of virtues is not a question of knowledge, but a result of personally deliberated and free actions. Virtue theory, presented in an integrated fashion to other theories of moral reasoning, helps to give strong support to rules, to the traditional military values and, moreover, gives guidance when rules are not enough.

Military ethics is about duty, but it is also about character as well and the two must be presented, together with an understanding of military values. There needs to be a knowledge of the history and principles which are the foundation of duty and military values and the role which virtue theory plays in our lives in decision making. An integrated approach to ethics, rather than a fragmented one where various ethical theories are set out on a shelf to pick and choose from should be part of a foundational course on ethics. Above all military ethics is an applied and practical, professional ethic and should be approached as such.

Dr Griffin has recently been awarded a PhD from Flinders University for her study of the role of Duty and Virtue in Military Ethics. Her research was conducted in the United States of America, Canada, Great Britain and Australia. This short article is a brief account of her thesis. Gillian who is a member of the RUSI of SA is presently engaged in writing a book on Military Ethics.