

Virtuous Combatants:
Opportunities and Challenges for Ethical Leadership

Soldiers do not come to the profession of arms morally neutral. They have been shaped by the emotivistic post-modern American culture from which they have come and must adopt a new ethic which will sustain them morally in life and throughout their military career. Beyond the official institutional Army “Values” and “Warrior Ethos,” Soldiers need to develop personal virtues of character, both to prevent war crimes and illegal actions, as well as to create a morally positive *jus in bello* command climate.

This paper will present opportunities for and challenges to approaching and implementing ethical leadership in terms of virtue and character. American culture, the Army institution and individual moral development will be examined for the sake of considering how to develop a character based training plan in virtues, in order to form ethical Soldiers¹ and an ethical combat climate.

Soldiers are only as moral as the culture from which they come. At best today’s warriors may have had a positive moral upbringing in their homes of origin. Generally however Soldiers come with the predispositions of contemporary culture, a culture which appreciates but does not understand the profession of arms. Civilian society will send recruits to the Army who have the predilections of the culture which is essentially emotivistic. These recruits believe that all evaluative judgments and especially all moral judgments are merely expressions of preference – expressions of attitude or feeling. The challenge here is that the Army is a very strongly

¹ “Soldier” and its forms will be capitalized throughout as this is the US Army standard, allowing this work to have an Army readership.

structured environment with codified standards and norms for behavior. Recruits will need to be trained and drilled in these standards.

The opportunity we have is that most young recruits do not know why they believe what they believe. If their immediate leadership can train and drill (habituate) them to internally incorporate virtues as an Army cultural standard, then these new Soldiers will be more ethical in their personal lives as well as in their profession of arms.

MacIntyre relates that our cultural morality is not what it once was. Historically in the classical traditions of Aristotle's Greece and of medieval Europe, morality facilitated the change from untaught human nature "as-it-happened-to-be" to human nature "as-it-could-be" if it realized its *telos* (*raison-d'être*, purpose/goal). "Ethics is the science which is to enable [people] to understand how they make the transition from the former state to the latter" (MacIntyre 52). There is a presumption here of the potential to and ability to act against our vices and for our virtues, in order to "realize our true nature and to reach our true end," our *telos*.

As inheritors of the self-styled Enlightenment's results, we now have a culture in which new Soldiers know only what they *feel* to be right, with no culturally agreed upon objective standards by which to judge anyone or anything. Soldiers are aware that people can behave immorally (even by their own individualistic standard), and know how they should *not* behave, but there are no socially universal standards for what *should/could* be – how they *should* be. Soldiers will need to see their new *telos* as moral warriors who dutifully and selflessly serve each other, the people, and Constitution of the United States. They need to inculcate virtues of who we all *should* be, both individually and corporately.

The goal then is an ethical Army institutionally made up of Soldiers of character. The Just War Tradition, both in *Jus in Bello* as well as understanding *Jus ad Bellum*, is one

expression of the moral character of well formed Soldiers. The former *in bello* informs and forms that Soldier to be ethical in combat. The latter *ad bellum* enables the Soldier to understand the greater context for why he or she fights, and the moral implications of fighting.

In *Jus in bello*, the Soldier is in the conflict and the just war tradition morally (verses legally *vis-à-vis* Rules of Engagement) directs how combatants *should* act. The Soldier will show distinction or discrimination, commonly called “positive ID” of the target. The Soldier will conduct acts of war only towards positively identified enemy combatants, and not towards non-combatants caught in circumstances they did not create. The prohibited acts include engaging civilian residential areas that have no military value and committing acts of terrorism or reprisal against ordinary civilians.

An understanding of Proportionality will prevent the Soldier from attacking a military objective knowing that the incidental civilian injuries would be clearly excessive in relation to the anticipated military advantage. And finally, military necessity will ensure the principle of minimum force necessary. An attack or action must be intended to help in the military defeat of the enemy, it must be an attack on a military objective, and the harm caused to civilians or civilian property must be minimal and not excessive in relation to the concrete and direct military advantage anticipated. This principle is meant to limit excessive and unnecessary death and destruction. This not only best enables mission accomplishment, but it also undergirds the individual and corporate ethic.

For *Jus ad Bellum*, Soldiers should understand why they are being sent to war. Although these considerations are at the national strategic level and young enlistees or officers will not have direct input into national decision making *ad bellum*, they need to understand the effect of their decisions on national policy. And if a Soldier’s conscience is resolute that the nation’s

cause is not just according to the *Jus ad bellum* principles, that Soldier can refuse to fight for the sake of conscience and face the legal consequences of that decision. In other words, selective conscientious objection *does* exist – one could disobey a legal order for the sake of conscience, incarcerated.

Implicit in the Just War Tradition (especially “last resort”) is the presumption against fighting, and should we fight, Soldiers should expect that the nation’s cause is just, that a legitimate authority has committed troops to combat, that a right intention exists to correct an actual wrong, that a high probability of success exists, that proportionally more good will be done than harm, and that their personal exposure to unlimited liability on behalf of the state is indeed the last reasonable resort.

To accomplish these Just War changes institutionally, the Army must change its approach to moral conduct, beyond jargon and slogans. We need an Army of Soldiers with virtuous character, not lists of untethered values and ethos. “Virtue” better than “values” define the character needed to be, know and do what is *right*. The Army even enjoins this in its Field Manual on Leadership, FM 6-22. What is central to this manual on leadership is the trait of moral character. The FM understands this:

“Character, a person’s moral and ethical qualities, helps determine what is right and gives a leader motivation to do what is appropriate, regardless of the circumstances or the consequences. An informed ethical conscience consistent with the Army Values strengthens leaders to make the right choices when faced with tough issues. Since Army leaders seek to do what is right and inspire others to do the same, they must embody these values” (35).

I would modify this in that the living out of the Army Values must be consistent with one’s ethic – an ethic of Virtues. Virtuous moral character is logically prior and should evidence in loyalty to others, duty to mission, etc. This will allow definite character development and more concrete practices which give better content to what would otherwise be vague *ex-nihilo* ideals in the 7

Army Values and the Warrior Ethos. The locus therefore for morally living is internal; it is character based, and more consistent with FM 6-22 than any other ethical construct.

Aristotle's "classical view of man" is the best starting point for a military context. The Greek virtues (or excellences) were courage, friendship, and fidelity, and these virtues held their import within their social context. Aquinas' Augustinian-Aristotelian combination of the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love, as well as the four cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, courage, and temperance offer the core of the ethical competencies proposed. The theological virtues can be included if they are carefully and broadly framed in the domain of the human spirit without violating the Establishment Clause, that one can have faith in one's God and our civil Constitution, hope regarding one's movement towards God and what makes us better, and love as an unconditional commitment to one's God and each other. As a Christian Chaplain, endorsed to the US Army to remain faithful to the tenets of my endorsing agent, I am free to point to faith, with Soldiers of like faith. For those of other or non-faith backgrounds in a religiously pluralistic environment, the virtues can still be presented without citing sacred texts *per se*. These virtues, when taught, drilled, modeled and coached, will help to change the institutional climate.

Individually, Soldiers by virtue of their voluntary enlistment have already gone through a self-selection process. Most understand a vague notion of Army standards before arriving at basic training. Beyond the tales of the Army recruiter, new Soldiers expect a life with some notion of service and duty, with concepts of honor, selflessness and loyalty. Yet when these virtues are positively modeled, trained and habituated (especially by Drill Sergeants from "day 1"), Soldiers will be able to develop the virtuous character and moral capacity for *jus in bello*.

This formation in virtues will have to be practical and realistically oriented. It will be hard and fast and enable discernment on the Soldier's part. Officers and enlisted alike must be given realistic moral challenges in training environments where they have the freedom to fail. The capacity to make virtuous decisions, said Aristotle, requires wisdom, *phronesis*. This is not mere head knowledge. *Phronesis* is knowledge applied rightly. The *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* describes, "*phrónēsis* is... moral insight or knowledge leading to a virtuous life. As practical acumen it differs from theoretical wisdom."² This is in contrast to the Greek *sophia*, which is merely academic, rote learned information. This ethical combat wisdom must be personal, practical and derive from these virtues. Soldiers will be able to be virtuous and live ethically, especially on a battle field. They must be able to discern and do the right.

The scale of discernment is what Osiel refers to as an understanding of "reasonable error" regarding orders which may be immoral, illegal or atrocious. As with Osiel's thesis, the Army must create a "personal identity [for the Soldier] based upon the virtues of chivalry and martial honor, virtues... constitutive of good Soldiering" (Osiel 23). He proposes a "reasonable error" rule that places the burden back on the Soldier *not* to presume the legality of an order without reasonable, though immediate reflection. If trained and drilled well, this decision can be almost reflexive. A moral code of "Martial Honor" and a character-based (virtues) approach will help combatants to "own" the ethical decision making process by living his or her warrior's ethos, from the inside out. This intentional reflection will naturally allow that Soldier to immediately distinguish and refuse an illicit order. These internal virtues will allow the Soldier to go beyond the mere letter of the law of what *not* to do and allow for broader application of moral decisions, "practices," in the moment, e.g., protecting the lives and property of noncombatants.

²Kittel, Gerhard ; Friedrich, Gerhard ; Bromiley, Geoffrey William: *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Grand Rapids, Mich. : W.B. Eerdmans, 1995, c1985, S. 1277

Broad corporate ownership is necessary for success, especially for leaders from the top down, though Army Chaplains have the best opportunity in this training. Chaplains have graduate degrees in the domain of moral philosophy, and have a persistent presence among Soldiers where Soldiers see them in the barracks, in the field of training and in combat alongside them. Chaplains can be/should be the example, or incarnation of those virtues. Many Chaplains know the theological heritage of the Just War Tradition, and have been trained in character formation skills. Other proposals of lawyers or combat arms trainers falls short, though they will need to model and lead this as well, because ultimately it is *always* the commander's responsibility to see to the good order and discipline of the troops in their formations. The seemingly ubiquitous presence of the Chaplains allows them to follow up formal training in the classroom with an informal presence in the lives of Soldiers.

When properly trained with these practices of the internal virtues, Soldiers will be able to avert illegal orders and serve with *jus in bello*. They can be excellent moral exemplars, serving with distinction, honoring their nation and the profession of arms.

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