

A PEDAGOGY OF MILITARY ETHICS
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INTRODUCTION

Given today's fast paced and chaotic battlefield where the leaders are younger and the news cycle is 24-7, the need for ethical military members has never been more necessary. In large part the military does a good job with its ethics education; however, can we do better? In this paper, I will ask what the purpose of ethics in the military is and examine current pre-commissioning ethics pedagogy within the military. We will focus our attention on some common barriers to the pedagogy of ethics, e.g., curriculum, case studies, and the classroom among others. I will then offer some possible solutions to the aforementioned barriers as well as investigate intuition's role on moral conduct.

GROUNDWORK

What is the telos of military ethics? One purpose is mission necessity; military members need to act ethically in order to properly accomplish the mission, i.e., *Jus in Bello*. Another purpose is to create people of good character. Carle Ficarrotta argues military ethics should be limited to military duties and not conduct¹ off duty (Ficarrotta, 2010). I take the position that military ethics must have mission necessity; however, in opposition to Ficarrotta, I believe the latter as well. The American people expect military to create people of good general character. This is due in part to the American culture but also because the military has explicitly and implicitly² told the American people that their sons and daughters will be better citizens for the

¹ I take 'conduct' to be both action (i.e., the physical or mental activity that the agent is consciously aware of and wills their self to do or not to do) and behavior (i.e., the physical or mental activity that the agent unconsciously performs given a certain situation).

² "[O]ur standards must be higher than those that prevail in society at large" (as cited by Ficarrotta, 2010, p. 1) General Ronald Fogleman, former U.S. Air Force Chief of Staff. General Krulak stated that "Character is readiness" (Krulak, 1996, p. 1). General Mundy stated "Reaffirm these Core Values and ensure they guide your performance, behavior, and conduct every minute of every day" (USMC, 1998, p. 2.7). Recruiting ads imply that

experience. As a result, we will presume that the military has a *prima facie* duty to educate character. How does the military educate for character?

CURRENT PEDAGOGICAL METHODS

Enlisted Character Education

At the enlisted level, the system is primarily a rule-based system of punishments and rewards, its intent is to instill habitual and immediate obedience to orders. However, one has to question whether 13 weeks³ can affect 18 years of life experience. A recent study of moral reasoning indicates that moral reasoning is not affected, and in some cases (e.g., females) actually decreases, after initial entry training (Williams, 2010). It seems, for the most part, the military takes a pragmatic approach to teaching character to its enlisted members, i.e., character is caught, not taught.

Officer Character Education

We find various pedagogical methods used for teaching ethics to officers. There are three service academies⁴ each having their own highly developed programs. There are hundreds of Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) programs each having separate programs based on their respective service academy's model; however, they also rely on the liberal arts education from their respective university.⁵ The final major commissioning source is Officers Candidate School (OCS) and the Direct Appointment (DA) process where the perspective officer's ethics

when a young soldier completes their duty they will be a better person, e.g., you [the soldier's family] made them strong we [the U.S. Army] will make them Army strong. U.S. Marine Corps ads where the civilian transforms into a knight, and presumably a better (more ethical) citizen when they leave the Marine Corps. The list could go on but I assume this will suffice for the argument.

³ The U.S. Marine Corps has the longest enlisted initial entry training at 13 weeks long.

⁴ The U.S. Military Academy (i.e., West Point), the U.S. Naval Academy, and the U.S. Air Force Academy.

⁵ ROTCs, at least Naval ROTCs, have only one formal class on military ethics, "Leadership and Ethics."

education is non-military and fully dependant on the particular degree program within the university.

Much has been said about the pedagogical methods used at the academies with regard to ethics education (see Cook, 2008; Miller, 2004; Wertheimer, 2010; Wilson, 2008); however, it should be noted the academies only reach 17 percent of the commissioned officer population⁶. As such, I will focus on the more prevalent ROTC programs.

ROTC Ethics Education

The Educators

It is assumed that if one is an officer and passes the requirements to be assigned to an ROTC⁷ unit one is capable of teaching ethics. Is this the case? The military is very good at training, and most officers have been trainers prior their assignment to an ROTC unit, but is training, education? J. Joseph Miller makes the distinction by delineating between the technician's method (i.e., asking 'how' questions) and the philosopher's method (i.e., asking 'why' questions) when teaching military ethics (Miller, 2004). The military sends excellent technicians to ROTC units. All things being equal this method serves them well; however, all things are rarely equal in ethics, i.e., most ethical issues are messy and cannot be neatly "plugged" into the technician's algorithm. As a result, a few pitfalls often occur at ROTC units.⁸

⁶ In 2009 the Department of Defense reported that 17.31% of commissioned officers received their commission from a service academy, 30.05% received their commission through an ROTC program, 45.58 % received their commission through OCS/OTS or DA with the remaining coming through other programs (DoD, 2009). OCS/OTS and DA do not receive dedicated military ethics education and only receive ethical education according to their particular programs at their respective universities.

⁷ The requirements vary greatly across the branches of service and the individual colleges and universities.

⁸ I suspect that these pitfalls occur in college and university courses where technical practitioners, outside philosophy departments, teach applied ethics courses. I am not implying that this cannot turn out good, but that

Formal Classes

When one examines the course material for a typical “Leadership and Ethics” ROTC course you will find readings on act and rule utilitarianism ethics, Kantian ethics, and the like, each require more than a passing glance in order to be fully understood. The ill-equipped instructors mean well but the results are often shallow and often misapplied theories.

Applying the Theory

A natural result from the formal classes is misuse of the various ethical theories. This often manifests itself in questions such as “What would Mill say about *gundecking*⁹ maintenance records;” resulting in a utilitarian moralization that justifies gundecking. Alternatively, this line of questioning digresses into a “battle” between Mill and Kant, each defending a side, when in reality both would agree that gundecking is wrong.

Case Studies

Case studies abound and are “easy.” Typically, students often apply a theory to the case, resulting in a misplaced application of the particular theory. Group discussions often result in consensus building to arrive at an answer. The lure of this method is that it looks and sounds like moral reasoning is occurring; however, the “answer” is dependent on the dominant personality within the group and not on sound moral reasoning.

The Didactic Classroom

Often one defers to authority in military situations, or at the very least there is a hesitancy to challenge authority, the classroom is no exception. As soon as the teacher indicates that

these professors are teaching something that is tangential to their area of expertise but is in fact not their particular expertise.

⁹ Gundecking is a nautical term equivalent to cheating (i.e., purposefully over estimating or underestimating) or outright falsifying activity, documents, or reports.

“they” have *the* answer, the students quickly seek *the* approved answer over the reasoned answer. Worse yet the teacher “lectures” or “preaches” as if they were the gatekeeper of such knowledge.

Lack of Horizontal Integration

Teaching ethics often occurs outside the classroom yet these opportunities are largely left untouched. When a student does something right or wrong, we rarely link their conduct to the organizations values and principles.¹⁰ A pat on the back for a job well done, without mention that their conduct exemplified the organization’s values, is often the case. When someone does wrong, they are punished according to rules; rarely told the violated values.

Intuitive Ethics

Evidence suggests that the majority of our day-to-day judgments and behaviors are intuitive; they appear in consciousness without us knowing how they got there. Jonathan Haidt put forth his social intuitionist model of moral conduct where he suggests that moral reasoning is a post hoc rationalization of our intuitive behavior. Haidt gives four reasons why his model is an accurate model of moral conduct. First, there are dual processes that drive our conduct, i.e., both conscious and unconscious. Second, the agent acts more like a defense lawyer than a judge, i.e., we seek to morally defend our actions. Third, often times we cannot explain why we do the things we do; as such we manufacture reasons, post hoc, when pressed for answers. Fourth, he cites several studies that indicate moral action covaries with moral emotion to a greater extent than it does with moral reasoning (Haidt, 2001). Work done by Anthony Greenwald and colleagues, using their Implicit Association Test seems to support intuition (Greenwald & Farnham, 2000; Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998; Greenwald, Smith, Sriram, Bar-Anan,

¹⁰ The values of the U.S. Military are derived from the Declaration of Independence, The Constitution of the United States, Section 5947 Requirement of exemplary conduct of Title 10 United States Code, the Oath of Office, and Core Values for the particular branch of service.

& Nosek, 2009). Clearly, we need to take serious the growing evidence that points to the fact there might be something going on “under the hood;” that our intuitions play a greater role in our moral conduct than we previously thought.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

Formal Classes

I do not think that the military’s intent is to create meta-ethicists; rather it is to increase the practical moral reasoning skills of junior officers. Perhaps a different curriculum would better serve that purpose. A curriculum that focuses on critical thinking skills, increasing moral sensitivity¹¹, moral empathy, and open mindedness while linking military rules and regulations to the organizations’ values and principles would serve that purpose better than a broad-brush class in meta-ethics.¹²

Applying the Theory

Changing to a curriculum similar to the one described above would nullify the pitfall of applying the theory. Meta-ethical theories are not essential in practical ethics. A basic understanding of the classic ethical theories would certainly be helpful, but it is not necessary and could be potentially misleading if not understood fully.

Case Studies

The focus of case studies should determine the values, principles, and potential rules used in making wrong ethical decisions, then identifying those elements that should have been used to make the right ethical decision. A proper focus may eliminate the theoretical “battle royal.”

¹¹ Moral sensitivity is the ability to identify situations that are morally evaluatable.

¹² An exception would be to spend much needed time on Just War Theory, i.e., *Jus ad Bellum* and *Jus in Bello*.

With group discussions, the teacher must guide the students, keeping them on task, focusing on the relevant values and principles, and not allow groupthink to prevail over sound reasoning.

The Dialectic Classroom

The dialectic classroom can be problematic, remembering the tendency not to challenge authority in the military, when the very purpose of the class is to have the students challenge the belief systems. Typically, the senior member of the ROTC unit teaches the ethics courses, this can be a distracting factor if not properly managed. The teacher must make it clear that nothing within the dialogue will be used against the student. If the students do not trust the teacher in this, learning will not occur. Whether or not it is intentional, and I suspect most times it is not, the mere fact that the teacher is a ranking officer can generate a barrier against open and honest dialogue, and it is their responsibility to remove this barrier. Moving the class to a non-military setting, wearing civilian attire, and using a semicircle classroom set up may facilitate participation in the dialogue.

Understand that not everyone is at the same level of moral reasoning. Identifying where the student is and asking the appropriate level of question requires the teacher to know something of the levels or schemas of moral reasoning.¹³ The teacher must never tell what the answer is; this often ends up being the “approved” answer. The teacher engages the student in a dialogue that challenges the student’s preconceptions of the question and its answers. The crux of this method is the follow-up questions; the goal is to “stress” the current belief, without

¹³ Works by Lawrence Kohlberg, Thomas Lickona, James Rest, Darcia Narvaez, Stephen Thoma, and Muriel Bebeau are all great places to start one’s understanding of levels / schemas of moral reasoning (Kohlberg, 1981; Lickona, 1991; Narvaez & Vaydich, 2008; J. Rest, 1980; J. R. Rest, Narvaez, Thoma, & Bebeau, 2000; Thoma & Rest, 1999).

putting the student in “distress.” Self-reflection, writing one’s thoughts down, and follow up discussion challenges or strengthens the validity of the newly reasoned conclusion.

Horizontal Integration

There needs to be concerted effort to link conduct to the organization’s values and principles. This approach allows for positive reinforcement of conduct. It is better to acknowledge someone for exhibiting values or acting on principles than it is to acknowledge someone for not breaking a rule. Telling someone that you value their honesty reinforces the value of honesty and the principle of not lying.

Intuitive Ethics

Because much of our conduct is based on our intuition, we should seek ways to integrate intuitive ethics into training and education. In practical terms, this means that military personnel need to participate in as many morally ambiguous situations as possible and required to make intuitive moral judgments. These vignettes can be integrated into existing training scenarios linking the implicit moral behavior and explicit moral actions with dialogue between student, peers, and the teacher to the values and principles of the organization.

CONCLUSION

We laid the groundwork that enabled us to consider the purpose of the pedagogy methods of character development within the military. We then examined the current pedagogical methods used. We identified some common barriers that occur, namely, the formal class curriculum, use of case studies, conduct within the classroom, and lack of integration and offered some possible solutions. We also examined the role that intuition plays moral conduct.

In order to achieve maximum effectiveness in character education, we must integrate both intuitive and maieutic methods. We must set the conditions for success within the

classroom. We must not necessarily punish *wrong* ethical behavior while in training; rather we should spend time discussing and linking our Core Values to moral conduct. The military does a good job with character education but there is room for improvement. We must take advantage of proven pedagogical methods in order to make those improvements.

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