

This is the author accepted manuscript of a chapter published in *Military Virtues* (Howgate Publishing, 2019).

Cite as Peter Olsthoorn (2019) 'Military Values and Moral Relativism' in: Michael Skerker, David Whetham & Don Carrick (eds) *Military Virtues* (Howgate Publishing).

Available online: <https://www.howgatepublishing.com/product-page/militaryvirtues>

Military Virtues and Moral Relativism

Peter Olsthoorn

Introduction

Herodotus claimed that what we deem good and proper ultimately depends on where we stand: every society and epoch believes that the way it does things is the best way. To illustrate his argument, Herodotus described how at Darius' court Herodotus own Greek countrymen, who burnt their dead, met with the Indian tribe of the Callatiae, who ate them. They were all convinced that their way was the best way (and appalled by the idea of having to perform the burial rites of the other). Only a madman, Herodotus concluded, would ridicule the customs of another people.¹ But what was an insight for Herodotus – that what we consider just and proper is relative – has become a common place today: those who teach ethics at a military institution will sooner or later encounter students who point out to their teacher that the Taliban believe as firm in their values as we do in ours.² This, then, should prove that our (and everyone else's) values are relative. 'One man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter,' as the platitude goes. Clearly, such relativism effectively reduces ethical judgments to matters of opinion. Although most students who advance such relativistic views think that their argument is rather nuanced and philosophical, most moral philosophers hold that such a position is ultimately untenable – even if their opinions differ as to how exactly, and to what extent, full-blown relativism is wrong. Most agree with philosopher Simon Blackburn that the claim 'kicking babies for fun is wrong' is both true and objective, and think that the same claims can, equally true and objective, be made about apartheid, slavery and torturing puppies.³

¹ *The Histories* book 3, chapter 38

² As a Taliban fighter famously remarked, 'they love Pepsi-Cola, but we love death.' I. Buruma and A. Margalit *Occidentalism: The West in the Eyes of Its Enemies* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), 49.

³ S. Blackburn *Ruling Passions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 317-318

This introductory chapter wants to look at moral relativism from the perspective of virtues, especially military virtues.⁴ Owing to the increased interest for virtues as an alternative to rule-based ethics, military virtues are increasingly seen as the best way to underpin the ethics education of military personnel. Virtues are typically described as stable character traits that are worth having, often working as correctives to our self-regarding inclinations.⁵ Where duty-based ethics focuses on the act, that is, on what is wrong, right, permitted, or obligatory, the emphasis in virtue ethics is on terms that describe the actor, such as good and praiseworthy. This focus on the kind of person one wants to be makes that it has a much broader range than rule-based ethics. Being friendly, for instance, is a virtue, but it is not a duty.⁶ Motives, emotions, character formation, personality and emotions are important in virtue ethics, something until recently allegedly overlooked by other schools in moral philosophy. That does not mean that there is anything radically new about an approach that centers on virtues, though. Most virtue ethicists draw on Aristotle, who held that performing virtuous acts makes us virtuous. Doing courageous deeds grows courage, for instance. It is this Aristotelian view on virtues that also underlies most literature on military virtues. What makes virtue ethics especially interesting for the military is its concern with character formation. It assumes that character can be developed, and that virtues are not to be understood as inborn or God-given qualities, but as dispositions that can be acquired through training and practice. Such an approach also fits the tendency of many Western militaries to move away from a largely functional approach towards a more aspirational approach that aims at making soldiers better persons, mainly based on the view that bad persons are not likely to form morally good soldiers – although they could still be effective ones.⁷

A question that lies at hand in the context of this volume is whether what counts as (military) virtues is place and time dependent, and at first sight a convincing case can be made that it is not. Some virtues are valued in all times and places⁸ – mainly because they perform an important function in society. The disposition to tell the truth and keep our promises, for instance, has important beneficial consequences. Justice is another example of a universal virtue, but so is the more martial virtue of courage, because justice is of little value if we lack the courage to defend it.

⁴ David Whetham already briefly sketched what utilitarianism and deontology have to say on the topic. D. Whetham, 'The challenge of ethical relativism in a coalition environment,' *Journal of Military ethics* 7 (2008): 307-8

⁵ P. Foot *Virtues and Vices and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), 8-12.

⁶ S. van Hooft, 'Introduction,' in S. van Hooft and N. Saunders (eds), *The Handbook of Virtue Ethics*, pp. 1-14 (London: Routledge, 2014), 3.

⁷ Robinson, 'Ethics Training,' 22.

⁸ J. Donnelly, 'Cultural relativism and universal human rights,' *Human Rights Quarterly* 6 (1984): 414

But if we take a closer look at courage, it also becomes clear that we should not overestimate the consensus on virtues: although all societies value courage, the kind of courage they prize may vary greatly. Aristotle, for instance, famously defined courage in his *Nicomachean Ethics* as the mean between rashness and cowardice,⁹ and thought that this virtue is especially needed in battle – a brave man does not fear a noble death in war.¹⁰ This conception of courage as a mean fitted the Greek phalanx very well, as an excess or a deficiency of courage would likewise destroy the organized whole it was. But this notion of courage is clearly worlds apart from what Gandhi envisioned when he pleaded for courageous but nonviolent resistance to British colonial rule.¹¹ More generally, Aristotle believed he provided us with an objective description of human nature and the moral and intellectual virtues that spring from it, but in fact mainly described the traits a Athenian gentleman from the 4th century BC would ideally possess.¹² That supposedly objective account of human nature also motivated his defence of slavery. Apparently, arguments against slavery are mainly convincing to those who subscribe to the modern Western idea that all people are equal – a notion that was alien to Aristotle.¹³ His idea that people are not equal also informed his hierarchical conception of justice, which is markedly different from our egalitarian conception of that universal virtue.

The question that underlies the remainder of this chapter is not about the relativity of virtues, however, but about whether some virtues themselves further (or lessen) moral relativism. An illustrative example is respect, a virtue that can induce military personnel to adopt a morally relativistic position. In recent years Western military personnel faced situations ‘in which the conduct of the local population in a deployment area (a different culture) [was] experienced as conflicting with one’s own personal moral and cultural values.’¹⁴ In preparation for such situations, pre-deployment training teaches Western military personnel knowledge of and respect for other cultures. And for good reasons: Western forces can be involuntarily offensive in their dealings with the local population if they have insufficient knowledge of local sensitivities, and ‘a lack of cultural relativity in their occupation “technique.”’¹⁵ But there is another side to this: emphasizing the

⁹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1115.

¹⁰ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1107b, 1115a, 1115b

¹¹ C. Gowans, ‘Virtue Ethics and Moral Relativism,’ in S.D. Hales (ed.), *A Companion to Relativism* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 397.

¹² Gowans, ‘Virtue Ethics and Moral Relativism,’ 394.

¹³ See also E. Westacott, ‘Moral Relativism,’ in J. Feiser & B. Dowden (eds), *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2012).

¹⁴ Schut, M. *Soldiers as Strangers: Morally and Culturally Critical Situations during Military Missions*, (doctoral dissertation, University of Nijmegen, 2015), 106.

¹⁵ V. Fontan, Polarization Between Occupier and Occupied in Post-Saddam Iraq: Colonial Humiliation and the Formation of Political Violence, *Terrorism and Political Violence* 18 (2006): 219.

relativity of our values, and the need to respect other people's mores, provides Western soldiers in, say, Sudan, Afghanistan or Mali with a ground for not intervening in cases of corruption or the cruel treatment of women and children.

In Afghanistan Western military personnel regularly witnessed a by now well-documented practice called *bacha bazi*. That last phrase translates as 'boy play,' and involves the sexual molesting of what are euphemistically called dancing boys: men in positions of power 'own' femininely dressed boys who serve tea, dance – and have to perform sexual services. That the success and perhaps even safety of the mission to some extent depended on good relations with the same local leaders who may be involved in *bacha bazi* probably explains why now and then military personnel were instructed to look away.¹⁶ At other times such instructions stemmed from the belief that showing cultural respect was by itself instrumental to the democratization and restoration of security in contested areas.¹⁷ And sometimes soldiers had to do without guidelines about how to act: David Whetham describes how in recent missions soldiers from Australia, Great Britain, Canada and the United States '... kept asking for guidance when faced with situations that they knew "just weren't right," but did not get it.¹⁸ For Dutch military personnel guidelines about how to deal with *bacha bazi* were equally absent.¹⁹

When the political and military leadership militaries fail to provide guidelines on how to act in such situations, responsibility shifts to the men and women on the ground. For soldiers, an encounter with *bacha bazi* can then become a moral dilemma: the wish to further human rights and the rule of law, and to improve the situation of the boys in question, conflicts with their feeling that it is not legitimate to impose Western values on members of other cultures. But even with guidelines in place, proscribing for instance that one should not interfere, there still might be a dilemma: it brings personal principles into conflict with laws, rules and procedures, and soldiers have to choose

¹⁶ D. Pugliese, *Ottawa Citizen*, Former soldier still fights to protect Afghan boys from abuse, September 21, 2009.; J. Goldstein, *New York Times*, 'U.S. Soldiers Told to Ignore Sexual Abuse of Boys by Afghan Allies,' 20 September, 2015.

¹⁷ M. Schulzke, 'The Antinomies of Population-Centric Warfare: Cultural Respect and the Treatment of Women and Children in US Counterinsurgency Operations,' *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 39 (2016): 410-411. At first sight, such straightforward instructions could turn potential moral dilemmas into tests of integrity: it is clear what is the correct way to proceed, yet there are reasons (in this case one's own moral repugnance) to follow a different course of action. S. Coleman, 'The problems of duty and loyalty,' *Journal of Military Ethics* 8 (2009): 105-6.

¹⁸ D. Whetham, 'ABCA Coalition Operations in Afghanistan, Iraq and Beyond: Two Decades of Military Ethics Challenges and Leadership Responses,' in P. Olsthoorn (ed.) *Military Ethics and Leadership*, (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 98.

¹⁹ Schut, *Soldiers as Strangers*.

between following the rules and following conscience.²⁰ If military personnel subsequently decide to look away, their respect for other cultures comes not only at the cost of one's own values and of values most people consider to be universal; it evidently also harms the human dignity and physical integrity of the victims. To put it somewhat polemically: more culturally competent soldiers are sometimes less morally competent, that is, more prone to look away and put aside their own values.²¹ A soldier deployed to Afghanistan explained: 'During Mission-specific Training, we didn't discuss this subject at all. But we did learn that we must respect local culture.'²² Yet exactly how respectful for local cultural practices should a soldier be?

Why Moral Relativism is Probably Wrong

Moral philosophers routinely do away with undiluted moral relativism (yet at the same time make sure not to identify themselves with a too objectivistic position), and although this chapter does not intent to delve too deeply into the philosophical nuances of the matter, it is worthwhile to briefly recap their line of argument. Moral relativism consists of an empirical claim, stating that there is deep and widespread moral disagreement, and a metaethical claim, holding that the truth or justification of moral judgments is 'relative to the moral standard of some person or group of persons.'²³ Students forwarding a relativist position subscribe to both claims, and will feel that the empirical claim substantiates the metaethical one. But does it? And is that initial empirical claim really true? The answer to that latter question is not necessarily affirmative; just think of the near universal prohibition on killing and stealing, the golden rule 'do unto others as you would have them do unto you' and the more or less global appeal of human rights.²⁴ We already noted that also some virtues enjoy universal support. Perhaps there is more consensus than meets the eye. Most of what looks like disagreement about values is in fact disagreement about the norms that we derive from these

²⁰ But even if 'guidelines' mitigate the dilemma, military personnel might still suffer from feelings of guilt and failure. Schut, *Soldiers as Strangers*.

²¹ Schut, *Soldiers as Strangers*.

²² Schut, *Soldiers as Strangers*, 116.

²³ C. Gowans, 'Moral Relativism,' *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/moral-relativism/>>.

²⁴ Gowans, 'Moral Relativism.' These examples belong by and large to the rule-based domain; the utilitarian credo of the greatest happiness to the greatest number suggest there is also a consequentialist *summum bonum* we can all agree on.

values, and about what a person has to do to live up to these values: both those who eat their dead, and those who burn them, do what they think amounts to paying respect to the dead.²⁵

What is more, our idea that the sexual molestation of dancing boys and corruption are part of Afghan culture is misguided; like everyone else, most Afghans think both practices immoral – according to one research eighty per cent of the Afghan population disapproves of the practice of *bacha bazi*.²⁶ Similarly, Western military personnel might see a superior who withholds part of a police officer's salary as merely confirming to local cultural mores, but the officer involved sees it as corruption. That most Afghans do not think dancing boys and corruption are morally acceptable or part of their culture suggests that there is some basic morality that most people will agree on. Afghan law, by the way, forbids both practices. Clearly, corruption and the sexual molesting of children do not stand up against internal evaluation: they are not defensible within the value framework of Afghan society.²⁷ Often, such practices, sometimes defended by claiming that the idea of human rights is too Western, have only the loosest of connections with local culture.²⁸

But even if most or all Afghans thought that child molesting was right, would that really imply that we should respect their position? Most will hold not, because they believe child molesting is a clear violation of important external standards; condoning every practice that meets internal standards would overlook that we are also member of a more cosmopolitan moral community.²⁹ That the majority in certain societies endorsed or endorses certain practices – say slavery, or female genital mutilation – does not make these practices right. Thinking that a practice is 'right' if a majority in a society agree with it would, first of all undercut any criticism we might want to level at a society (and that could be our own society) that permits slavery or any other abhorrent practice. As long as the majority supports slavery, they will represent the norm, and from a relativist position those who oppose it would be mistaken. Until, of course, for some reason the abolishers have become the majority.³⁰ In the same way, if relativists were right we could not reasonably say that the small minority of US southerners that opposed slavery in the nineteenth century, or the equally small

²⁵ M. Sheenan, 'Moral Relativism' in R.E. Ashcroft, A. Dawson, H. Draper and J.R. McMillan, *Principles of Health Care Ethics, Second Edition* (John Wiley & Sons, 2007), 94. See also Donnelly, 'Cultural Relativism,' 404-5.

²⁶ The West ousted the Taliban for a variety of reasons, but their poor human rights record was certainly among them. However, the Taliban did suppress the practice of *bacha bazi* during their years in power; it resurfaced after the Taliban reign ended. To complicate things a bit more: most Afghans, although opposed to *bacha bazi*, do not think that Western military personnel should intervene. Schut, *Soldiers as Strangers*.

²⁷ See also Donnelly, 'Cultural relativism,' 406.

²⁸ Donnelly, 'Cultural relativism.'

²⁹ Donnelly, 'Cultural relativism,' 407.

³⁰ See also W.H. Shaw, *Utilitarianism and the Ethics of War* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 12; Whetham, 'ABCA Coalition Operations,' 93.

minority in Germany that resisted the Nazi regime a century later, were acting morally in doing so. That is an outlandish point of view for many reasons, one of the more important ones being that it is criticism from within a society that can work as a catalyst for moral progress.³¹ Soldiers on mission sometimes end up believing that ‘the situation is culturally determined and therefore unchangeable,’ when it is in fact not.³² Gradual moral disengagement plays a role to: referring to *bacha bazi*, a member of the Dutch military explained that ‘[t]he peculiar thing is that it becomes more and more “normal,” which is a phenomenon known as “mission creep.” ... After six months, you start to adjust and start to assimilate local customs and we practically never talked about it, you get used to it.’³³

Embracing the relativist position would not only make moral progress less likely to happen, however; it would also effectively do away with the idea that moral progress exists in the first place.³⁴ We would have no ground to say that a society that has abolished slavery, or the use of the rack on suspects and the drawing and quartering of those who confess, is better than a society that still permits these practices. In *The Code of the Warrior* Shannon French gives us the (in the debate about moral relativism more often used) example of Tsujigiri: after receiving a new sword, a samurai tests whether it is sharp enough to cut an adversary in two by trying it out on a random peasant passing by.³⁵ It is difficult to see how abandoning such a practice could *not* amount to moral progress. Only the most radical forms of relativism do not see a role for at least some very basic rights to serve as a check on all too particularistic practices.³⁶ Not speaking out against such practices also overlooks that tolerance is, like respect, a matter of reciprocity: there is no obligation to ‘bear’ the intolerant.³⁷

But although all-out moral relativism is unattainable, a certain modesty is in place when we are confronted with cultural practices that are alien to us – as Herodotus already reminded us, our own deeply held convictions might be more a product of our cultural surrounding than we like to think. That courage meant very different things to Aristotle and Ghandi, as we noted earlier, points in the same direction. That leaves us with the not so spectacular yet probably correct conclusion that

³¹ Kwame Appiah shows in his book *The Honor Code* how something that was once thought honourable can be turned relatively quickly into something to laugh about, as happened to the practice of duelling in Great Britain, or as something backward, which was the fate of foot binding in China. A. K. Appiah, *The Honor Code* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010), especially 51, 100, 162.

³² Schut, *Soldiers as Strangers*, 94.

³³ Schut, *Soldiers as Strangers*, 116.

³⁴ See also Shaw, *Utilitarianism and the Ethics of War*, 12; Whetham, ‘ABCA Coalition Operations,’ 93.

³⁵ S.E. French, *The Code of the Warrior* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003); see also Sheehan, ‘Moral Relativism,’ 95.

³⁶ See also Donnelly, ‘Cultural relativism.’

³⁷ Forst, Rainer, ‘Toleration,’ *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2017 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2017/entries/toleration/>>.

the truth lies somewhere between radical relativism and radical universalism.³⁸ But which virtues would fit such a middle position best?

Virtues Needed (and not Needed)

Established virtues such as courage dominate the lists of virtues and values of most militaries.³⁹ It is also these virtues that will typically be in the foreground in the literature on military virtues – with chapters on wisdom, patience, temperance, humility and compassion, this volume is partly an exception that rule. But although there is evidently still an important role for the conventional soldierly virtues, it is equally evident that, however instrumental in attaining the objectives of the military, they are not particularly helpful to military personnel confronted with ‘morally and culturally critical situations’⁴⁰ such as corruption or child abuse. Because military personnel today have to deal with more than just opposing forces, that is a cause for some concern. The virtues we teach military personnel should suit their task, and today that are not only the more martial ones. But we have also seen that a less archetypal military virtue like respect does more harm than good if it provides soldier with a ground to look away. It is therefore important that respect is balanced by other virtues that can function as correctives to too much relativism. To that purpose, we first examine another military virtue that has a less bellicose ring to it, moral courage, and briefly juxtapose it against another possible candidate, the somewhat related virtue of integrity.

We already noted that Aristotle equated courage with physical courage on the battlefield.⁴¹ But although physical courage is an important and for a soldier a defining virtue, it primarily benefits colleagues and the larger organization. Aristotle paid no attention to the just as important virtue of moral courage, which has a much wider reach. Where military virtues such as physical courage are rather functional (loyalty, obedience and discipline are other examples) and aim mainly at good outcomes for the military, moral courage is a more outward looking virtue the beneficiaries of which are the outsiders the military is there to protect.⁴² Although some will hold physical courage in higher regard than moral courage because in case of the latter it is ‘only’ one’s reputation that is at risk, this underrates the degree to which people fear the censure of those whose judgment matters to them. Moral courage asks us to uphold our principles even if others disagree, and perhaps hold us in

³⁸ See also for instance Donnelly, ‘Cultural Relativism.’

³⁹ P. Robinson, ‘Ethics training and development in the military,’ *Parameters* (2007), Spring

⁴⁰ Schut, ‘*Soldiers as Strangers*.’

⁴¹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1115a.

⁴² In the end this is in the interest of soldiers too: the inability to prevent unethical conduct can cause moral injury. B. T.Litz, N. Stein, E. Delaney, L. Lebowitz, W. P.Nash, C. Silva & S. Maguen, ‘Moral injury and moral repair in war veterans: A preliminary model and intervention strategy,’ *Clinical psychology review*, 29 (2009).

contempt for sticking to them; it requires ‘the capacity to overcome the fear of shame and humiliation in order to admit one’s mistakes, to confess a wrong, to reject evil conformity, to denounce injustice, and to defy immoral or imprudent orders.’⁴³ This ability to withstand censure from friends and colleagues if that is what doing right requires is an important subspecies of courage. A paradigmatic example of some time ago is Hugh Thompson, Jr., the helicopter pilot who did everything in his power to stop his fellow US soldiers from killing Vietnamese villagers in My Lai in 1968, and reported the incident to his superiors afterwards.

On first sight, moral courage is somewhat akin to integrity, as they both expect us to uphold our principles when others disagree. But there is an important difference between integrity and moral courage: the latter aims at a moral end outside oneself, whereas integrity is in its everyday meaning (which is somewhat different from the meaning it has in the chapter on integrity in this volume) about standing up for one’s personal beliefs – meaning that committed slave holders and devout Nazis could also claim to possess this good quality as long as they live by their own principles. Although we *could* say that such persons possess integrity, we reserve the term morally courageous for those who speak out against them. Whether integrity works out for the good depends on the values someone actually adheres to. That makes integrity intrinsically subjective, and no doubt there have been soldiers who were clearly in the wrong when they acted from personal principles (and at least *some* conscientious objectors fall under that heading). Integrity is not the antidote to moral relativism we seek, because it is itself a virtue with a clear relativistic core.

So moral courage does a better job as a check on too much moral relativism; there is undeniably something morally objectivistic about exercising moral courage. It is hard to envisage how the just mentioned My Lai hero Hugh Thompson could have stood up for what he believed in if he had at the same time been convinced of the relativity of these beliefs. Thompson acted on ideas about what his country and organization should stand for, not on merely personal values. He later stated in a lecture on moral courage that the soldiers involved in the massacre ‘were not military people,’ suggesting that it was a military – and hence not a personal – ethos that was guiding him.⁴⁴ One could say that moral courage can fulfill the role often designated for integrity, without having its manifest shortcomings.

Moral courage can only perform that function if militaries allow room for it, however. Although most militaries claim to deem it a plus to have among its personnel principled people who dare to blow the whistle if necessary or to stop a colleague who is about to commit a wrong, in

⁴³ I. Miller, *The Mystery of Courage* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 254.

⁴⁴ Thompson’s remarks can be found at http://www.usna.edu/Ethics/_files/documents/ThompsonPg1-28_Final.pdf.

reality military organizations too often offer a fairly unfriendly environment for acting on moral principles, especially when these principles conflict with organizational interests. The emphasis militaries put on loyalty, another quintessential military virtue and subject of a later chapter, might very well be to blame for that. As a consequence, soldiers who take a principled stance sometimes end up as martyrs for a good cause rather than as models for their colleagues. Thompson became the victim of orchestrated slander after the My Lai scandal broke out. More recently, Joe Darby, the sergeant who in January 2004 went to the US Army Criminal Investigation Command with the Abu Ghraib pictures, had to live in protective custody after his name became public. Some soldiers who did intervene to stop child abuse in Afghanistan saw their careers within the military jeopardized.⁴⁵

Conclusion

That there exists disagreement on what is right and what is wrong does not mean that we have to embrace the position of the moral relativist. That some might think that kicking babies for fun or torturing puppies is all right does not imply that we are wrong in condemning these practices. According to Thomas Scanlon, thinking about right and wrong is 'thinking about what could be justified to others on grounds that they, if appropriately motivated, could not reasonably reject.'⁴⁶ Clearly, the puppy torturer, the samurai who cuts a farmer in two, the slaveholder and the police commander with a young boy chained to his bedpost all fail that test. As human rights expert Jack Donnelly writes: 'Failure to act or even speak out against the grossest affronts to human dignity overseas on the grounds of cultural relativism would be widely – and I believe correctly – perceived as moral cowardice.'⁴⁷ One could say that the military has a role in addressing flagrant violations of human dignity on the macro level: it is increasingly used for the promotion of democracy, the rule of law, and human rights, sometimes among people who do not yet count these things among the values of their culture.⁴⁸ But how does that translate for the men and women on the ground? And how do we prepare them?

⁴⁵ Goldstein, 'Soldiers Told to Ignore Sexual Abuse.'

⁴⁶ T.M. Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998), 5.

⁴⁷ Donnelly, 'Cultural Relativism,' 404.

⁴⁸ "The reason we were here is because we heard the terrible things the Taliban were doing to people, how they were taking away human rights," said Dan Quinn, a former Special Forces captain who beat up an American-backed militia commander for keeping a boy chained to his bed as a sex slave.' Goldstein, 'Soldiers Told to Ignore Sexual Abuse.' Somewhat similar: "It's disgusting," said Schouten, now retired after eight years in the military. "We're telling people that we're trying to build a nation there and we let this happen?" Pugliese, 'Former Soldier Fights to Protect Afghan Boys.'

Militaries traditionally found the answer to that last question in providing clear rules. That emphasis on rules makes sense in many aspects, most of all because it provides both military personnel and outsiders, say the local population in a mission area, with some security regarding the way they are treated. Such a confidence in the salutary power of rules has its downsides, though, for instance that rules are impotent when no one is around and lack the flexibility necessary in today's missions. Also, rules are often more about inducing people to refrain from unethical behavior than about motivating them to behave humanely.⁴⁹ But perhaps the most important drawback of an overreliance on rules is that it can impede the ability to see the moral aspect of what one is doing (or not doing), while that ability is evidently an important prerequisite for morally sound decision making. Soldiers should have some leeway in that decision making to keep them from committing so-called 'crimes of obedience.'⁵⁰

Making good use of this leeway presupposes a virtuous disposition, and many militaries hence see a virtue based approach to ethics as an important complement to rules imposed from above in their effort to make their personnel behave ethically. This volume aims to help militaries in that effort. Virtues such as those elaborated on in the following chapters can provide guidance to military personnel in ambiguous situations, where providing general rules and guidelines for such complex situations will not work – and where militaries are hence disinclined to give them. We have seen how moral courage is an example of a virtue that can form an antidote to too radical forms of relativism, and the accompanying tendency to put aside one's own values. It can be of help in morally complicated missions, but so can some of the other essential virtues developed in this book.

Some might feel we need a more cosmopolitan set of militaries virtues. If true, that still does not mean we have to design a new set of virtues from scratch. Of the four time-proven cardinal virtues of courage, wisdom, temperance and justice, only courage has made it to the traditional lists of military virtues and values. Wisdom, temperance and justice have not, but are today probably as necessary as courage is. Happily, all three have their own chapter in this volume. Another way forward would be to interpret the existing virtues somewhat less narrowly. Conceptions of courage should include moral courage, as we have seen, but likewise militaries could, for instance, interpret loyalty in such a way as that it includes loyalty to a profession, not just loyalty to one's group and

⁴⁹ A. Bandura, Selective moral disengagement in the exercise of moral agency. *Journal of moral education* (2002), 31.

⁵⁰ H. C. Kelman and V. L. Hamilton, *Crimes of obedience: Toward a social psychology of authority and responsibility* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989). A recent handbook on military ethics states that 'in any situation where law and ethics set different standards, a member of the military profession will follow the higher standard, inevitably the one required by ethics.' S. Coleman, *Military Ethics*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 268.

organization. The following chapters provide ways forward for such more comprehensive interpretations too.

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