

Military Ethics and Virtues

An interdisciplinary approach for the
21st century

Peter Olsthoorn



Cass Military Studies

Military Ethics and Virtues

This book examines the role of military virtues in modern armies.

Most militaries cling to traditional interpretations of military virtues – such as honor, courage, and loyalty – yet these may no longer be practical in modern conflicts. In the current understanding of these virtues there is, for example, little which regulates the conduct of military personnel towards those they are supposed to be protecting, nor do they take into account the new constraints military personnel face, imposed by critical public opinion and media coverage. These traditional virtues are mainly beneficial to colleagues and the military organization, not to outsiders such as the local population. As a result, troops trained for combat sometimes experience difficulty in adjusting to the less aggressive ways of working needed to win the hearts and minds of local populations after major combat is over. It can be argued that today's missions call for virtues that are more inclusive than the traditional ones, which are mainly about enhancing military effectiveness, but a convincing case can be made that a lot can already be won by interpreting these traditional virtues in different ways. This volume offers an integrated approach, dealing with the most important of the traditional military virtues, exploring their possible relevance and suggesting new, more inclusive ways of interpreting them, adjusted to the military tasks of the twenty-first century.

The book will be of much interest to students of military ethics, philosophy, war and conflict studies in general.

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First published 2011
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
270 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2010.

To purchase your own copy of this or any of Taylor & Francis or Routledge's collection of thousands of eBooks please go to www.eBookstore.tandf.co.uk.

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A catalog record has been requested for this book

ISBN 0-203-84082-8 Master e-book ISBN

ISBN13: 978-0-415-58006-9 (hbk)

ISBN13: 978-0-203-84082-5 (ebk)

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Acknowledgments

The chapters on honor, courage, and integrity are partly based on earlier work published in Routledge's *Journal of Military Ethics*. The chapter that deals with loyalty draws on a paper presented in 2008 at the conference *New Wars and New Soldiers: Ethical Challenges in the Modern Military* (organized by the Centre for Applied Philosophy and Public Ethics, University of Melbourne), and that will be published by Ashgate as a book chapter, titled "Loyalty and professionalization in the military," in a volume called *New Wars and New Soldiers: Military Ethics in the Contemporary World* (eds. Jessica Wolfendale and Paolo Tripodi). I am grateful for Ashgate's permission to reuse some of the material of that chapter. Also, I am very much indebted to my colleagues Twan Hendricks and Harry Kirkels for improving the English of the manuscript, and to Maarten Rothman and the reviewers of Routledge for their useful comments.

1 Virtue ethics and the military

In recent years, a number of military historians have brought forward the thesis that the West, since the days of the ancient Greeks, has its own specific way of waging war, branded the *Western Way of War* by one author (Hanson 1989, 2002), which has a number of characteristics that make it both bloody and successful. Supposedly, at the basis of its victories are organization, discipline and, most of all, a lack of restraint (other than, at times, the distinction between combatants and non-combatants). Some hold that it is mainly by these characteristics that Western militaries, from the Greek phalanxes that battled Persian forces at Marathon in 490BC to the colonial wars European powers fought in more recent times, have brought carnage to their non-Western adversaries with minimal losses. In contrast, the non-Western tradition – more widespread in both time and, at least until recently, space – is purportedly a lot less organized and often limited by, for instance, rituals and taboos that greatly increase the chances of surviving combat. Yet, there are those who believe that it is as a consequence of these self-imposed limitations that, in the past at least, militaries belonging to this tradition in general have lost their battles when they fought more ruthless Western armed forces.

Today's restraints for military personnel

If ever there was such an identifiable Western tradition (see for a critique Lynn 2003), today this dichotomy between Western and non-Western ways of war seems to be a lot less straightforward. As has been mentioned in numerous other introductory chapters, for most militaries in the West the core tasks changed radically following the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the reduced risk of a major conflict, and shifted from the conventional task of national defense to the handling of international crises in its broadest sense, ranging from humanitarian missions to regular warfare. At a time when the capacity for destruction is greater than ever, these new operations, even if they on occasion effectively boil down to traditional warfare, often require a lot of restraint on the side of Western military personnel. This is, in fact, considered to be one of the defining characteristics of what has actually been coined the *New Western Way of War* by another author (Shaw 2005). Not too long ago, US soldiers and marines in Iraq, for instance,

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continue[d] to report being in threatening situations where they were unable to respond due to the Rules of Engagement (ROE). In interviews, Soldiers reported that Iraqis would throw gasoline-filled bottles (i.e., Molotov cocktails) at their vehicles, yet they were prohibited from responding with force for nearly a month until the ROE were changed. Soldiers also reported they are still not allowed to respond with force when Iraqis drop large chunks of concrete blocks from second story buildings or overpasses on them when they drive by. Every group of Soldiers and Marines interviewed reported that they felt the existing ROE tied their hands, preventing them from doing what needed to be done to win the war.

(Mental Health Advisory Team IV 2006: 13)

Clearly, in this case, what perhaps makes some sense on a policy level borders on the incomprehensible on the level of the individual soldier.

At the same time, however, such accounts are illustrative of the fact that in today's operations there is, as a rule, an asymmetry not only regarding the amount of military might of the respective parties, but also in the methods employed and, more specifically, the amount of restraints imposed on military personnel who have to do their jobs under the scrutinizing eye of politicians, the media, and the general public. That is not necessarily a bad thing; in fact, we expect military personnel to uphold high moral standards even when that scrutinizing eye is not present. Without too much exaggeration, we could with some plausibility claim that the combined forces of law, politics, an increased moral sensitivity, extensive media coverage, and public opinion, both at home and abroad, not only pose considerable limitations on Western troops, but, notwithstanding the fact that these factors do not always work in the same direction, to a certain extent also help troops to make true their expressed ambition (that is, by some members of militaries) to be "a force for good."

As far as public opinion abroad is concerned, nowadays the focus is often on winning over the local population, something that as a rule can only be reached by, for starters, limiting the number of civilian casualties as much as possible. Western militaries are for that reason duty-bound to exercise self-control when deployed, trying to practice something now and then labeled as the "hearts and minds approach," that is to say: a non-threatening style, characterized by minimal use of force instead of overwhelming force, that is both respectful and open with the local population (see for instance Onishi 2004; van Baarda and Verweij 2006: 8). It should be clear that this method has an important self-serving aspect, too: it is thought to yield better information and more cooperation from the local population, and thus, in the end, increased security for the troops. In fact, this aspect seems to be one of the more important reasons behind the whole enterprise. We see this two-sidedness, for instance, in US General Petraeus' letter from May 10, 2007 to his troops in Iraq, in which he states that

our values and the laws governing warfare teach us to respect human dignity, maintain our integrity, and do what is right. Adherence to our values

distinguishes us from our enemy. This fight depends on securing the population, which must understand that we – not our enemies – occupy the moral high ground. This strategy has shown results in recent months.

(2007)

That there is a self-serving element here does not take anything away from the fact that nowadays wars are probably fought more ethically than ever, testifying that the idea of military ethics does not necessarily amount to a contradiction in terms.

To somewhat complicate this rosy picture, it seems that the strict limitations on how asymmetric conflicts can be fought by Western militaries are, in general, only to be respected to the extent that this can be done without increasing the risk to own personnel; some authors have pointed out that avoiding casualties among Western military personnel is in general considered more important than avoiding casualties among the local population (see for instance Shaw 2005). That is the latter count for less is, it seems, perceived that way by both the militaries and the populations at large in the West. At the same time, it is evident that reducing the risks for Western soldiers in ways that increase the chances of civilian casualties among the local population stands in rather stark contrast to the universalistic ambitions behind most of today's military interventions.

The West's adversaries, in the meantime, repeatedly do not live up to the above sketched picture of the restrained, non-Western warrior who holds his own life dear. As a Taliban fighter of undisclosed origin remarked, "they love Pepsi-Cola, but we love death" (Buruma and Margalit 2004: 49). They do not always impose restrictions on themselves, and, what's more, by mingling with the population take advantage of the one limitation on the use of violence that the West has regularly (though certainly not always) subscribed to: the distinction between combatants and non-combatants.

Virtue ethics

As an inevitable consequence of the restraints imposed on today's Western armed forces, for instance ethics education for the military today partly boils down to convincing military personnel to restrain themselves, even when their adversaries do not. Incidents in recent years have shown that the required moderation does not always come naturally. There is, so it seems, a certain inclination to think that some maneuvering space is created once the opponent stops playing according to the rules. Extra room is thought to be generated by higher goals, which are sometimes considered to legitimize methods normally considered inhumane (see also Bandura 1999: 196; Fiala 2005). To illustrate, after (and as a result of) the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 we have seen how, for instance, extracting information by using questioning methods such as sleep deprivation, putting detainees in stress positions, and waterboarding, has been defended by precisely such arguments. What is permissible in a specific

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case all depends, it is often thought, on the context, whereas in fact it hardly ever does. It is, for that reason, of considerable importance to find ways to enhance the moral sensitivity of military personnel. As laws and codes of conduct are generally considered of limited use here (more on that below), most of today's militaries put their money on character building in trying to make their soldiers, airmen, sailors, and marines virtuous. As a result, and parallel to the renewed interest over the past decades for virtues in ethics literature (which started with Elizabeth Anscombe's article *Modern Moral Philosophy* from 1958 and gained momentum with MacIntyre's 1981 book *After Virtue*), in military ethics military virtues are now more in the spotlight than they used to be (see for instance Bonadonna 1994; Osiel 1999; Toner 2000; French 2003; Robinson *et al.* 2008).

A virtue is typically described as a trait of character worth having, not to be understood as an inherited or god-given quality, but as something that can be acquired, mainly through training and practice. References are often, if not always, made to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, where a virtue is defined as a disposition of character, to be developed by finding a middle ground between too much and too little in both feeling and doing. That idea of virtue as a mean between the extremes of excess and defect has by now turned into one of the better known proverbs of Western philosophy.

As far as the doing part is concerned, Aristotle stresses that virtues are acquired by, and in fact do not exist outside, actually performing virtuous acts. These acts should spring from a noble intention and serve a morally just cause. This latter element was essential for Aristotle: by definition, a virtue cannot serve an unethical end, nor can it be motivated by the desire for money or glory, or by the wish to avoid punishment or disgrace, as virtue should be its own reward. To give an example, courage is defined as the middle position between recklessness and cowardice, to be developed by practicing courageous acts, and springing from the right attitude concerning feelings of confidence and fear in the pursuance of (and motivated by) an honorable cause.

Although virtue ethics comes in many varieties these days, this Aristotelian view on virtues, formulated in the days of the above-mentioned phalanx, is, for several reasons, still pivotal in many texts on military ethics dealing with the subject of military virtues. First of all, the idea that virtues, and thus character, can to some extent be developed, and that one is not bound to an inherent personality, is, of course, very appealing, and not only to the military. In addition, developing virtues is by some authors seen as the best way to prevent misconduct by military personnel, it, as indicated earlier, being considered superior to rules or codes of conduct imposed from above. The main argument these authors offer is that these solutions are impotent when no one is around, and lack the flexibility often thought necessary in today's world. Finally, rules and codes try to condition behavior, leaving less room for personal integrity (van Iersel and van Baarda 2002). At first sight, then, there is a great deal to say in favor of virtue ethics as being the best way of underpinning military ethics education.

Duty-based ethics

Even so, it is not all Aristotle and virtue ethics that form the basis for military ethics today; traditionally, the military has always stressed the importance of rules and obedience. For instance, notwithstanding their possible shortcomings, most militaries try to impose standards and norms by means of rules and codes of conduct. Besides these, there is core literature that is explicitly based, not on virtues, but on rights, such as Michael Walzer's works on war, without a doubt the most influential in military ethics and required reading in many a military ethics course. What's more, the just war tradition Walzer stands in is primarily founded on rights as well (although, at the same time, there are unmistakably some consequentialist elements in both Walzer's thinking and the just war tradition). In addition, there are the works of Lawrence Kohlberg and John Rawls, which are deemed important and useful for educating military personnel (see for instance Toner 2000), especially on the topic of moral development. Both Kohlberg and Rawls are adherents of duty-based (or deontological) ethics, and do not see much of a role for character traits. Kohlberg, for instance, famously denounced virtue ethics as "a bag of virtues approach" (1981).

Duty-based ethics, to a great extent inspired by the works of Immanuel Kant, stress the importance of universal, categorically binding moral norms. Whereas terms like good, laudable, praiseworthy, etc., (with the focus on the actor) are central to virtue ethics, in duty-based ethics the emphasis is on what is wrong, right, permitted, or obligatory (with the focus on the act). Where virtue ethics calls for the development of good inclinations – we are virtuous when doing the right thing gives us pleasure – duty-based ethics asks us to follow these moral rules against our natural (selfish) inclinations, testifying to a much more Calvinistic view on human nature. The best-known example of duty-based reasoning is the one underlying the prohibition against the use of torture, a ban that by most accounts should be maintained regardless of how expedient it might be not to do so. That is, in any case, the stance a deontologist would take. (A virtue ethicist, however, would probably highlight that the most important matter is to be, or to become, the kind of person who would under no circumstances commit any acts of torture, while the consequentialist could, for instance, point out that the harm done by the use of torture outweighs the benefits.)

With this emphasis on rules and duty, this main alternative to virtue ethics by most accounts not only lacks flexibility, but also aims at nothing more than the ethical minimum, where virtue ethics asks for a lot more, including the kind of supererogatory acts the military depends on. In this view, virtue ethics urges us to do what is good, while duty-based ethics merely asks us to refrain from doing evil. However, this interpretation seems not entirely fair to either Kant or duty-based ethics. Not asking anyone to go beyond the call of duty, this main alternative to virtue ethics nevertheless does demand quite a lot from military men and women: moral duties are to be followed, not because they are imposed from the outside and backed by sanctions, but because one accepts them by choice,

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something that requires an amount of altruism and a universalistic outlook that in all probability is missing in not only the majority of military personnel, but also in most people in general. As political philosopher Robert E. Goodin puts it: “What matters more to [deontologists] are individuals’ motives and intentions. It is not enough, for them, that the right thing be done. They also insist that it be done, and be seen to be done, for the right reasons” (1995: 47). Most likely, it is this altruism and universalism required by deontological, duty-based ethics – asking too much, not too little – that makes it in effect less suited for the military and, for that matter, most of us. Duty-based ethics seems to assume that knowing what is the good thing to do suffices to motivate people to actually do what is good.

Old virtues and new tasks

In spite of the importance of rules and codes in regulating the conduct of military personnel, or Rawls’ and Kohlberg’s preference for duty-based ethics, it has time and again been argued that virtue ethics, with its emphasis on character building, provides a better basis for military ethics than duty-based, deontological ethics (let alone utilitarian ethics, if it is taken to mean that precedence should be given to considerations of expedience; see for instance Bonadonna 1994: 18), and it is this book’s main aim to shed some light on different aspects of some of the more prominent military virtues. Although virtue ethics is what militaries have put their faith in when it comes down to enhancing the chances of soldiers behaving morally, this preference for steering conduct by means of promoting certain desirable dispositions is not without any problems, yet as it stands this is hardly ever addressed.

To begin with a minor matter: virtues and values are two things that are not the same, yet are sometimes treated by militaries as if they were. As military ethicist Paul Robinson puts it: virtues represent “desirable characteristics of individuals, such as courage,” while values, on the other hand, correspond to “the ideals that the community cherishes, such as freedom” (2008: 5). For reasons of simplicity, from now on the term virtues will be used throughout this book, as this seems to be closest to what militaries actually mean to say, and is also in line with the emphasis they put on character development and their choice for virtue ethics as the basis for their ethics curricula. One likely reason for the fact that such confusion can arise and persist, and for the fact that in general there has been little attention for the more problematic sides of the current emphasis on virtues within the military, is that, although much has been written on virtue ethics, the existing literature on virtues in a military context is surprisingly scarce.

The literature that is available often deals with one specific virtue only, such as courage or loyalty, while broader approaches, going into the relations between the different virtues, are relatively rare (see for an exception Toner 2000). On top of that, texts frequently do not refer to much scholarly literature that is critical on the specific virtue they are dealing with, and are more often apologetic

than critical, as they mainly stress the importance of that particular virtue, and not so much its intricacies. What's more, the changes in the military's wider environment, which have led to the above-mentioned shift from traditional tasks to new, more complex, missions, have raised some new questions, such as: have some virtues lost their importance, and have others perhaps gained significance? These questions should be dealt with, as much depends on whether the actual virtues military personnel aim for are the right ones for a particular job, and one could expect that today, the proper virtues are not necessarily solely the more martial ones. It appears, for instance, that the traditional military virtues are, especially in their common interpretation, mainly beneficial to colleagues (see also Robinson 2008: 6) and the organization, not so much to the local population of the countries military personnel are deployed to.

This volume, to be sure, does not answer all the questions raised in the above, but it does try to address some of them. One way of doing that would have been, of course, to begin reflecting on, and in due course working out, a set of more cosmopolitan virtues and values that is in line with today's new kind of missions (see for instance Deakin 2008a). A new set would most likely be more about exercising restraint (probably giving a place to not so new cardinal virtues such as justice, temperance, and prudence) than about demonstrating virtues such as courage, loyalty, and discipline. Such a fresh "bag" of virtues is, however, probably not only not indispensable but also, and more importantly so, maybe asking a bit too much, at least in the foreseeable future, from what is, on the whole, an organization that has a relatively traditional culture.

It is primarily for that reason that this book pursues a different course. Instead of devising a new list of virtues from scratch, this volume attempts to identify some of the weaknesses and downsides of the existing virtues and, as a logical next step, addresses the question if the way the traditional virtues are interpreted by most militaries could not be improved in light of the changes in the military's tasks. It is, looked at in this way, not so much the question which virtues should be listed as important military virtues, as it is unclear in what form the traditional ones should best be understood. Yet, what does seem clear is that, as it stands, most militaries today cling to fairly traditional interpretations of their long-established virtues, which might no longer suffice in their present versions. In this book, an attempt is made to show that there is still a place for the established military virtues, yet that their role in today's militaries is sometimes a cause for some concern.

The following chapters in this volume deal with the most important of the traditional military virtues (with the possible exception of the subject of the sixth chapter, respect, which is perhaps a somewhat less archetypical military virtue), going into their possible relevance for today's armed forces, and suggesting new, and somewhat more inclusive ways of interpreting them, adjusted to the tasks of the military in the twenty-first century – the aim of this book is not merely to complicate matters by raising a host of questions, but also to suggest some possible ways for improvement.

Overview of this book

More specifically, Chapter 2, on military honor, contrasts the Roman honor ethic, stating that honor is a necessary incentive for virtuous behavior and that it is even something worth dying for, with today's prevailing view which sees honor as something obsolete and archaic and not as a legitimate motive. Despite its diminishing role in society at large, it is argued, honor continues to have a role in today's militaries as an incentive in combat, but sometimes also as a check on the behavior on both the battlefield and in modern Operations Other Than War. Drawing on moral philosophy and military sociology alike, this chapter also addresses some of the serious drawbacks of the military's use of the honor ethic in its current shape, and tries to identify some solutions to these problems.

Chapter 3 argues that the best-known definition of physical courage, stemming from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, is, in reality, for several reasons not very well suited for today's military. Having done so, a short outline is given of more "scientific" approaches to physical courage, which draw mainly on insights offered by psychologists and military sociologists, and of the problems that are inherent to these approaches. Subsequently, the chapter turns to a topic that is often paid lip service to in the military, yet remains somewhat hard to pin down: moral courage. Although both forms of courage are intertwined, they are so in a less straightforward manner than is often thought; the way the development of physical courage in today's military is undertaken does not contribute much to the development of moral courage.

Chapter 4 deals with loyalty, a "gray virtue" that can serve both good and bad causes alike, partly depending on the form it takes: loyalty to a group (which can range from one's primary group to one's country) and loyalty to a principle (such as justice). Most militaries tend to stress the first form, which brings them to, on occasion, reducing the risks for their own soldiers at the expense of the local population. It could be argued, however, that the focus of loyalty for a professional should not only be with his colleagues and organization, and the second half of the chapter therefore addresses the question to what extent the military ethic can be reformulated so as to incorporate the interests of the local population somewhat more than currently is the case.

The subsequent Chapter 5 is all about a special form of loyalty, namely to one's own principles, which often goes under the name of integrity. Although most militaries maintain that they consider it an important virtue, and most military personnel see it as a prerequisite to be able to "look yourself in the mirror," especially to those working in the armed forces, the notion of integrity as upholding personal values and principles is a very problematic one. For more than one reason, outlined in this chapter, it is very well possible that the benevolent role the virtue of integrity could have in a military organization – because it is in itself one of the rare military virtues that is not geared towards military effectiveness per se – can in fact better be played by other virtues, for example respect.