

Command and General Staff College

# Moral Underpinnings of the Military Profession

An Organizational View of Our Historical Foundations

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A professional military must be led by leaders that understand the basis for morality, that absolute moral truth exists and is knowable, and they must be secured communally on a foundation that transcends broader cultural trends and relies on more than either reason or emotion for sustenance. Failure to understand and adhere to such a morality corporately has historically led to great failures of commission and omission. Philosophy has proven a poor tool to provision answers to the practical questions of how an organization and the leaders of that organization develop and cultivate such a morality.<sup>1</sup> At the core of the problem remain truths, often either overly complicated or overly simplified by both philosophers and religious leaders. A proper understanding of morality for organizational leaders in the military is to understand that universal truths do exist, they are knowable, but not all men will come to understand them on their own. Such an understanding leads to a moral leadership approach that combines methods. It strengthens common understanding corporately and it includes tools, norms and control mechanisms for a diverse population recognizing that a percentage of the organization will never come to understand higher principles on their own.<sup>2</sup> However, at the foundation of such a system must exist a certain core understanding, even if the entire organization does not personally subscribe to the core beliefs, there must be at the base a tried and true support that all can accept as the foundation.

Philosophy in a general but very real sense overcomplicates and oversimplifies the ability and capacity of man to know moral truth. Three main ethical concepts (outcome, virtue and duty) provided to us by philosophers attempt to categorize the way men arrive at ethical and moral choices and this is sufficient for profound thinking on matters that appear unknowable in the abstract.<sup>3 4</sup> However, when taken as stand-alone systems by which one might template a system of personal or organizational behavior they are wholly inadequate for such practical

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matters. In this regard philosophy oversimplifies the entire subject into something akin to a self-help book – one can simply pick a concept and apply it to their actions and life, replacing the implicit knowledge all men possess of right and wrong with an attempt to overlay a system of behavior. At the same time, philosophy overcomplicates the entire subject of morality and ethics. Men of tremendous intellect have dedicated their lives to discussing, arguing and theorizing about aspects of the subject. One could be left with the impression that it is impossible to really know what truth is or how to even approach finding it. True morality is practiced using all three approaches discussed below but it must be guided by implicit knowledge, the only difference in approach and application is the individual's capacity to understand the foundation of moral truth.

Consequentialism, or outcome based ethics, concerns itself with evaluating the outcome of an action rather than the action itself. From an organizational perspective this is perhaps the least desirable candidate for inclusion in a system of morality. There is the possibility of reaching justifications doing a wrong to produce a positive outcome within this model, “the ends justify the means” is an example.<sup>5</sup> In a proper system of morality and ethics there are times when actions are taken that look wrong when taken in the abstract but are correct within the context of the situation. In contrast, as a standalone system of ethics, consequentialism cannot properly serve as a basis for moral acts because it simply lacks the foundational structure to guide choices.

Duty ethics, or deontological ethics, is at once the singular foundational truth of morality and inadequate for a practical system of ethics for most people.<sup>6</sup> Duty ethics consists of the notion that unseen laws exist for human morality and that men can know these laws. In the plainest form duty ethics comprises one and perhaps only two universal laws. In its more

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complicated forms there is the belief that laws exist in immutable form for almost all actions. In the first case, men have generally proven incapable of always knowing and following the simple one or two law model. In the second case it has proven almost universally impossible to know and follow a myriad of unseen laws. In the case of the notion of multiple laws there is also the real probability that eventually one or two duties or laws will come into conflict and cause dilemma. Duty ethics fail when it separates understanding of the law through the creator from human understanding of the application of the law in practical circumstances.

Virtue ethics focus on principles that purport to make humans better by increasing moral behavior through the application of these principles to actions and life.<sup>7</sup> The New Testament, Thomas Aquinas, Plato and Aristotle all propose and support forms of virtue ethics as a means for ordinary men to deduce proper actions but not in a moral vacuum, each began with the premise that something higher and intrinsic guided men. To them it seems virtue ethics were merely a roadmap to assist men in making moral choices.<sup>8</sup> Of the three forms discussed here virtue ethics present the strongest case for a system applicable to most men most of the time. The major potential drawback of virtue ethics is that even a virtue can become a vice if misapplied or pursued improperly. Without a foundation on more permanent things, universal truths, virtue ethics fail to serve as a complete system for ethical and moral behavior.

A system of ethics that functions has the capacity to perform in all times and in all places. Such a system may use some or all of the ethical behavior concepts described above but at the core it must accept the fundamental fact that there are objective universal truths. Most ethical theories acknowledge there are objective moral truths and of those that agree with that principle, most disagree as to the source of such truths. However, it is illogical to assume that there can exist a moral law without some entity that created that law. Humans could not have simply

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arrived via reason universally and for all time on the content of the law. If the moral code does not exist universally and throughout time and space, regardless of culture or place of birth then no objective truth exists. The following syllogism is the most logical explanation; “If God does not exist, objective moral values do not exist, objective moral values do exist, therefore, God exists”.<sup>9</sup> Objective universal truth manifests itself as Aristotle put it in the form of natural law.<sup>10</sup> Plato theorized in The Republic that without God there is no morality.<sup>11</sup> It is not just Western philosophy that conceptualizes the notion of a common law according to nature, the Maturidi school of Sunni thought supports the idea of natural law, common to all humans in all times.<sup>12</sup> It is reasonable to accept that objective truth must exist, independent of human reason or thought and that for this truth to exist there must be a creator of this truth. Any workable system of morals and ethics must therefore accept these facts as the foundation the system and with it a creator of the system and rules.

Within the Army profession our attempt to template virtue ethics into code, creeds and mottos has not fully served us in developing leaders of character, authentic leaders, nor has it resulted in proliferating moral behavior across the force. In big and small ways, we exhibit unethical behavior, even on simple matters of telling the truth on reports.<sup>13</sup> Our system of values and ethics has abandoned its historical underpinnings to what is universally true. America’s Army began and thrived for many years as an essentially Christian organization.<sup>14</sup> George Washington himself issued a general order dictating the Army conduct itself as Christian Soldiers.<sup>15</sup> Individually there was certainly diversity of personal belief but corporately our officer corps accepted the Christian religion as that foundational corporate underpinning. It was the glue by which we connected internal social controls to regulations of conduct to moral behavior. We have thrown out the glue and expect that systems and concepts of ethics can

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suffice, they cannot. From an organizational perspective the only way to right the ethical position of the profession is to fundamentally change the common bond that should join the officer corps as it leads the profession – to return to our historical roots.<sup>16</sup> A moral and ethical system, to be effective, must acknowledge objective and universal truth and in so doing it must acknowledge the existence in some form of a creator, for you cannot have the first without the second. Such a system should as much as practicable adhere to historical cultural norms. In the case of the Army this means a general acceptance, at least corporately among the leaders, of the Christian religion. An organizational approach that achieves that end is the system of moral philosophy I suggest the Army requires at this juncture.

The approach suggested here is fraught with difficulties. The society from which the Army is drawn might best be described as post-Christian making an organizational attempt to utilize historic Christianity as the foundational glue, that gives meaning to virtue and fills the gap between knowable universal law and human understanding possible, problematic at best. Such an organizational effort, if it could weather public opinion and external political pressure, would still face the reality that the bulk of our leadership is apathetic or ambivalent to the notion. They are perhaps sold on the idea that credos and mottos can instill virtue. However, despite the reality that there will not soon be organizational support for such a change and regardless of the fact that it may not represent what society as a whole believes they want for the Army the validity of the argument for such a paradigm shift in approach is not diminished. There is no sustainable system of ethics and morality that does not accept universal truths; universal truths can only come from a creator; the Christian religion has proven to provide a valid way to connect human knowledge of the natural law and universal truths to an understanding of how to apply those

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truths; Christianity is the historic religion of America. Therefore, Christianity is the obvious answer to our moral failings in the Army.

The system of moral philosophy described above conforms to the professional military ethic precisely because the principles I have describe predate and gave birth to the very notion of a professional military ethic. There can be no ethics without morality, there can be no morality without God. The influence of the Christian religion of Western morality and ethics is undeniable and it is from that tradition that the very basis of military ethics sprang. If the system of morality I have described above were to become incompatible with the professional military ethic then that ethic would exist in words only, ill-defined words.

The basis for any organizational system of morality must be centered on truths and glued together with a foundational common underpinning. No simple system or approach, in the abstract and absent a connection to the law of nature, can suffice. Without a shift toward our historical heritage and a reconnection with the permanence of universal truths we are destined to become a profession guided by a written ethical code but devoid of real morality. The answer to our difficulty with moral failings and a search for an organizational ethical system is found in General Washington's general order of July 9, 1776, "The General hopes and trusts, that every officer and man, will endeavour so to live, and act, and becomes a Christian Soldier defending the dearest Rights and Liberties of his country".<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “The first thing to note is that these bad philosophies cannot be practiced consistently.” Joseph Rowlands, *Bad Philosophy is Inconsistent*, [http://rebirthofreason.com/Articles/Rowlands/Bad\\_Philosophy\\_Is\\_Inconsistent.shtml](http://rebirthofreason.com/Articles/Rowlands/Bad_Philosophy_Is_Inconsistent.shtml)

<sup>2</sup> By corporately within this paper I refer to the common foundational understanding that should unite the officer corps.

<sup>3</sup> For the purpose of this paper I have generally used ethics and morality interchangeably because the scope of the paper does not lend itself to a proper differentiation. However, I believe there is a significant difference in the meaning of the words and a great danger in routinely conflating them as the same. Ethics, particularly in the military profession, has taken on an air of laws and codes that are interpreted by experts. There are problems in say, ceding moral decisions to lawyers to determine if an action is allowable. Lawyers are the least qualified profession to honestly assess the morality of an act based upon purely intrinsic principles and are likely to only render advice based upon interpretations of what one can get away with.

<sup>4</sup> All three are variations of normative ethics which attempt to explain how a person should live without explaining the foundational rationalization for the “how”. See *Moral Philosophy*, <http://moralphilosophy.info/normative-ethics/>, assessed January 31, 2016

<sup>5</sup> John Mizzoni. *Ethics: The Basics*. John Wiley & Sons. p. 104.

<https://books.google.com/books?id=AsGbVvQA23oC&lpg>, accessed January 31, 2016

<sup>6</sup> Duty or deontological ethics has as its greatest supporter Immanuel Kant (see Eugene Kelly. 2006. *The Basics of Western Philosophy*. Greenwood Press: 160.) Kant surmised that there existed one universal law, that is to act from goodwill (see Immanuel Kant. 1785. "First Section: Transition from the Common Rational Knowledge of Morals to the Philosophical"). His summation is in essence completely true and complete in terms of a universal law. The problem with Kant’s practical application of his theory, one that he suffered from greatly in his own work latter, is know how a human understand what comprises “goodwill” in any particular case. Kant’s work placed too much reliance on the individual’s ability to work this out absent assistance for the creator of the original rule, e.g. God.

<sup>7</sup> Rosalind Hursthouse. "Virtue Ethics". In Zalta, Edward N. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2012 ed.) <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2012/entries/ethics-virtue/>.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, Saint Thomas Aquinas, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aquinas/>

<sup>9</sup> William Lane Craig, *God? A Debate Between A Christian And An Atheist* (ed. James P. Sterba; Oxford, 2004), p.19. <http://commonsenseatheism.com/wp-content/uploads/2009/09/Craig-Sinnott-Armstrong-God-A-Debate-between-a-Christian-and-an-Atheist.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, Book I – Chapter 13, <http://rhetoric.eserver.org/aristotle/rhet1-13.htm>

<sup>11</sup> *The Elements of Christian Theology, Philosophy, Morals, & History*, Christchurch, H.J Weeks of St Martin’s, 174 High Street 1894 pg 318

<https://books.google.com/books?id=R4ArAAAAYAAJ&pg>

<sup>12</sup> Henry Corbin (1993) [1964]. *History of Islamic Philosophy*. Translated by Liadain Sherrard and Philip Sherrard. London; Kegan Paul International in association with Islamic Publications for The Institute of Ismaili Studies. p. 39. [http://www.fatuma.net/text/Corbin\\_-\\_The\\_History\\_of\\_Islamic\\_Philosophy.pdf](http://www.fatuma.net/text/Corbin_-_The_History_of_Islamic_Philosophy.pdf)

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<sup>13</sup> Dr. Leonard Wong, Dr. Stephen J. Gerras, *Lying to Ourselves: Dishonesty in the Army Profession*, Strategic Studies Institute, Army War College, February 17, 2015

<sup>14</sup> Benjamin Franklin Morris, Christian Life and Character of the Civil Institutions of the United States, G. W. Childs, 1864, <https://archive.org/details/ChristianLifeAndCharacterOfTheCivilInstitutionsOfTheUnitedStates>, accessed January 31, 2016

<sup>15</sup> The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources, 1745-1799. John C. Fitzpatrick, Editor, George Washington, July 9, 1776, General Orders, [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/mgw:@field\(DOCID+@lit\(gw050226\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/mgw:@field(DOCID+@lit(gw050226))).

<sup>16</sup> Dr. Don M. Snider, COL (USA Ret) Alexander P. Shine, *A Soldier's Morality, Religion and Our Professional Ethic*, Strategic Studies Institute, Army War College, April 30, 2014

<sup>17</sup> General George Washington. General Order July 9, 1776