



Military Leadership and Ethics

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Abstract

Leadership and ethics are habitually treated as related to separate spheres. It would be better, perhaps, if leadership and ethics were treated as belonging to a single domain. Ethics is an aspect of leadership and not a separate approach that exists alongside other approaches to leadership such as the trait approach, the situational approach, etc. This holds especially true for the military, one of the few organizations that can legitimately use violence. Today, most militaries opt for a character-based approach for the ethics education of their leaders and espouse leadership theories that want leaders to be strong and visionary. Both the role of character and leadership are increasingly questioned, however, on the basis that situational factors are more influential than leadership and character. A closer look suggests that an interactionist perspective, with leadership, character, and the situation interplaying, is more accurate. It is still good leadership that keeps soldiers from crossing the line between the lawful use of force and excessive violence.

Keywords

Leadership · Ethics · Virtues · Character · Education

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Introduction

Incidents involving military personnel testify to the importance of ethics in the military. The killing of 39 civilians by Australian special forces in Afghanistan between 2005 and 2016 is a recent example of such an incident (Inspector-General of the ADF 2020), while the Abu Ghraib prison scandal, the Haditha killings, and the My Lai massacre already date some time back. Failing leadership played an important role in these examples (Inspector-General of the ADF 2020; Zimbardo 2007; Bargewell 2007; McDermott and Hart 2017), in the case of Abu Ghraib especially at the senior level (more on that below). In all these cases, the victims were outsiders to the organization. But militaries also have to deal with serious misbehavior *among* military personnel in units that are not deployed and in that part of the military organization that is never directly involved in combat. Also in such cases of misbehavior in the so-called cold organization (Soeters et al. 2003), military leaders are sometimes part of the problem. But peacetime incidents notwithstanding, it is because the military is one of the rare organizations that can legitimately use violence and that its leaders hence have to lead personnel that have used or experienced violence, which explains why leadership is so important in the military. There is a rapidly growing body of literature on military ethics, military leadership, and the ethics of military leadership that wants to contribute to a better understanding of the ethical challenges for military leaders but that also wishes to help the military leaders that actually face those challenges. (Military ethics “exists to be of service to professionals who are not themselves specialists in ethics but who have to carry out the tasks entrusted to the profession as honorably and correctly as possible. It is analogous to medical ethics or legal ethics in the sense that its core function is to assist those professions to think through the moral challenges and dilemmas inherent in their professional activity (...) papers in which philosophers argue with the positions of other philosophers, no matter how interesting they may be by the canons of the discipline, are not really military ethics in our sense” (Cook and Syse 2010).)

Although most handbooks on leadership written by leadership scholars do nowadays pay at least some attention to ethics, this will generally be in a separate chapter, often one of the last (see, for instance, Northouse 2021). Leadership and ethics are habitually treated as related to separate domains. (Interestingly, this thinking and writing about ethical leadership as just one approach among many other appears to be a relatively recent invention. Authors of old dealt with leadership and ethics as a single subject. It was not before the twentieth century that we saw the rise of a separate leadership industry (Kellerman 2012).) In real life ethics is, in the military and elsewhere, an important aspect of leadership and not a separate approach that exists alongside other approaches such as the trait approach, the situational approach, etc. Now, the last few decades did bring a number of leadership theories that profess to be ethical, such as transformational, authentic, spiritual, and servant leadership. It remains somewhat elusive, however, what exactly the ethical element of these theories consists of. Paying lip service to the importance of values does not make these modern leadership theories more ethical. According to leadership ethicist Joanne B. Ciulla:

philosophers who specialize in ethics see their subject differently than do social scientists. Studies of charismatic, transformational, and visionary leadership often talk about ethics. In these studies, ethics is part of the social scientist's description of types or qualities of leaders and/or leader behaviors. From a philosopher's point of view, these studies offer useful empirical descriptions, but they do not offer detailed critical analysis of the ethics of leadership. (2004, 303–4).

The argument for leading ethically that underlies transformational leadership (the leading theory today and popular among leadership scholars interested in the military; see, for instance, Bass 1996; Dvir et al. 2002) is that leaders who appeal to the values of their followers are thought to be more effective and to have followers who are more satisfied with their leader, than leaders who fail to do so (while unethical leadership is explained away as a pseudo-transformational leadership; see, for instance, Bass 1999). Such reasoning has not necessarily a lot to do with leadership that is actually ethical (see for a different view Bass and Steidlmeier 1999). The flip side of such arguments for leading ethically is that they lose their force as soon as a leader finds a way to be more effective, and perhaps even to have more satisfied followers, without being ethical. Even so, the importance of ethics is regularly “sold” to military personnel by pointing out that behaving ethically in the end benefits the organization or furthers the accomplishment of mission goals. (Interestingly, also some outside the military have a tendency to convince militaries of the importance of ethical conduct by invoking arguments that are more based on expediency than morality. For instance, Human Rights Watch reported that civilian fatalities in Afghanistan increased support for the Taliban and that taking “tactical measures to reduce civilian deaths” was essential for maintaining the support of the local population that the mission in Afghanistan depended on (2008, 5)).

Different from what most leadership handbooks do, the next section turns to ethics first. The subsequent section describes some criticisms at the dominant ethical approach to military leadership education, while the section after that takes a closer look at leadership theory.

Military Ethics Education

Many in the military see their work as a profession, something that military sociologist James Burk defines as “a relatively ‘high status’ occupation whose members apply abstract knowledge to solve problems in a particular field of endeavor” (2002, 21). Clearly, to label an occupation as a profession is “to make a positive normative judgment about the work being done” (Burk 2002, 19), and professions hence compete “to secure their place in society” (Burk 2002, 23). In a more neutral sense, the term professionalization refers to the conduct, objectives, and values that typify a profession. What distinguishes a profession from other occupations that require a fair amount of skill and training is that a professional often “works relatively independently of his colleagues, but closely with the clients he serves” (Mintzberg 1983, 190). As a result professionals frequently seem to be as loyal to

their profession as they are to their organization and colleagues (Mintzberg 1983). It is that element of professionalism that seems to be less present in the military. That is perhaps at least partly due to the fact that, while professionals such as doctors and lawyers receive most of their socialization before entering their job (Mintzberg 1983, 192), military leaders tend to receive most of their education within the military, adding to the loyalty they often feel toward each other and their own organization. This also means that the professional standards of those who lead the military do not so much stem from universities and professional associations as they do from their military organization. As a consequence, some countries have military codes, oaths, and values that are primarily about military effectiveness and the needs and interests of the organization and colleagues, while the values of the medical professionals, for instance, are not about how to behave toward colleagues but about patients and medical care. A related consequence is that different militaries have different organizational values (often still service specific), but there are no values of the military profession as such. Despite that relative lack of shared values of the military profession, most authors today agree that the military profession is, indeed, a profession (see also Burk 2002).

Some general remarks can be made about the form this in-house professional ethics education for military leaders can take. First of all, that education can either be functional, aimed at making military leaders better at their job, or aspirational, aimed at turning them into more ethical persons (Wolfendale 2008; see also Robinson 2007). (Underlying is the more fundamental question whether there is a difference between (mainly functional) role morality and (more aspirational) general morality. Sometimes, this is clearly the case: a lawyer might be expected to defend the guilty, spies must now and then lie, and at times role morality will ask you to do more than is expected of ordinary civilians (Coleman 2013).) In general, the aspirational approach focuses on *character*, while the functional approach is more based on *conduct* and *outcomes*. (One could also argue, however, that by aiming to instill both “general” virtues, such as integrity and honesty, and more military specific virtues, such as courage and discipline, the military in fact combines an aspirational and a functional approach.) This corresponds with three main schools in moral philosophy, respectively, *virtue ethics*, *rule-based ethics*, and *utilitarianism*. These three schools form also the three most likely foundations for the ethics education of military leaders.

Rule-based ethics underline the importance of universal, categorically binding moral norms. Most militaries tend to see moral issues through the lens of rules and regulations, and setting rules makes clear to military personnel what they can and cannot do. Some decisions are not left to the discretion of the individual soldier. (That individual soldier does not always want discretionary room: David Whetham describes how in recent missions soldiers from Australia, Great Britain, Canada, and the United States who were confronted with child abuse and corruption “. . . kept asking for guidance when faced with situations that they knew ‘just weren’t right’” (2017, 98). They did not get that guidance. But when political and military leaders fail to provide guidelines on how to act in such situations, responsibility shifts to the men and women on the ground.) This is not only in the interest of outsiders to the

organization but also that of soldiers themselves: research shows that military personnel who lack such rules experience more moral dilemmas, increasing the likelihood of moral injury (Schut 2015). The downside of such rule-based approaches is that rules tend to be inflexible, also when that flexibility is clearly called for. Rule-following can also hamper the ability to see the moral aspect of what one is doing, even though that ability is essential to morally sound decision-making. A text book on military ethics meant for educating future military leaders hence 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” (Coleman 2013, 268). Soldiers will often have substantial leeway in their decision-making. This is one of the reasons why many militaries see promoting virtues as an important complement to rules imposed from above. Virtues, in this view, have to provide guidance to military personnel in morally ambiguous situations, seeing that providing general rules and guidelines for such complex situations will not work – militaries seem now and then even disinclined to give them (see, for instance, Whetham 2017).

Now, first of all, virtues have to be distinguished from values, even if militaries occasionally treat them as if they were the same. Where values correspond to “the ideals that the community cherishes, such as freedom,” virtues represent “desirable characteristics of individuals, such as courage” (Robinson 2007, 32). Virtues have also been described as stable character traits that are worth having, often working as correctives to our self-regarding inclinations (Foot 2002, 8–12). Virtue ethics assumes that such character traits can be developed through training and practice. Performing courageous deeds grows courage, in this view. 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. Motives and emotions are important in virtue ethics, something allegedly overlooked by other schools in moral philosophy. This focus on the kind of person one wants to be makes that it has a much broader range than duty-based ethics. Being friendly, for instance, is a virtue, but it is not a duty (van Hoof 2014). That until recently most modern moral philosophy paid less attention to such things as emotions, character formation, and personality does not mean that there is anything radically new about an approach that centers on virtues, though. Such an approach harks back to Aristotle whose work underlies most ethics education based on military virtues nowadays. As Robinson writes, “[t]he approach adopted in most armed forces is that of ‘virtue ethics,’ with their philosophical origins found in Aristotle. Essentially, virtue ethics seeks to ensure moral behavior by instilling certain virtues (loyalty, honesty, and courage) to create good character. Consequently, many military academies have adopted an approach based on Aristotelian virtue ethics” (Robinson 2007, 29). Such an approach appeals to many military trainers and educators because it sits well with the way most militaries see themselves: as being in the business of character-building, especially that of its (future) leaders. Where rule-based approaches mainly aim at securing compliance, virtue ethics asks for a lot more. Virtue ethics is hence in keeping with the tendency of many Western militaries to move toward a 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 (Robinson 2007; Wolfendale 2008, 164) – although they could still be effective ones.

On a more critical note, one could argue that many militaries have adopted this aspirational virtue ethics approach in a rather carefree manner. There are quite a few unanswered questions. For instance, how do we teach virtues? It is an assumption of virtue ethics that they can be taught, but is this really the case? And if so, how should they be taught? Virtues are developed by practicing them, but military ethics education consists often of formal education in a classroom setting that leaves little room for that. In practice ethics education based on virtue ethics might consist of teaching about virtues (and virtue ethics) rather than teaching virtues. Also, it is often overlooked that the different virtues are interrelated: courage is of little use without practical wisdom to guide it, for instance, while that same courage is not a virtue if it does not serve a just goal. Finally, we should keep in mind that the aim of virtue ethics is one's own flourishing and that it is thus not by itself attentive to the needs of others (with the virtue of justice as the obvious exception). That militaries promote virtues with an eye to external goals such as military effectiveness or ensuring the ethical use of force even raises the question to what extent it is virtue ethics that is practiced here. Promoting certain virtues because they are beneficial to others within or outside one's own organization amounts to what is sometimes described as character utilitarianism (Railton 1988).

That brings us to utilitarianism, a universalistic ethic that holds that whether an individual act, or category of acts (in the case of rule utilitarianism), is morally right depends upon the results it produces but also (much more revolutionary) that everyone's life and happiness should weigh equally. Next to rules and virtues, utilitarianism is in theory a possible third candidate to buttress military ethics education. In practice most authors on military ethics see it as particularly unfit for that purpose, mostly because it would make military expedience outweigh all other concerns: "an outcome-centered approach may lead all too easily to military expedience as the sole guide to actions in war" (Bonadonna 1994, 18). Utilitarianism's fairly bad reputation in military ethics is hence mainly because it is thought to make military expedience override all other concerns. Military ethicist and political philosopher Michael Walzer has pointed out, as have many others, that the valuing of "each and every person" in the same way will not happen when "solidarity collapses" (Walzer 2004, 39). Precisely that is what happens in war, where we cannot but expect to see little willingness to take the consequences to all parties into account equally. The atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki is a famous instance of such a skewed utilitarian calculation that "the rules of war and the rights they are designed to protect" should have stopped (Walzer 1992: 263–8). Most of utilitarianism's critics reason that utilitarianism is not bad per se, but prone to be misapplied in a self-serving way.

Such criticisms, William H. Shaw (Shaw 2016) argues in his defense of utilitarian thinking about the moral issues that war occasions, are mistaken, as are most of the other common objections to utilitarian thinking about the moral issues war raises. Utilitarianism does not condone the maximizing of our own utility, as some critics

seem to hold, but that of all. Not unlike J.S. Mill and H. Sidgwick, Shaw advocates a fairly subtle variety of utilitarianism that does not expect us to make elaborate utilitarian calculations before every action; rather, it wants us to act from motives, dispositions, and character traits that have proven to produce the best results on the long term (2016, 31). The same holds true for some general rules, such as keeping promises and telling the truth. Likewise, accepting and institutionalizing a specific set of rights have beneficial consequences. We must therefore adopt these rights (2016, 36) and not violate them if we think that would increase general happiness in a specific instance. Interestingly, Shaw holds that states not only *should* adhere to certain rules and rights; in practice, Shaw suggests that the wish to maximize welfare (or minimize suffering) is also why states and militaries *do* follow these principles in practice. Shaw stresses that one does not have to be convinced of utilitarianism as a moral philosophy to accept that it does have the best answers regarding questions about when and how wars are to be fought.

An alternative to the usual virtue ethics, rule-based ethics, and utilitarianism trichotomy forms the idea of a value-based ethics education for military personnel. Such an approach would put the values and principles of that community to the foreground, instead of promoting the military-specific virtues that are currently taught. An example of such a value-based approach is the concept of *Innere Führung* as used by the German armed forces. A leading idea behind *Innere Führung* is that soldiers should think for themselves, but the values that should guide that independent thinking are societal. Members of the German military are to actively defend, out of personal conviction, values such as human dignity, freedom, justice, equality, and democracy.

Does Character Matter?

Most militaries see a virtue ethics approach as the best way to underpin the ethics education of its leaders. An increasing number of authors suspect, however, that situations determine conduct to a far greater extent than character does. Notwithstanding the merits of a virtue-based moral education, the situation military personnel find themselves in can limit the influence of a virtuous disposition, especially when that disposition is needed the most. This idea goes under the name of situationism. It points out that people tend to make a fundamental attribution error: the tendency to over-attribute behavior to character or personality and underrate the influence of situational factors.

When we say that people have character, we generally mean that they have traits that influence behavior across different situations (cross-situational consistency) and are constant over time (temporal stability). Sometimes, we also mean that these traits are interrelated (integrity). Situationists especially take issue with the belief that we have traits that are cross-situationally stable. They argue that this insight challenges virtue ethics and that trying to build character in order to make people behave morally is betting on the wrong horse. This is a variation on the old insight that knowing good and doing good are not the same (Arjoon 2008, 235). Especially

Milgram's research on obedience and Zimbardo's Stanford Prison Experiment have popularized (also in the military) the idea that situations can make people harm innocent others. Zimbardo's colleague Albert Bandura has argued that people with high ethical standards can behave unethically because they find ways to justify their behavior and as a result are able to avoid feelings of guilt or shame that would normally follow not living up to one's ethical standards (that, according to Bandura, do not necessarily erode). According to Bandura, "there are many social and psychological manoeuvres by which moral self-sanctions can be disengaged from inhumane conduct" (Bandura 1999: 194). Such maneuvers include moral justification (it is for a good cause), advantageous comparison (the other side behaves worse), the displacement and diffusion of responsibility (basically the problem of the many hands – something that has gotten a new relevance with the emergence of network-centric warfare), the dehumanization of enemy forces during wartime, and the use of euphemisms such as "collateral damage" and "servicing the target."

Ethicists increasingly take such insights about how situations matter into account. Some claim that modern social psychology research not only undermines virtue ethics but also some widely shared intuitions about moral responsibility (see, for instance, Doris and Murphy 2007; Robinson 2009). It certainly challenges some notions about the role of military leaders and about how to prepare these leaders for their role. Concentrating on virtues implies a focus on the individual, and according to situationists, such an approach wrongly suggests that incidents involving military personnel are the result of individual moral defects and that soldiers bear moral responsibility when things go wrong. Situationists think that this blaming of individual soldiers is mostly incorrect. The situational factors that already swayed most research subjects in the experiments of Milgram and Zimbardo amount to little in comparison to the situational forces soldiers encounter in combat. Sleep deprivation, dehumanization, stress, military training and culture, (racial) ideology, the role of the primary group, and negative peer pressure, but also the amount and kind of training and education received, make unethical behavior almost inevitable (Doris and Murphy 2007). The strong loyalty to colleagues and the organization that militaries further certainly plays a role here too. Military ethicist Stephen Coleman argues that some of the moral dilemmas military personnel face are not really dilemmas, but tests of integrity: what is the right thing to do is clear, yet there is considerable situational pressure (from colleagues, for instance) to choose the wrong course of action (Coleman 2009, 105–6). As Doris and Murphy put it, "[i]f situational pressures of the sort adduced in the experimental record can impair the exercise of normative competence, we can reasonably conclude that the extreme and often prolonged situational pressures typical of warfare can induce quite severe impairments in normative competence" (Doris and Murphy 2007).

That the situation often governs our conduct does not necessarily mean that virtue ethics is unfit as a basis for moral education. Social psychology only shows that the influence of our natural dispositions is weak. That does not tell us a lot about the influence of virtues, which are the product of training and habituation. Virtue ethics does not assume that most people have virtues but that people can acquire them if they work hard enough. Military training and education are designed with an eye to

instilling relevant virtues, and situations might hence have less influence on trained soldiers than on people who lack that training. What is more, some critics point out that the situationist argument rests on a partial interpretation of research in social psychology: we rarely read about the many participants in the experiments of Milgram, and Zimbardo did not succumb to situational pressures (see, for instance, Griggs and Whitehead III 2014; Perry 2013).

The above leaves some ground for optimism regarding the role of character formation. On the other hand, a military ethics education that does not take the actual possibilities and shortcomings of a character-based approach into account would be too theoretical. The ethics education of military leaders should not only further virtues but also give insight in the factors that make unethical conduct more likely to take place. The well-meant advice to avoid morally challenging situations (Harman 1999) is clearly not very helpful in a military context, but with more knowledge about the influence of situational factors, military leaders can do more to make the erosion of moral standards less likely to occur.

Does Leadership Matter?

The overestimating of the role of character in ethics has a counterpart in the field of leadership studies: according to leadership scholar Barbara Kellerman, people overrate the importance of the role of leaders and leadership (Kellerman 2012). A “leadership attribution error” leads to the mistaken assumption “that good outcomes depend on good leaders; that good leaders are good people; and that good people can be trained, or educated, or developed, to be good leaders” (Kellerman 2012, 180–181). According to Kellerman, this misconception led to today’s thriving leadership industry. Its results are mixed at best: according to some it has not made leaders necessarily more effective and certainly not more ethical (Kellerman 2012). Not unlike virtue ethics, this belief in the significance of what leaders do underestimates today’s increasingly complex situation that often makes leaders considerably less influential than most people think they are. Over the last few decades, leaders lost influence, and power has shifted to followers.

Most leadership theories are primarily about how to augment one’s impact as a leader, and from that viewpoint, this loss of influence poses a problem. Leadership theories such as that of transformational leadership assume that a leader has to have a lot of influence over his or her subordinates to be effective, while more modest leadership styles will be negatively portrayed as *laissez-faire* leadership (see, for instance, Bass 1999). According to Bass, a transformational leader “is charismatic such that the follower seeks to identify with the leader and emulate him or her. The leadership inspires the follower with challenge and persuasion, providing a meaning and understanding. The leadership is intellectually stimulating, expanding the follower’s use of his or her abilities. Finally, the leadership is individually considerate, providing the follower with support, mentoring and coaching” (Bass 1996, 5). Yet, it is the question how intellectually stimulating and individually considerate visionary a charismatic and visionary leader really is. Also, one could also argue that with

today's better-educated followers strong leaders are less needed than they once were, also in the military.

However, in line with most modern leadership theories, many Western militaries still want their leaders to be strong and visionary. (At the same time, militaries consider decentralization of leadership important too. But such leadership can only work if leaders are prepared to stay on the background now and then and occasionally suppress their desire to interfere.) Most recent leadership theories emphasize "the omnipresence and omniscience of the leaders," and there are just as "many military leadership doctrines [that] build on these theories" (Vogelaar 2007, 36). (It is not unlikely that in the military popular view that management is inferior to leadership is also due to the idea that leaders are strong, visionary, and active, as opposed to inactive, merely facilitating managers (see, for instance, Kolditz 2007).) There are a few theories that espouse a less obtrusive leadership, but these theories do not get a lot of attention in most militaries. An exception is Robert Greenleaf's theory of servant leadership (Greenleaf 2002), which did draw some attention from military circles, but on the whole this theory remains rather unclear and undefined (Northouse 2021; Russell and Stone 2002).

But if the role of character and virtues is overestimated in military ethics, while the role of charismatic, visible leaders is overrated when we talk about the role military leaders have, where does that leave us on the subject of leadership and ethics? Situationism and the idea that we are witnessing "the end of leadership" (Kellerman 2012) together suggest that, as neither character nor leadership matter a lot, it is not the ethically behaving soldiers or leaders that deserve praise or blame, but only the environment that steers them. But that conclusion might be too quick: even if it is true that the situation determines conduct to a large extent, this does not necessarily make moral responsibility evaporate; one could also maintain that responsibility shifts from the perpetrators to their superiors. Zimbardo criticizes the assumption made by many generals and high-ranking government officials that the Abu Ghraib prison scandal was the work of "a few bad apples." According to Zimbardo, the "barrel of apples began rotting from the top down" (Zimbardo 2007, 415).

With this blaming of the political leadership and the higher leadership of the organization, Zimbardo suggests that leaders are no longer excused by the situation they find themselves in once they reach a certain threshold level in the organization. The context soldiers have to work in is not a given but at least partly the result of the actions and policies of military (and political) leaders. Political and military leaders have their share in forming (and thus bear some responsibility for) the ethical climate (see also Schaubroeck et al. 2012) that has an effect on the chances of military personnel crossing the thin line between lawful force and excessive violence (van Doorn 1975; Neitzel and Welzer 2012; compare Browning 1992, 163). An unpublished US Army General's report on the Haditha incident (in which Marines killed 24 Iraqi civilians) found that "[s]tatements made by the chain of command (...) suggest that Iraqi civilian lives are not as important as U.S. lives, their deaths are just the cost of doing business, and that the Marines need to get 'the job done' no matter what it takes. These comments had the potential to desensitize the Marines to

concern for the Iraqi populace and portray them all as the enemy even if they are noncombatants” (Bargewell 2007). Looking back on Abu Ghraib, Mastroianni reaches a somewhat similar conclusion: suboptimal leadership makes it easier for morally corrupt individuals to misbehave (Mastroianni 2013, 62–3). Holding leaders responsible is also more or less in line with the common intuition that, after having reached a certain organizational level, it becomes less convincing to hide behind the fact that you were just doing as others did or were merely following orders – although leaders are of course influenced by the situation as well (see also McDermott and Hart 2017).

So although leaders partly shape the situation, the reverse also holds true, especially at the lower levels. As McDermott and Hart write about the ethical challenges for small-unit military commanders who are to explain crucial ethical concepts to their young warriors (in general not too interested in the nuances of virtue ethics or deontology): “The sophisticated commander, well-schooled in ethical theory and social psychology, can keep his soldiers on the right side of the line. However, above all, he must remember the ‘Leader’s Trap’; he is just as human as everyone else, and should he slip down the slope of evil it is likely that the rest will loyally follow” (McDermott and Hart 2017). But although leaders are of course immersed in the situation themselves, it perhaps makes sense to already attribute some moral responsibility to those who have reached the level of junior commissioned officer. They will have received military training but hopefully also the education needed to recognize and counter the situational pressures under which misconduct is more likely to happen.

In the era of the strategic corporal (Krulak 1999), with many non-commissioned officers fulfilling important leadership roles with a relatively high degree of autonomy, there is ample reason to attribute responsibility to these non-commissioned leaders too. In the Australian case of failing leadership in Afghanistan, mentioned in the introduction, it was especially the leadership at the lowest – corporal and sergeant – level that was to blame. The Afghanistan Inquiry report states, for instance, that, although “commanders at troop, squadron and Special Operations Task Group level must bear some responsibility for the events that happened ‘on their watch’, the criminal behavior of a few was commenced, committed, continued and concealed at the patrol commander level, that is, at corporal or sergeant level” (2020, 30). In view of that, it would make sense if militaries gave more attention to the ethics education of NCOs and soldiers (instead of reserving most ethics education for [aspiring] officers) so that they are prepared to face the testing of their leadership that war and peacekeeping inevitably bring.

Conclusion

Many moral philosophers appear to have a clear preference for one the three main schools in moral philosophy, be it virtue ethics, rule-based ethics, or utilitarianism. Yet in real life, most people tend to see a role for virtues and rules alike while also taking the consequences of an act into consideration. It seems that those involved in

military ethics education are practically duty-bound to adopt a similar mixed approach. An ethics education of military leaders should, for example, have attention for rules, procedures, and codes but also for virtues and character. To state it somewhat schematically: military leaders should be an example by displaying virtues, but also maintain certain rules, and take into account the consequences of their own acts and that of their subordinates. At the same time, they should also have an eye for the situation and how it can adversely affect their own conduct and that of those they lead. Even in a time that leadership is increasingly questioned, sound leadership at all levels is what keeps military personnel from behaving unethically.

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