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How Phronesis and Moral Action Can Improve Character and Virtue in the United States Army

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This is an unpublished conference paper for the 5th Annual Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues conference at Oriel College, Oxford University, Thursday 5th – Saturday 7th January 2017.

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Character, Wisdom, and Virtue Conference

Oriel College, Oxford

7 January 2017

In the recent past, members of the U.S. military experienced moral failures and human rights violations via commission and omission. In 2003, U.S. soldiers tortured and sexually assaulted Iraqi detainees at Abu Ghraib Prison, Iraq.[1] Similarly, In November 2005, a group of U.S. Marines killed 24 unarmed men, women, and children in the city of Haditha, Iraq.[2] In 2006, four U.S. soldiers raped, shot, and burned a 14-year-old girl with kerosene along with her six-year-old sister and parents.[3] In 2008, a U.S. airstrike killed an estimated 90 Afghan civilians in Helmand Province, Afghanistan.[4] In 2012, U.S. Army Staff Sergeant Robert Bales absconded from his base in the Panjawi district of Kandahar Province and entered a nearby house. He shot all ten residents, killing six. Bales returned to base briefly before setting out to another home, where he killed ten and wounded two more. Nine of the sixteen killed, were children.[5] As early as 2011, senior officers instructed U.S. military personnel to ignore Afghan soldiers sexually

[1] Hersch, Seymour M. "Torture at Abu Ghraib." *The New Yorker*, 10 May 2004, http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2004/05/10/torture-at-abu-ghraib. Accessed 17 July 2016.
[2] Von Zielbauer, Paul. "A Marine Tutorial on Media 'Spin'." *The New York Times*, 24 June 2007, http://www.nytimes.com/2007/06/24/weekinreview/24word.html. Accessed 17 July 2016.
[3] "Four U.S. Soldiers Charged with Rape and Murder." *CNN.com*, 18 October 2008, http://www.cnn.com/2006/LAW/10/18/soldiers.court/index.html. Accessed 17 July 2016.
[4] DeYoung, Karen and Candace Rondeaux. "U.N. Finds Airstrike Killed 90 Afghans." *The Washington Post*, 27 August 2008, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/08/26/AR2008082600301.html. Accessed 17 July 2016.
[5] Healy, Jack. "Soldier Sentenced to Life Without Parole for Killing 16 Afghans." *The New York Times*, 23 August 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/24/us/soldier-gets-life-without-parole-in-deaths-of-afghan-civilians.html. Accessed 17 July 2016.

abusing boys, even on U.S. bases, because "it is part of their culture." This was an effort to maintain good relations with Afghan police and militia and refrain from imposing cultural values.[6]

These horrific war crimes of commission and omission, and major transgressions by senior leaders, make for embarrassing headlines and dominate the U.S. Army's discourse on moral education. While no one argues those responsible were somehow unaware of their action's being wrong, such events commonly elicit immediate demands for further instruction in ethical reasoning. In its haste to respond, the U.S. Army repeatedly deploys its intellectual capacity toward solving the wrong problem.

Failure to identify discrete portions of a multi-faceted problem can sabotage even the best intentions. Imagine a purpose-drive soldier motivated to improve his fitness level. He inspires the formation each morning by fully committing during physical training; however, he shows little improvement. Only after an honest counseling does the soldier confess he rewards himself with 800-calorie coffees and donuts after exercising on the way to conduct hygiene. Immediately, the leader recognizes the soldier is attending to a multi-faceted ends (general health) along only one relevant line of effort – physical training. Similarly, the Army is unaware of its own blind spot in character development.

Recent military initiatives have led to better instruction in ethical theory and improvements in general moral reasoning; however, the U.S. Army must simultaneously improve its soldier's moral will – their moral motivations. Moral knowledge alone will not develop phronesis. In other words, to develop phronesis moral action is required. The proper

[6] Rivett-Carnac, Mark. "U.S. Troops Told to Ignore Sexual Abuse of Boys by Afghan Forces, Report Says." *Time.com*, 20 September 2015, http://time.com/4042104/us-military-afghanistan-sexual-abuse-soldiers/. Accessed 17 July 2016.

end of the U.S. Army ethics program is moral action rather than moral knowledge. These are two deliberate, but not necessarily discrete, ends. One might gain moral knowledge without interest in pursuing moral action (lacking phronesis). In contrast, one cannot act morally without the prerequisite knowledge (ethical reasoning) that allows him or her to discern right action. There is a gap between moral knowledge and moral virtue. There is a motivational gap between knowing what to do and actually doing it. Phronesis is what bridges that gap. The U.S. Army must rebrand its ethical training as moral education and implement systematic methods of reinforcement so that the profession interprets its ethic as something each member aspires to be rather than something he or she does.

Phronesis – The Bridge between Moral Knowledge and Moral Action

If moral knowledge is knowing the right moral judgment and moral action is doing the right moral activity, the bridge that connects the two is phronesis. Julia Annas might put it best when she said, "Whatever else phronesis is, it is the disposition to make right moral judgments."[7] Aristotle distinguished between two types of virtues (intellectual and character) by the way they are acquired. The intellectual virtues are acquired through teaching, and the virtues of character through exercise.[8] While different, these two types of virtues are entwined. According to Aristotle, "the excellence of character and intelligence cannot be separated."[9] Further, Aristotle describes phronesis as an intellectual virtue that is required to exercise all of the virtues of

[7] Annas, Julia. *The Morality of Happiness*. Oxford University Press, 1993 (73).
[8] MacIntyre, Alasdair C. *After Virtue*. University of Notre Dame Press, Third Edition, 2007 (154).
[9] Ibid., 154.

character.[10] It is the intellectual virtue of practical reasoning[11]; it is the "state of the developed virtuous person, who not only makes the right judgment and decision on particular occasions, but does so from a developed intelligent disposition, which is the basis for doing so reliably and correctly."[12] Practical intelligence is the state the agent is in who has learned to reason well about moral matters, "not in a particular sphere, but generally."[13] This means two things. First, the agent has mastered the correct way of reasoning. Second, the agent will not have to fight his or her feelings because their emotional virtues will have developed along with their dispositions to have the appropriate reactions. Emotion and attitude will be in harmony with his or her judgments. Therefore, they will not just be following the rules because they are the rules (for the sake of rules) but instead he or she follows the rules because they have reasoned the rules as correct and his or her emotions have developed along with his or her understanding. When you reason something out, you understand it, accept it, and your attitude reflects that.

Why is this important for soldiers? Annas argues, "Virtue requires intelligence. It is the state of the person who makes the right judgments on moral matters and this is impossible if he or she is not virtuous."[14] The non-virtuous person's reasoning may fail to start from the right considerations and may be derailed by temptations. If a soldier is merely following the rules and feels anger or hatred, the temptation to violate the rules and engage in torturing enemy combatants or killing innocent civilians/non-combatants may be too great to deny. While they will have moral knowledge, without phronesis, they may not choose the virtuous action. Merely following the rules is not an intellectual inquiry. If soldiers have no understanding of what they

[10] Ibid.
[11] Aristotelian scholars, such as Annas and MacIntrye, use practical reasoning and practical intelligence to describe the same thing. I will use it interchangeably and I consider it synonymous for this essay.
[12] Annas, 73.
[13] Ibid., 74.
[14] Ibid., 75

are doing, and are merely following the rules, they are doing what John Stuart Mill called "the ape like faculty of imitation."[15] It should be about who you are not what you do. If you are just following the rules then what happens when your military service is done? You no longer have rules to follow. If you focus on who you are, and you use phronesis to bridge moral knowledge and moral action, then it does not matter that you have left your military service. In fact, it does not matter what you do in the future because you will use phronesis and your virtues to know what to do in any particular situation. The hallmark of an Army is its discipline. While an Army needs to be disciplined, how does it achieve that goal? Is it merely to follow the rules? Some military leaders rationalize rule following and discipline as being moral. The argument goes something like this. Leaders want soldiers to be disciplined and to follow the rules because if they do, ipso facto, they are moral.[16] If you follow the rules then you are doing something that is right. If you are doing something that is right, then you are not doing something that is immoral. If you are not immoral, then you are moral. Are we content with saying that our soldiers did not violate rules? Clearly, that is different than arguing that they are moral or virtuous.

Training versus Education

[15] Mill, John Stuart. *On Liberty*, Hackett Publishing Company, Inc. Eighth Edition 1978.
[16] We know of examples where military leaders are in fact the ones giving illegal and immoral orders such as the My Lai massacre, but most military leaders will say these examples are outliers and would not count as just rules or orders.

The contemporary environment is complicated and growing ever more complex. While the military once prioritized efficiency and effectiveness, it now emphasizes flexibility and adaptability. Training attends to the former; training prepares soldiers and leaders to succeed in the next *known* mission. Education attends to the latter; education prepares soldiers and leaders to succeed in the next *unknown* mission. While training prioritizes highly specialized, repeatable, expertise (battle drills for example), education prioritizes 'big-picture' thought that understands interoperability of efforts – their necessary causes and likely effects. Moral knowledge requires education initiatives rather than further training initiatives.

Similarly, the Army might seek to either train or educate soldiers toward the second end suggested above – moral motivations. Training may habituate good activities by virtue of an organized system of rewards and reprimands. That model might achieve more immediate compliance; however, it is unlikely to gain enduring commitment. Formerly, in a more centralized formation, that course of action would prove acceptable, feasible, and suitable. However, the contemporary counter-insurgency environment imposed upon the military a need for far greater autonomy throughout the force's subordinates and subordinate commands.[17] Junior leaders find themselves responsible for huge swaths of battle space, armed with incredible assets, and able to make major strategic impacts. Rewards and reprimands require immediacy and deliberate oversight to be effective; the conditions are not conducive for such a method of reinforcement. In addition, disciplinary problems recently exposed in the senior ranks indicate that the current model fails to instill enduring moral motivations; once leaders rise beyond the system of rewards and reprimands, this time not by proximate distance but by seniority (or at least they perceive it as thus), the system fails to compel right action. Morality must shift its

[17] This is the US Army's new strategy of Mission Command. To find out more about this new Army doctrine see https://www.army.mil/article/105858/Army_announces_Mission_Command_strategy/

dependency to internal motivations to achieve greater commitment rather than mere compliance. Education alone might achieve this end; training fails to achieve the requisite level of internalization.

How does the Army transition to Moral Education?

The changes I recommend will require attention to the overarching education of the soldier as a moral agent. Moral education must educate soldiers so that they might discern right actions, and then choose to conduct those actions out of respect for the profession and its ethic. To develop a disposition of moral responsibility, we need to take a new approach to learning; we must encourage full-scale debates about moral issues (a dialectical method) that allow soldiers to question and deepen their personal convictions until they adopt the profession's morals as their own. These changes to the military moral education program will benefit the military in two ways: collectively decreasing the occurrence of moral failures, and individually fostering greater resiliency against moral tragedy by appropriating Soldier's morals within the greater Army ethic. Finally, the Army needs to stop referring to their 'values' and refer to 'virtues'.[18] Values are vacuous and relative. Virtues are intellectually driven and specific.[19]

In regards to practically applying Aristotle's position, we will begin by discussing the military's unique group dynamics and highlighting its potential benefits regarding character development. We have made the following two assumptions: first, one better measures character along a spectrum that traverses from vicious to virtuous, rather than assuming its

[18] The Army does not promote virtues but values. The US Army has 'The Seven Army Values' whose acronym is LDRSHIP; Loyalty, Duty, Respect, Selfless Service, Honor, Integrity, and Personal Courage.
[19] Professor James Arthur of the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues brought this distinction to my attention during a discussion at the Center for the Army Profession and Ethic (CAPE).

uncompromising presence or absence; second, formal and informal mentorship better motivates ascent along that spectrum than less personal methods commonly employed by more conventional training.

In order to explicate our measuring effectiveness along a spectrum, we might first depict that method within a more quantifiable domain: physical fitness. The military has clearly outlined physical fitness standards of excellence and failure. There is no confusion over how the profession designates, scores, and records those standards. However, the Army anticipates that its largest population of service-members will score somewhere well between what they consider an excellent or failing score. It would be absurd to designate a failing score just below one that represents excellence. However, that same absurdity persists in our understanding of character development.

The military assumes every service-member has exceptional character, until he or she does not. For years, the officer's evaluation report (OER) allowed only for a single check to describe a leader's character along those attributes the Army values: honor, integrity, courage, loyalty, respect, selfless-service, and commitment to duty. Marking, "yes" indicated the officer was fit for service, while "no" condemned him or her as absent decent character. While different in its form, the revised OER instituted in 2014, maintains a similar dichotomy. While raters now draft descriptive prose in the block devoted to character, their comments are highly damaging unless they identify their subordinate is, "operating with impeccable integrity and ethic" (or something comparably laudatory). The interpretation that one's character is exceptional, or failing, is absurd; not only does it make no intuitive sense, leaders clearly do not employ such a stark distinction anywhere else on the OER.

We do well now to suggest the second point above: educational mentorship, rather than training, motivates one to ascend along that spectrum. Again, there is value to the example offered in the more clear measure of physical fitness. As previously assumed, the majority of military members remain well within the designations of exemplar and failure. Admitting the benefits of the conventional, "carrot and the stick approach" for those soldiers on the cusp of either designation, one must concede that most do not fear "the stick" of failure, nor are they inspired by the "carrot" to excel (as they likely see it as impossible for them). For the majority, those incentives offer very little to motivate improvement. For them, their relative performance in respect to their performing peer-group offers better motivation.

The military has carefully addressed instances of hazing; however, it stands to benefit from appropriately emplaced peer pressure. That is the predictable result of a phenomena referred to as Social Identity Theory. "A person's sense of who they are is based on their group memberships,"[20] states Henri Tajfel, an expert in group psychology. His central hypothesis is that group membership indoctrinates its members in a way that emphasizes the negative aspects of an out-group, in order to enhance their own self-image. He argued that the psychological nature of prejudice would be greater illuminated by an understanding of the principles of basic cognition involved in the process.[21] First, one *categorizes* people into a group according to certain common attributes that he or she admires. Second, one *assimilates* or socially identifies him or herself with that group by adopting its identity as his own and establishing an emotional bond with its members. Third, one *coheres*, or socially compares, himself and his group with others through a lens that is predisposed to recognize his advantages and an outsider's

[20] McLeod, Saul. "Social Identity Theory." Simply Psychology, 2008, http://www.simplypsychology.org/social-identity-theory.html. Accessed 21 July 2016.
[21] Ibid.

disadvantages.[22] "Tajfel wrote that prejudice literally means 'prejudgment'[…]. Judgments are made about the members of other groups regardless of their individual characteristics: members of the out-group are judged negatively, […], simply because they belong to the out-group."[23] Similarly, members of the in-group are judged positively solely because of their membership. Soldiers self-actualize in response to the inclusion of that peer dynamic.

We might now apply this discussion to physical fitness. The average soldier is motivated to improve his or herself in order to remain in the fold. Absent clearly identifiable goals, such as those available to the soldiers on the margins of excellence or failure, those around them motivate and compel them to improve. Sadly, no similar peer-pressure occurs in the domain of character development. A soldier admires the moral exemplar, and avoids association with the pariah, however, most are generally content and uninspired to grow (as identified above, they may not even understand growth as an option as they interpret themselves as already endowed with impeccable status). We must impose valuable pressure within the ranks that encourages the already present benefits of group dynamics to perform how it does elsewhere; educational mentorship, rather than more training, is the answer.

Thomas Ricks, a well-respected historian and sincere critic of military leadership, earmarked an interesting dynamic for further discussion in his controversial book, *The Generals*.[24] He brought attention to the inconsistency present in military leadership's unwillingness to fire senior leaders. It professes that generalship is incredibly difficult and requires a very unique set of skills and characteristics; however, in its reluctance to fire general

[22] Ibid.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Ricks, Thomas E. *The Generals: American Military Command from World War II to Today*. Penguin Books, 2013.

officers, it tacitly endorses the notion that everyone promoted to that rank has those rarely found skills and characteristics. His suggestion bears import here as well.

By virtue of remaining in the military long enough, one is valued as a mentor. Why is that? While mentorship requires sincere commitment by both parties, it also requires very certain attributes, skills, and characteristics such as the following: humility, sympathy, competence, and experience. If it is so valuable, and it requires so much to be successful, why do we pretend everyone can do it?

It is here that we propose a major shift in the professional military education's model (PME): a deliberate emphasis on one-on-one mentorship. When a rater comments on a subordinate's potential for future assignments, one of those most coveted should be '*PME mentor'*. While the specifics of such a role would require far more discussion, identifying a subordinate in this way would suggest to the board superior merit in those attributes the Army values most. Further, such identification would impose an obligation to uphold and spread that value among the ranks. This identification creates a more accurate understanding of the spectrum of character in the force. These leaders alone would serve as exemplars, the Army should continue to identify specious members as such, and necessarily the majority would now populate the middle ground that the system created. With the landscape redrawn, we might consider now the advantages afforded to the military by this new population of mentors in regards to moral education and motivation.

A well-respected psychologist, and expert in the field of education, Peter Brown offers two relevant points in his book, *Make it Stick: The Science of Successful Learning*,[25] that students better retain that which they value, and that dialectic methods of instruction lead to far

[25] Brown, Peter C., Henry L. Roediger III, and Mark A. McDaniel. *Make it Stick: The Science of Successful Learning*. Bellknap Press, 2014.

better internalizing of the material. Each is better available in the model proposed here rather than in the more conventional ethic's training regimen.

Currently, ethics training occurs discretely. Predominantly, the Army instructs ethics within PME programs and requires small unit leaders to reiterate the major points annually. At both times, the Army is guilty of placing ethics instruction among a list of competing demands and poorly emphasizing its priority. The proposed mentor program demands an open dialogue that occurs as, or when, necessary. It is necessary that standards be outlined to provide for a common experience, but they must remain limited for the benefit of the open-dialogue intended by the spirit of the initiative.

The soldier is more likely to value the topic of ethics and moral instruction if it is taught by an exemplar than if it is modularized and mass-produced in the way it is currently. It is here that we directly apply pressure along the dimension of moral motivations. The mentor not only instructs the facts and rules of ethics, but also holds the subordinate accountable to them as a moral agent. This immediate, personal dimension serves as an intermediate step toward inculcating the notion that the profession holds one to account; initially represented by an individual, ultimately he or she is representative of an ideal that demands conformity.

Third, dialectic is the only way to instruct the topics covered in ethics and moral education. One may identify and adopt certain instantiations of justice, fairness and right-action; however, those sort of 'list answers' fail to satisfy. In order to conceive of the essence that informs each of those instantiations, one must be inspired to dig far deeper and reconcile his or her individual world-view, with his or her professional ethic, while solving real-world problems. This sort of pursuit remains only superficial when conducted in mass; it allows far too many to

remain on the sideline of critical discussions that are necessary to develop and mature one's character. This one-on-one proposal demands that sort of valuable interaction.

In Conclusion

The hallmark of an Army is its discipline. Is discipline rule following? Is discipline a virtue or merely a value? Is discipline enough? Clearly, it is not enough because of the horrific war crimes of commission and omission, and major transgressions by Army senior leaders in the recent past. How does the Army fix this problem? In order to solve the Army's moral transgressions, we need to develop phronesis in order to connect moral knowledge with moral action. I argue that the way to do this is for the Army to rebrand its ethical training as moral education and implement systematic methods of reinforcement so that the profession interprets its ethic as something each member aspires to be rather than something he or she does. This includes full-scale debates about moral issues (a dialectical method), and educational mentorship by moral exemplars.