

What Should We Mean by “Military Ethics”?

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Between us, we, the editors of *The Journal of Military Ethics*, have spent quite a number of years observing conferences devoted to “military ethics,” observing military training events claimed to be in service of that subject, reading papers submitted to a journal of that title, and listening to papers presented at academic conferences ostensibly bearing on military ethics questions.

Anyone who has had similar experiences will be struck by the great diversity of activities nominally gathered under that rubric. We have observed cadets being exhorted to be morally good by football coaches and beauty queens. We have listened to exquisitely crafted philosophical arguments clarifying central concepts such as “noncombatant” and “double effect.” We have heard military lawyers rehearse the laws of armed conflict (LOAC) before mandatory formations of military personnel fulfilling their “annual training” requirement under the Geneva Convention. We have listened to thoughtful officers and enlisted personnel anticipating the complexities of their future actions in combat and reliving and grieving over past actions that continue to trouble the conscience. We have observed religiously based expositions of the grounding of the military calling in basic religious beliefs from chaplains and religiously motivated military personnel.

Nobody has exclusive authority to dictate, of course, which of these activities might properly be worthy of the title “military ethics.” And of course different individuals, groups, and academic disciplines will approach issues and questions in their own way. But we believe it might be helpful to explicitly articulate our understanding of what the core of military ethics is and ought to be, as a point of departure for further debate, and also as

an editorial statement for this journal—a statement about which we invite debate among our readers.

First and most important, military ethics is a species of the genus “professional ethics.” That is to say, it 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 and, by helping members of the profession better understand the ethical demands upon them, to enable and motivate them to act appropriately in discharge of their professional obligations.

The practical implication of this understanding of the field is that it provides a conceptual framework by means of which one can assess the value of the various military ethics activities we described above. When that framework is so applied, some of them turn out to be central to the activity, while others are more marginal, ancillary, or perhaps essentially irrelevant.

We are often put in circumstances of hearing philosophical talks. Often these are wonderfully logically developed, conceptually clear, rigorously argued—and in the end professionally irrelevant. In other words, 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. The test is fairly simple here: is what’s going on in this paper the sort of thing that might be helpful in providing real-world guidance for policy makers, military commanders and leaders, or operational decision making? There may be a place within the discipline of philosophy for such conceptual and intraphilosophical arguments, but unless they can be brought to bear on the professional activity of military personnel in some meaningful way, they are academic exercises of interest primarily to other academics within the same field. It goes without saying that academic communities exist to do precisely this sort of thing: to frame questions of interest to the internal dialogue of the discipline. And of course we do not wish to be misunderstood to suggest that such things are bad (or good, for that matter). Those are questions left entirely to the disciplines themselves to decide. But what they are not is meaningful help to the profession unless and until they can be shown to be so relevant. Just as “medical ethics” or “legal ethics” that provided no discernible practical guidance for professional practice or policy in those spheres would be irrelevant, so is this kind of philosophical work on concepts derived from military practice.

Second, we hold that critical assessment of Law of Armed Conflict (LOAC) is a fundamental component of military ethics, understood as professional ethics. Most true professions have a body of law unique to them, giving both permissions and restraints to the profession distinct from those of ordinary citizens. At a minimum, professionals need a good working knowledge of that body of law. Furthermore, since the technology and practice of the use of military power are continually changing and evolving, the law necessarily lags behind and requires reinterpretation so as to remain relevant and useful in guiding that changing activity. So explorations of the limits of current legal guidance and proposals for modification of law to be relevant to changing patterns of military practice make a practical contribution to the body of professional military ethics.

Third, historical contributions that add to critical thinking about war and the military profession are an essential piece of a comprehensive understanding of professional military ethics. Like the contribution of philosophers, however, historical contributions are governed by a similar set of considerations. Historical analysis as a purely historical exercise is not a contribution to professional military ethics—however interesting such work may be by the canons of the discipline of history. Insofar, however, as the historical roots of the profession and its professional ethic help to illuminate and guide the ongoing development of the profession, it is an invaluable component of professional military ethics. Also, some thinkers in the history of ethics have left such a stamp on present-day military ethics and are so often referred to by teachers and practitioners alike that new readings of their core texts can be deemed to have relevance as such.

Fourth, we have the contribution of religion to professional ethics. This is a complex field. Certainly for many individuals, the connection between their religious convictions and their professional activity may be deep and integral. However, confessionally specific beliefs cannot serve as the basis of a general professional ethic in a pluralistic society. Voluntary discussions of such matters among religiously like-minded individuals are valuable and have their place. But even in that context, it is important to avoid any suggestion that other members of the profession who ground their personal understanding of their ethic differently are in some way deficient. We should add that clarifications of what certain stands, traditions, or texts within an influential religious tradition have to say about military ethics may certainly be relevant for the same reasons as those stated under the rubric of “historical contributions” above.

Last, there is some role for the hortatory in professional military ethics. Perhaps especially in a profession that requires courage and spirit (what

the Greeks called *thumos*), nonrational appeals that motivate have a role in encouraging those very attitudes and behaviors. Tales and examples of exemplary individuals and actions can provide us with the role models and motivation at a level deeper than rational analysis. But they also need to be used with caution: they can easily misfire and produce cynicism. And of course selecting the appropriate examples and heroes presupposes an antecedent grasp of excellence in military conduct and virtue.

In sum, military ethics is at its core practical and professional. It is meant to be the handmaid of the profession of arms. It exists to assist thoughtful professionals to think through their real-world problems and issues. As in any other field of applied professional ethics, only those who have taken the time to understand the sphere of professional activity belonging to the profession are really in a position to be of much assistance. That requires learning the profession's vocabulary. It necessitates a deep understanding of the constraints under which the profession carries out its duties. It even requires an understanding of the internal structure and dynamics of the profession—in the military profession, for example, the role of rank, promotion, and division of military specialties.

While meant to give guidance to authors and readers, and even offer criticism of certain forms of discourse that sometimes go under the name of military ethics, this statement is not meant to be overly restrictive. We do admit that the field of military ethics, like all complex fields of study and practice, constitutes a large jigsaw puzzle where many different and unequally shaped pieces make up the whole. Sometimes an odd-looking piece may come our way, which is not easily placed within the framework provided above. Yet we may find it somehow helps us see the larger picture, and thus nonetheless we publish it. Indeed, this should always be the way of good academic work.