

ETHICS AND THE MILITARY COMMUNITY

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***Abstract:** Military communities differ in how they implement ethics training. Some have well developed programmes while others have only a few stand-alone presentations. For this reason it is difficult to produce a template to suit every situation. Leadership training within the Military is generally of a very high standard and it is particularly important in relation to the development of high moral standards, whereas the training in ethics varies considerably throughout the military world. Therefore, even though we regard our ethics programme to be of a very high standard there is always the need to review what we have in place and update it. Codes of Ethics need to be revised from time to time and we can gain valuable insight from sharing and comparing our training programmes with other militaries.*

***Keywords:** ethics, military community, leadership, moral standards, core values.*

WHY ETHICS?

A few years ago I was taking part in a seminar for Police Officers and after giving my presentation on 'Implementing an ethics programme into a Police Service' one officer asked me if I knew of any Police Force in the world with an ethics programme which incorporated the main elements of what I had included in my presentation. Both he and I were somewhat surprised. He was surprised to discover that any Police Force should have adopted such a scheme and I was surprised that he felt that few, if any, Police Forces could invest time, money and resources in such a programme of ethics.

Today, I don't believe that officer would think the same way. Since that seminar was held there have been so many scandals relating to business, banking, the church, the police, the military as well as to governments and members of parliament. Even before some of the major scandals rocked the world Stephen D Potts wrote in 1998, "As we approach the beginning of both a new century and a new millennium, there are increasing signs that ethics in public service is an idea whose time has come." [1] This is certainly true with regard to the military. In 2005, the media contained reports of charges of brutality by members of American and British Armed Forces against prisoners in Iraq. Since

then we have read disturbing and shameful reports giving details and showing photographs of some of the disgraceful activities that took place in Abu Ghraib prison as well as in certain Basra detention centres.

One of the British Army's most senior officers, Sir Graeme Lamb, was quoted in the Sunday Telegraph, dated August 22, 2005, as saying that the allegations of prisoner abuse against soldiers could fatally undermine the British Army. "We are in very real danger of losing our place in society as a highly respected British institution [...] which today stands virtually alone in the eyes of this and many other nations." General Lamb, who had himself commanded troops in Iraq, is reported to have said, "The officers and men under our command did not live up to the standard we expected of them. Those who failed were empowered when they should not have been, were left unsupervised when we probably knew they should not have been." One reason for this situation, he claimed, was because the British Army was being forced to recruit soldiers from a "morally corrupt and dysfunctional" society, where young men idolize foul-mouthed footballers. The General's comments raise a number of very important points. The failure of some soldiers and officers to live up to the high moral standards expected by their leaders does not lie entirely with the Army but with a society that has failed to equip young men and women with the moral values and principles necessary to become responsible citizens as well as responsible soldiers.

Society needs to reflect on this

and invest seriously in the moral education and character development of its young men and women, who when they are given the task of fighting wars, killing the enemy and, if necessary, giving their own lives for the sake of some just cause that they, their commanders, their government and nation believe in, will not behave in a manner unbecoming to the Army of which they are members.

THE RESPONSE

Not surprisingly, the unethical behaviour of a small minority of American and British personnel has been studied and examined in some considerable depth in order for both the British and the American Armed Forces to find ways whereby such lapses in moral behaviour by their soldiers can be minimised.

In 2006 the Pentagon announced that all US servicemen in Iraq were to undergo additional military ethics training, including lessons in "core warrior values." Renewed emphasis on the importance of core values and proper ethical behaviour has also taken place within the British Army.

The response of the American and British Armed Forces was to be expected and it will undoubtedly help in raising awareness amongst their troops of the importance of having core values and of the need to honour them as they carry out their dangerous and demanding operations.

However, whilst additional training in ethics may be of some value to the military, I believe that moral behaviour is more than behaving according to certain procedures or rules. It has to do with the type of

person the soldier or officer is. It has to do with character and virtue as well as with the social context of the community in which a person is living and working. As the British General hinted at in his newspaper interview, we need to look at these sad unfortunate incidents within a much broader spectrum.

I recall reading about a clock that hung on a wall at the back of a church. The clock had a large face and it was there for the benefit of the priest who conducted the service. It was probably placed there to remind him not to preach too long! However, for weeks the clock failed to work correctly and before it was repaired, someone with a sense of humour, attached a notice to it, which read, "Don't blame my hands, the fault lies deeper!"

THE FAULT LIES DEEPER

To issue an "Aide Memoire" to all soldiers on Core Values and revisit the subject of ethics training within the British Army was, in my opinion, not a knee-jerk reaction to the regrettable incidents that took place in Iraq some four or five years ago. In fact, in the late 1990's, the British Army deliberately set about putting more and more emphasis on one component of their military doctrine, namely, "The Moral component of Fighting Power."

Part of my contribution at that time was an attempt to make the senior generals aware of the moral background from which they were recruiting and training their young personnel. We were living, and still are, in a society in which moral

authority has become seriously fragmented. We were, and still are, part of a society in which there is considerable evidence of a serious erosion of personal responsibility. In addition, we were conscious, and still are, of the emphasis being placed on human rights without any equivalent emphasis being paid to developing the sense of personal responsibility.

I became convinced that the challenges facing us then, as now, were not only the immediate challenges such as those relating to lapses in the moral behaviour of troops on operations, but also the much deeper philosophical challenges that shaped, and continue to shape, the society from which the soldiers are recruited.

"Western society," writes Jonathan Sacks, "has been largely formed from two primary influences, ancient Greece and ancient Israel, and it owes their combination and dominance to Christianity, formed in the encounter between these two civilisations." [3]

Michael Polanyi, scientist and philosopher, is quoted as saying, "The past three hundred years have been the most brilliant in human history, but their brilliance was created by the combustion of a thousand years' deposit of the Christian tradition in the oxygen of Greek rationalism." [4]

In my attempts to paint a background for the senior officers, I wrestled with the question; Why are things as they are? How can we best understand our situation? Professor Iain Torrance, then of Aberdeen University and presently the Dean of Princeton Theological Seminary, accepted my invitation to deliver a number of lectures to senior

officers at several gatherings. One of those lectures was entitled; “The Fragmentation of Moral Authority and the Cult of Individualism”. Professor Torrance’s lectures stimulated much discussion and thought. Personally, I gained much from his contributions and afterwards I was determined to read more about what he had said.

Whilst it is not my intention to give a history lesson, it is important to appreciate just what has happened over time and I found the following parable written by the American Philosopher Alasdair Macintyre [6] most helpful. He writes, “Imagine that at some time in the future there is a widespread revolution against science. There is a series of ecological disasters. Science and Technology are blamed. There is public panic. Riots break out. Laboratories are burned down. A new political party comes to power on a wave of anti-scientific feeling and eliminates all science teaching and scientific activity. A century later, the mood subsides. People begin to try to reconstruct what was destroyed, but all they have are fragments of what was once a coherent scientific culture: odd pages from old books, scientific instruments whose use has been forgotten, bits and pieces of information about theories and experiments without the background of knowledge of their context. These pieces are reassembled into a discipline called science. Its terminology and some of its practices resemble science, but the systematic corpus of beliefs, which once underlay them, has gone. There would be no unitary conception of what science was about, what its practices were for, or what the

key terms signified. The illusion would persist that science had been recovered; but it would have been lost, and there would be no way of discovering that it had been lost.” [7]

This, Macintyre argues, is what actually happened to moral thinking in the Eighteenth Century. This period, known as the Enlightenment, “succeeded in destroying the traditions to which the key terms of morality belonged The words survived like – *good, right, duties, obligation, virtue* – but they became severed from the context that gave them sense.” [8].

Two Canadian writers, Middleton [9] and Walsh [10] explain this by using interesting and helpful illustrations of the carnival and the circus. Think for a moment about the Circus. Usually there is one central ring and this is where the main performance takes place. In addition to the main performance there are often a number of sideshows which we can view on our way in or out of the Big Top. In fact, most of the side shows are identifiable components of the main programme.

As mentioned earlier in my references to Jonathan Sacks and Michael Polanyi, the main philosophical activity and influences emanating from the “centre ring” that shaped our society for many centuries was Christianity. However, in the Eighteenth Century, at the time of the “Philosophical Enlightenment,” this influence was pushed aside, lost its hold of the centre, and was replaced by philosophy. It was believed that reason alone could and must be able to solve all moral problems and difficulties.

Christian Religion, though important in the past, had caused too many problems and conflicts and there was now a new and better way to approach our world.

Jonathan Sacks poses the question? “When the profession of a faith is no longer needed for citizenship, what else weaves the strands of private lives into the fabric of a shared existence? Nineteenth-century thinkers, with few exceptions, had no doubt. It was the existence of a shared morality.” [11]

The expulsion of Christianity from centre stage in Europe in the eighteenth century to be replaced by philosophical rational thinking is not the end of the story. In fact, the hoped for “common morality” was itself removed from centre stage. It also became fragmented to such a degree that, if we stay with the image of the circus, there is now no influential presence in the main centre ring. All that remains are the sideshows.

“Far from the erosion or even eclipse of religious belief that the Enlightenment so confidently predicted, the Enlightenment itself has been eclipsed, resulting in a veritable smorgasbord of religions and world views for our consumption.” [12]

Perhaps the most succinct summary of what has happened over the past two hundred years resulting in what we experience today, is expressed by Jonathan Sacks when he writes, “For centuries Western civilisation had been based on a Judaeo-Christian ethic. That was now being abandoned, systematically, ideologically, and with meticulous thoroughness” [13].

Macintyre writes, “We have long

assumed, that there are standards of rationality, adequate for the evaluation of rival answers to such questions, equally available, at least in principle, to all persons, whatever traditions they may happen to find themselves in and whether or not they inhabit any tradition” [14]. However, this is a false assumption. Reason alone does not solve our complex difficulties – argument is endless – the experts fail to agree.

The conclusion for some, therefore, is that “Ethical action is dependent on in-dwelling a socially embodied narrative, on membership in a concrete community oriented to a distinctive perspective, heritage and vision of life” [15]. It was Macintyre who said, “I can only answer the question, ‘What am I to do?’ if I can answer the prior question, ‘Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?’” [16]

In the light of this, there has been a suggestion that one way forward is to create “moral communities.” From within such communities there would be “tradition and reason” exercised in the process of making moral decisions. A cautious and qualified suggestion that the Army could become such a community was made by Professor Torrance.

In fact, the break up of society into autonomous entities is already part of our culture, and this is true especially in relation to ethics.

“The concept of autonomy implies that each of the various spheres of life (politics, economics, art, etc.) has its own particular set of laws inherent in the very nature of the matter which is its peculiar concern, and that these inherent laws forbid

us to bring these spheres under the judgment of ethics. For any attempt to do so would mean imposing on the sphere in question the external norm of an alien sphere, such as that of morality or of religion” [17]. Today the separate entities of business ethics, police ethics, medical ethics, military ethics, legal ethics, etc. may be a reflection of this autonomy.

THE MILITARY AS A MORAL COMMUNITY

Whether we agree, or disagree, with MacIntyre and others about the importance of ‘community’ in a world suffering from serious fragmentation of moral authority we will recognise that the military and its sub-divisions including Regiments, Brigades, Squadrons, Destroyers, Frigates etc. can be easily recognised as a community or communities, which, because of the very nature of the work, require values and standards as well as ethical guidelines on how to live and operate. The military community is not, nor should it become, a ‘cult’ cut off from the society from which it recruits its personnel, but, in today’s world, it needs its own moral compass.

WEAVING A MORAL THREAD INTO THE OVERALL FABRIC OF THE MILITARY

Military communities differ enormously in how they implement ethics training. Some have well developed programmes while others have only a few stand-alone presentations. For this reason it is difficult to produce a template to suit

every situation but, I believe there are some points that can be of use to everyone.

- 1 Self assessment.
- 2 Leadership.
- 3 Training.
- 4 Review and update.

SELF –ASSESSMENT

This involves examining what is in place at present, asking questions like- What, if any ethics training is being done at present? How is it being delivered? How is the programme structured? Who is receiving the instruction, the recruits only, or everyone? Who is delivering the training? Is there a code of ethics ? If so, when was it last updated and revised? Are there well defined core values?

LEADERSHIP

Leadership training within the Military is generally of a very high standard and it is particularly important in relation to the development of high moral standards. In this respect I wish to give a quotation from each of three scholars who have made a major contribution to the subject of leadership in relations to ethics.

“No values initiative should begin without the most senior level of management making an explicit commitment to its long-term success” [18].

“A leader’s actions must serve purposes and reflect basic values that followers identify with personally. Followers must become committed to their organisations instead of to

their leaders” [19].

“A leader’s task is to infuse an organisation with value beyond the technical requirements of the task at hand” [20].

TRAINING

As mentioned earlier, the training in ethics varies considerably throughout the military world. Personally, I believe in what might be called a two-tier programme. This involves ethics being incorporated within functional skills training as well as additional stand-alone periods on ethics. In the former the instructor, in addition to teaching his or her particular military skill, includes within the lesson a possible ethical dilemma that might arise whilst using that skill on operational duties. This method helps to make the subject of ethics more relevant and the additional stand-alone lessons on ethics complements and confirms what the students have already been made aware of throughout their entire training.

In the course of his or her training a soldier will hear or be taught about the importance of courage, loyalty and discipline. These are three of a number of core values adopted by a wide cross-section of military units and formations. However, in teaching the importance of these values it would be easy to overlook the fact that these values are shared with terrorist groups and criminal gangs. The terrorist certainly believes in discipline. He will not get drunk on a Saturday night and tell those around him in the pub what his terrorist cell

plans to do the following week. He also believes in loyalty and knows that to achieve his objectives of destruction and suffering he will need courage.

Naturally, the Military Community has adopted Core Values for very different reasons from those of the terrorist. It aims to be a good and moral community, but there are obvious pitfalls that need to be avoided. The instructor, presenting his lesson on the core value of loyalty, may leave the class room convinced that all the soldiers in attendance understand the importance of loyalty. The soldiers may indeed understand but, sometime in the future, they may limit its application to a small four-man section. If the section, during an operation, behaves in an immoral way by beating up innocent civilians, a soldier may show loyalty to the other section members rather than to his Regiment or the Army.

REVIEW AND UPDATE

Even though we regard our ethics programme to be of a very high standard there is always the need to review what we have in place and update it. Codes of Ethics need to be revised from time to time and we can gain valuable insight from sharing and comparing our training programmes with other militaries. As Michael Hoffmann says, “There is no end to the game. You never cross the goal line – you have to keep up the effort, even, when things seem to be going well.” [21]

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