

# Officership: Character, Leadership, and Ethical Decisionmaking

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*What the bad man cannot be is  
a good sailor, or soldier, or airman.*

— General Sir John Winthrop Hackett<sup>1</sup>

**A** PLATOON is on a rescue mission. Two members of the platoon are trapped on a hill and under fire. Both soldiers are seriously wounded; within a few hours, they will be dead. Between the platoon and the two soldiers is a minefield, which the platoon must breach or go around if they are to get to the trapped soldiers in time. As the platoon leader ponders his options, he notices a civilian picking his way through the minefield. Obviously he knows where the mines are. The lieutenant detains the civilian, but the man refuses to lead the platoon through the minefield. The lieutenant offers several enticements to get the man to cooperate, but the man continues to refuse. There is no way he is going back through that minefield.<sup>2</sup> The lieutenant must make a decision that he had hoped to avoid. There are rules for situations like this, but if he follows them, good men will die.

## Inspiration

Officership is about inspiration, but good officers do more than inspire subordinates to do extraordinary things. They know what things to do and when to do them. They also set goals and convince people to spend time, effort, and other resources to achieve them. Doing this well involves making practical as well as ethical decisions. Sometimes, situations will create a tension that is not easy to resolve. When officers attempt to balance the demands of morality with the demands of the profession, they must consider the consequences of their decisions and the rules and principles that govern the profession. Ethical considerations by themselves, however, do not provide a complete approach sufficient to answer all of the moral questions that confront officers.

U.S. Army doctrine defines the traits of good officership within the framework of be, know, do, which incorporates ethical as well as practical aspects.<sup>3</sup> Because of this, we can discuss an ethics of being, an ethics of knowing, and an ethics of doing. Why approaches based on consequences and rules are inadequate is because they focus on the ethics of knowing and doing but exclude the ethics of being. Yet, being a certain kind of person is just as important to moral leadership as knowing consequences, rules, and principles and being able to apply them in ways that serve the profession and the Nation. This is because consequences and rules can come into conflict. When this happens ethical algorithms based on measuring consequences and applying rules will be insufficient to resolve the tension in a morally appropriate way. In such instances, it will be an officer's character that will help resolve conflicts in a consistent, coherent manner.<sup>4</sup>

## Character

The lieutenant in the scenario has a choice. He can torture or threaten to torture the civilian into cooperating, or he can decide to not torture or threaten to torture the civilian and effectively leave his men to die. Unfortunately for the lieutenant, the decision is not a simple one. If he chooses the first option, he violates the law of war. If he chooses the second option, he will have directly contributed to his men's deaths.

Deciding what to do is complicated; there is no clear way to choose one over the other. Preserving the lives of his men and accomplishing his mission are moral imperatives of considerable force. Yet, so is keeping the promise he made to uphold the Constitution, which includes abiding by the provisions of treaties to which the United States is party.<sup>5</sup> Resolving this problem will not depend on clever rationalizations or skillful manipulation of rules. Whether or not the lieutenant resolves this situation well depends

on the kind of person he is. To demonstrate this it is necessary to examine why appealing to consequences—like accomplishing missions and preserving lives—and simple conformity to rules is inadequate to account for every moral consideration.

Most ethical decisions are easy to make. For the most part, as long as officers meet the expectations of their subordinates and superiors and stay within the rules, everyone will consider them as ethical leaders, but as the above example shows, this is not always the case. To understand why, it is necessary to discuss the importance, as well as the limits, of consequences and rules in ethical decisionmaking.

**Military necessity and the laws of war.** The ethics of consequences seeks to determine whether a particular action maximizes some nonmoral good, such as happiness or pleasure, or minimizes some nonmoral harm, such as misery or pain. While choosing any particular objective is not in itself a moral choice, soldiers still have a *prima facie* moral obligation to accomplish their assigned missions. Thus, when making moral decisions, officers weigh consequences in terms of whether a course of action maximizes their chance of victory or lessens it.

Since maximizing victory includes minimizing the risks to soldiers so that they can continue the war effort, any course of action that directly contributes to mission accomplishment or that reduces risk to soldiers will be morally justifiable. In fact, if military necessity were the only consideration, then such acts would be morally obligatory, regardless of what action is taken. If this were true, then the lieutenant would be free to disregard the laws of war and to torture the civilian. In fact, he would never have to consider the laws of war in the first place. But, he is obligated to take such laws seriously. By accepting his commission he has promised to abide by treaties to which the United States is a party. Thus, regardless of how he feels about the law and morality of war, as a commissioned officer he has a moral obligation to uphold.<sup>6</sup> In this case, military necessity comes into direct conflict with this obligation. Always deciding in favor of military necessity would thus undermine an officer's ability to make promises. Promise-keeping is an essential part of maintaining one's integrity. A policy that undermines an officer's integrity, when pursued as a general policy, corrupts the profession.

To claim that in the case of such situations a good officer always abides by the rules would be easy, but simply asserting this will not help resolve the moral difficulties that arise when military necessity and the war convention come into conflict. Nor should the lieutenant unquestioningly follow the rules. There are a number of problems with any rule-based approach to ethics. Therefore, for the lieutenant to

ask why rules should take precedence over the lives of his men is reasonable. He must also ask himself if he wants to be the kind of officer who allows his men to die or to fail in their mission just to conform to a rule.<sup>7</sup> Sometimes the answer to that question will be "yes," but not always. Deciding when that is the answer is the primary task of officership.

**Character, leadership, and ethical decision-making.** There is a gap between the kinds of ethical questions officers confront and the kinds of answers that consequence and rule-based approaches

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can give. When considerations of military necessity are insufficient and rules fail, what the lieutenant does depends ultimately on the type of person he is. Thus, it is important to develop officers of character who understand what it means to be good officers—not just what it means to follow rules, perform duties, or reason well, although these are important to being ethical.

If officers are to have the resources necessary to make ethically sound decisions, they need an approach to ethics that articulates what good character is and how it can be developed. Moral philosophers usually refer to the ethics of character as virtue ethics. This approach to ethics seeks to determine systematically what kind of traits good people (good officers) should possess, what it means to possess these traits, and how people can come to possess these traits. In this context, virtues are the traits of good character.

An officer of character is more concerned with being the kind of person who does the right thing, at the right time, in the right way, and is not as concerned with the act itself. The ethics of character avoids most dilemmas because the focus is no longer on deciding between two unfortunate outcomes or two conflicting rules but on being a certain kind of person. Virtuous officers do not assign values to outcomes or preferences to duties. Virtuous officers have habituated dispositions that make them the kind of people who do the right thing, even in the complicated and dynamic environment of modern military operations.

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*[The lieutenant's] only requirements are to stand at the head of the line and make sure everyone gets fed. [But] if he knows why he is to stand at the front of the line, he will become a more caring person, for he should begin to notice anything that is not being done correctly. For example, the cooks might be giving out unusually small portions; the food might not be cooked as well as it should or could be; or the food might lack variety from day to day. There is nothing in the rule that requires him to do anything about these things.*

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**The virtues of good officership.** In virtue ethics, the virtues are determined by understanding the purpose something serves.<sup>8</sup> Knowing something's purpose reveals if something is functioning well or poorly. For example, if the purpose of pack animals such as mules is to bear burdens, their actions reveal which mules do better and which do worse. And, we can tell what qualities a mule must possess, such as strength, surefootedness, and endurance, to do its task well. To the degree a mule possesses these traits, the better the mule is.

A human being must also have certain characteristics to be a good human being. Aristotle claimed that the virtues of the excellent person included courage, temperance, liberality, proper pride, good temper, ready wit, modesty, and justice.<sup>9</sup> Plato listed prudence, courage, temperance, and justice.<sup>10</sup> Thomas Aquinas added faith, hope, and love.<sup>11</sup>

Because what it means to function well for a human is much more complex than what it means to function well for a mule, defining "functioning well" is difficult. Part of the problem is that a complex combination of biology, environment, culture, and tradition determines what it means to function well. What this complex combination is and how its components relate to each other are not always well understood and, therefore, are subjects of much debate.

The function, environment, culture, and traditions of the military are well understood, however. The military's function is to defend the Nation. This function is itself a moral imperative of the State. Also, officers have the added functions of setting goals and inspiring others to achieve them to serve this purpose. Not only does this allow us to determine the virtues of the good military leader, it provides a way to morally justify them as well. This gives a clear framework for discussing the character of morally good leadership.

Given this function, one can determine some of the virtues that are associated with officership, including selflessness, courage, prudence, caring, and

integrity.<sup>12</sup> If officers must establish goals and methods of defending the Nation, they will need to be prudent and selfless. The former is necessary to discern the proper ends, and the latter is necessary to mediate when proper ends conflict with self-interest. Officers require courage, caring, and integrity to inspire and direct others to achieve these goals.

Having decided what the virtues of good officership are, it is necessary to discuss what it means to act virtuously. Virtues are excellences of character; that is, they are dispositions toward certain behaviors that result in habitual acts.<sup>13</sup> Aristotle viewed each virtue as a mean between the two extremes (vices) of excess and deficiency in regard to certain human capacities. For example, with regard toward feelings of fear, courage is the mean. A person can feel too much fear and be cowardly or feel too little fear and be foolhardy. A person, who runs in the face of danger when the proper thing to do would be to stand his ground, is a coward. But the person who does not comprehend the danger he is in is also not courageous. This works the same way for other virtues as well. With regard to selflessness, one extreme is careerism, where officers are too concerned with personal advancement and fail to place the needs of the organization above their own. An officer can also be too selfless. Officers who never take care of personal interests might impede their ability to lead. For example, officers who deny themselves sleep, so as to demonstrate their commitment to the mission, quickly become incapable of making good decisions.<sup>14</sup>

Neither is the mean an average. For instance, 10 pounds of food might be too much, and 2 pounds might be too little, but this does not mean that the average of 6 pounds is the right amount. Instead, the mean is relative to our nature. It is worth emphasizing that for Aristotle the mean is only aimed at because it is beneficial; the mean between two extremes enables the individual to live well.

To discern what the mean is an officer must develop the ability to reason well, which is itself a virtue that Aristotle called prudence or practical wisdom. This virtue is necessary to resolve the tension between the feelings that emerge from natural appetites, concerns of self-interest, and the requirements of virtue.<sup>5</sup> The conflict between reason, feeling, and self-interest lies at the heart of the excellences or virtues. What drags us to extremes detrimental to our long-term happiness are passions and feelings, such as excessive (or defective) fear or excessive love of pleasure. Reason is required to control behavior, passions, and feelings. Excellencies are applications of reason to behavior and emotion. These excellencies can be developed with proper training.

Virtue ethics allows us to take into account consequences, rules, duties, and principles in a way that resolves the tension inherent among them. As in consequence-based ethical theories, we must be concerned with consequences of an action to determine its normative value. In virtue ethics, one must be sensitive to the conditions that frame moral choices. Acting on the principle of always telling the truth is good, but ignoring how that truth might affect others risks doing moral harm. For example, a caring husband should bring to his wife's attention conditions that negatively affect her health. A vicious (or at least stupid) husband will simply announce that she is fat. Determining how to instantiate a particular virtue requires an element of compassion. Instantiating a virtue without being compassionate can result in disastrous consequences.

Rule- or duty-based ethics evaluate actions in terms of how these actions correspond to certain rules or principles. In duty-based ethics one has an obligation to perform certain duties conscientiously. In virtue ethics one must habituate and instantiate a virtue conscientiously.<sup>16</sup> As such, the habituation of virtue can take on the qualities of a duty. To develop integrity, for example, one must always tell the truth and always avoid lying.

Virtues are also beneficial to the possessor. Someone who is courageous has a better chance of succeeding than someone who is cowardly, for that person will persevere. Someone who is selfless exercises self-control and would in most circumstances be happier and healthier because of not allowing personal gain to divert him from important long-term projects, such as passing an inspection or carrying out a long-term training plan.

**Developing the virtues of good character.** A virtue-ethics approach to officership can help resolve certain dilemmas that consequence- and rule-based theories cannot. Instead of doing good things, the virtuous person focuses on being good. How one becomes good is by acquiring certain virtues or character traits that lead to doing virtuous things. This is, however, where rule-based approaches can play a key role.

Virtues do not develop overnight. One cannot wake up one day and decide to be courageous, for example, and immediately be so. Being virtuous means knowing the right time, place, circumstance, and manner in which to be courageous. One acquires these traits by habituation. According to Aristotle, whose writings influence modern virtue theory, one becomes virtuous only by performing virtuous actions until doing so becomes habitual. In other words, experience is necessary. Aristotle makes this point by contrasting virtues with natural capacities: "Of all the things that come to us by nature we first

acquire the potentiality and later exhibit the activity (this is plain in the case of senses; for it was not by often seeing or often hearing that we got these senses, but on the contrary we had them before we used them, and did not come to have them by using them); but the virtues we get by first exercising them, as also happens in the case of the arts as well. For the things we have to learn before we can do

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them, we learn by doing them, e.g., men become builders by building and lyre players by playing the lyre; so too we become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts."<sup>17</sup>

So, just as one becomes a good musician only by practicing an instrument, one becomes a good officer only by practicing the profession. But, how does one who has no experience in such matters develop experience? When we try to describe a virtue, we tend to list the things we must do to instantiate the virtue. Listing these things is just like listing rules and principles. This is, in fact, one of the major problems with a virtue approach. When we try to put rules and principles into practice, we end up with what appears to be essentially a rule-based system. When this happens, the importance of character is not obvious.

To get a deeper understanding of what character is as well as how its virtues are best cultivated, consider the following example. To make his subordinates caring officers, a brigade commander made the rule that an officer's place is at the front of the mess line to ensure that everyone gets fed. The officer is to eat last. When the commander found one lieutenant at the end of the line, he immediately corrected the situation.<sup>18</sup> When the lieutenant first stood at the head of a line, he was simply following a rule. If rules were the sole determinants of right and wrong, then the lieutenant was doing what was right. This is good as far as it goes, but this will not make him a better lieutenant. If he knows why he is to stand at the front of the line, he will become a more caring person, for he should begin to notice anything that is not being done correctly. For example, the cooks might be giving out unusually small portions; the food might not be cooked as well as it should or

could be; or the food might lack variety from day to day. There is nothing in the rule that requires him to do anything about these things. His only requirements are to stand at the head of the line and make sure everyone gets fed. But, since he knows that this rule is supposed to make him a more caring person toward his soldiers, he is motivated to act to correct these things.

This might seem like a simple, inconsequential example, but this same dynamic works in many situations. At first, the junior officer is following rules; later, after doing it long enough with a properly critical and creative attitude, he makes a transition to where he is actually disposed to be caring. Once this happens, he is no longer simply following rules. He has actually developed the capacity to make them. What motivates him to adopt this attitude is an understanding that it is not enough to do good, it is just as important to be good.

Aristotle also points out that one cannot develop virtue by accident or by doing the right thing for the wrong reasons. The lieutenant in the above example might be motivated by self-interest because he knows the brigade commander will give him high marks for being so conscientious. This is why intent is important. One simply cannot become caring or wise or honest unless one is trying to become so. For an action to be truly virtuous, a person must be in the right state of mind. He must know that his action is virtuous, and he must decide on it for the sake of his soldiers. He must act in a caring manner because being caring is good, not because it will benefit his career.

## Mentorship

If rules have a role in habituating virtue, it is critical that the person making the rules possesses that virtue. In this way, the rules are not arbitrary but, instead, become a path one can take to becoming a good officer. Aristotle likened the acquiring of virtues to playing an instrument, which requires a teacher and habitual practice. Unless one is a savant, one does not pick up a guitar and by fooling around with it, play it. One might, after a fashion, be able to make pleasant sounds with it, but without someone to provide training, developing true proficiency will be long and arduous; fraught with mistakes; and certainly not efficient. One might even pick up a book and learn the principles of good guitar playing. Those who have tried that method know that doing so might make them better to an extent, but it takes a good teacher to really train them in how to achieve excellence.

For junior officers to become good officers, they must acquire the necessary virtues. Junior officers can learn from seeing how virtues are instantiated by those who are effective at moral officership. Only

then can they instantiate virtues into their own lives. Virtues involve a delicate balancing between general rules and an awareness of particulars. In this process, the perception of the particular takes priority, in the sense that a good rule is a good summary of wise particular choices and not a court of last resort. The rules of ethics, like rules of medicine, should be held open to modification in the light of new circumstances. The good officer must cultivate the ability to perceive, then correctly and accurately describe his situation and include in this perceptual grasp even those features of the situation that are not covered under the existing rule. The virtues provide a framework around which officers might engage in this process.

**Resolving the dilemma.** In resolving his problem, our virtuous lieutenant will understand that he cannot instantiate one virtue, such as caring, by failing to instantiate another virtue, such as integrity. In any particular situation, the virtuous person acts in such a way that he instantiates all of the relevant virtues. The lieutenant might decide that it is better to save his men at the expense of fulfilling his duty to obey lawful orders, but he will understand that he cannot be caring at the expense of his integrity. He will understand that somehow he must maintain or restore it. He will understand that to be virtuous, he must publicly take responsibility for his actions and the bad consequences those actions might have. To prevent or mitigate the bad consequences he might turn himself over to his superiors or resign from his position. This would send the message to his subordinates that what he did might have been necessary, but it was not good. If he were only obligated to consider military necessity, he would actually be able to conclude that torturing the civilian was a morally obligated act if he concluded that rescuing his men maximized military necessity. Virtue ethics allows him to conclude that this might be the morally best course of action, but not that the results of the action are morally good.

Could the lieutenant be virtuous and allow his men to die? Only if there were a way to instantiate caring if he did so. He might consider the harm he could cause to the civilian's family if the enemy discovers the civilian's cooperation. To achieve the greater good, the lieutenant might find that he, as leader, would have to bear the moral costs of his decision. He might consider resigning his position if it is the only way he can restore his integrity after having failed in the commitments he made to his men. What things he considers and how he considers them will result from the virtues relevant to the situation. If he were simply following the rules, he would have to conclude that letting his men die is the right thing to do, regardless of extenuating circumstances.

Offering a definitive virtuous solution is difficult

because there really is none, at least not in the same sense that consequence- or rule-based systems offer. Such approaches attempt to determine what the right action is in a particular situation. They are intended to be formulas that when all of the relevant variables are put into the equation, the right answer pops out. They are not always up to the challenge, however. While virtue ethics does not offer a formula, it offers a way of developing officers and subordinates in a manner that will provide the widest possible variety of resources to draw on to make the best ethical decisions in the moral crucible of the modern battlefield.

### Potential to do Good or Evil

In the complex, dynamic, and dangerous environment of the modern battlefield there is great potential to do evil and little time to apply rules or to calculate consequences to avoid doing evil. Even if there were, such one-dimensional approaches to ethics are not always up to the challenge. Rules, duties, and principles can conflict. Sincere, well-intentioned compliance can sometimes lead to the most disastrous outcomes. But acting in such situations does not necessarily make someone a bad person.

Actions might be evidence of the presence or the absence of virtue, but they are not in themselves virtuous. Acting virtuously might not spare one from the moral costs of leadership, but doing so provides a framework in which one can maintain one's integrity as well as the integrity of the pro-

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fession. This is why developing the virtues of good officership is so important for the military officer. In situations where any action can lead to a morally impermissible outcome, it will be officers of character who will be best able to resolve the tension and maintain their own integrity and the integrity of the profession as well.

Character is an essential part of an ethical framework for officership. When officers face the kind of situation the lieutenant did, it is the character they have habituated that will guide their actions. This does not mean that virtuous officers never consider consequences or rules to determine where their duties lie. The point is that the virtuous officer has developed the disposition to know how and when to do so in the best way possible. **MR**

### NOTES

1. GEN Sir John Winthrop Hackett, "Military Service in the Service of the State," *The Harmon Memorial Lectures in Military History* (U.S. Air Force Academy, CO: U.S. Government Printing Office [GPO], 1970).
2. This scenario is based on an actual event that occurred during the Vietnam war. See Anthony E. Hartle, *Moral Issues in Military Decision Making* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1989), 2-3.
3. U.S. Military Academy Circular 1-101, *Cadet Leadership Development System* (West Point, NY: June 2002), 1.
4. For a discussion on the importance of consistency and coherence in ethical decisionmaking, see Donald M. Snider, John A. Nagl, and Charles A. Pfaff, *The Army Profession: Officership and Ethics in the 21st Century* (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, 1999).
5. Department of the Army Field Manual 27-10, *The Law of Land Warfare* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1956, change 1, 15 July 1976), 6-7.
6. Military realists believe that in war there are no moral norms. Given the commitments officer make to honor the treaties to which the United States is part of as well as to the ideals the Constitution invokes, this view is incompatible with commissioned service.
7. For a more complete discussion of why rule- and duty-based ethics do not form complete ethical approaches, see Charles A. Pfaff, *Virtue Ethics and Leadership*, unpublished presentation to the Joint Services Conference on Professional Ethics, available on-line at <www.usafa.af.mil/jscope/JSCOPE98/PFAFF98.htm>. See also Julius Moravcsik, "On What We Aim At and How We Live" in *The Greeks and the Good Life*, ed., David Depew (Fullerton, CA: California State University, 1980), 199.
8. Aristotle believed that a human being's function is to reason. Human beings who reason well will also live well because they are the best human beings they can be.
9. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans., Terence Irwin (Cambridge, UK: Hackett Publishing Company), Book IV.
10. Plato, *Laws*, trans., A.E. Taylor, 1.631d, 12.965d, and *Republic*, trans., Paul Shorey,

- 4.427e, 433, in *Plato: The Collected Dialogues*, eds., Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1961).
11. Arthur F. Holmes, *Ethics: Approaching Moral Decisions* (Leicester, England: InterVarsity Press, date unknown), 119.
12. My use of selflessness here is synonymous with the idea of public virtue. See Forrest McDonald, *Novus Ordo Seclorum: The Intellectual Origins of the Constitution* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1985), 71. See also James M. Stockdale, *Thoughts of a Philosophical Fighter Pilot* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1995), 75.
13. Distinguishing between what Plato and Aristotle referred to as practical wisdom (*phronesis*) and philosophical wisdom (*sophia*) is important. Practical wisdom expresses itself in the prudent conduct of one's public and private business. This virtue, also often called prudence, is distinguished from the theoretical wisdom of the philosopher. In the context of the discussion of leadership, Plato, in *Laws*, discusses what qualifies a good legislator should possess and claims that a good legislator relies on prudence to determine what laws to enact. Since good laws achieve good ends, the good legislator must discern both the good end and the means to the good end.
14. Louis Pojman, *Ethics: Discovering Right and Wrong* (Albany, NY: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1999), 163.
15. Jonathan Shay, *The Invisible Gap: Ethical Standing for Commander Self-Care*. Paper presented at the Joint Services Conference on Professional Ethics, National Defense University, Fort McNair, Washington, DC, 30-31 January 1997.
16. See *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book II.
17. James Wallace, *Virtue and Vices* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1978), 90.
18. *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book II, 1103a27-1103b1.
19. Personal conversation with BG Ray Miller, U.S. Army, Retired, Palo Alto, CA, 1 November 1996.
20. Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will*, trans., Anna S. Benjamin and L.H. Hackstaff (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1964), 1.

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