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PROFESSIONAL READING

“Acting morally follows from character. To *do* something, one must *be* something.”

by

Vice Admiral James Bond Stockdale, US Navy (Ret.)*

Stromberg, Peter L., Wakin, Malham M., and Callahan, Daniel. *The Teaching of Ethics in the Military*. Hastings-on-Hudson, NY: Hastings Center, 1982. 85pp. \$5

This small well-printed book on the teaching of military ethics is one of a series on the teaching of ethics published by the Hastings Center, an ethics think-tank on the Hudson that takes for its province “problems of society, ethics, and life sciences.” The authors of the present volume are serious, well-qualified writers on the subject, none of whom thinks that ethics is a branch of psychology. Callahan is Director of the Hastings Center; Wakin, an Air Force colonel, heads the Department of Philosophy and Fine Arts at the Air Force Academy; Stromberg, an Army colonel, is Deputy Head of the Department of English of the US Military Academy, West Point.

It is too bad that there is no word better than “ethics” to designate the important material these writers want to get across. The “ethics” explosion has done something to erode the noble connotation of the word. In recent years, ethics courses have proliferated like fruit flies, ranging from “Business Ethics” to “Ethics for Dentists.” To stack a parallel military effort alongside these seems somehow to prepare one for being bored. Not that the authors of this careful study want to diminish the importance of the military profession’s stake in the moral life. On the contrary they emphasize, and rightly so, the moral duties and responsibilities of the military profession. But when you talk about “ethics” in whatever context today, it’s hard to avoid sounding flat.

It’s also hard to avoid misleading people into thinking there is some sort of science out there, a science having as its foundation a number of immutable principles from which you merely select the right one and deduce the answer to your immediate dilemma. (Oh, that military life were so simplistic; equally applicable principles

more often than not produce opposing solutions.) Somehow the term "Moral Philosophy" seems closer to the tradition of the humanities, and if you don't have a significant background in the humanities and familiarity with the philosophical classics, ancient and modern, you can't teach "ethics" without boring and confusing the hell out of your students whether they be colonels or corporals.

To be fair, the authors of this study are well aware of the importance of the classical literature on the subject. They cite Thucydides' Melian Dialogue, Plato's *Apology* and *Crito*, and insist on the need to know the key concepts of Aristotle, Kant, and Mill if you want to understand and to teach "Ethics in the Military." They know also the value of using literary masterpieces in the teaching of this difficult subject. They cite Dostoyevsky's "Grand Inquisitor" which to me has more moral philosophy for a human being and therefore also for a military man or woman than all the contemporary writings on "professional ethics" put together.

But the authors spoil good things by dropping back into platitudes. Example: "A flight leader threatens American values if he cannot analyze a moral problem." That's not helpful. A flight leader threatens human values (and, by inclusion, American values) if he hasn't got the guts ("character") to act like a man. Before you can teach ethics, you have to ask whether that discipline aims at building character or obeying rules. Ask Lord Nelson's ghost about that; he still has his blind eye and his telescope. Aristotle had no doubts on the subject. The end, goals, *telos* of a man is to be as human as possible. This takes skill and the skill can be learned, but not the easy way. You build your character by hard habit and tough training. Acting morally follows from character. To *do* something, one must *be* something.

An essential part of moral training is reading first-class material, not professional manuals. My philosophy teacher introduced me to Epictetus when I was a 40 year old naval officer graduate student at Stanford. Later, during my nearly eight years in prison in Hanoi, I remembered Epictetus and tried as best I could to turn his precepts into acts. But one must have a little something to start with. I resolved that if I ever got out of that torture-extortion machine, I would teach a course in moral philosophy. I did get out and during my tenure as President of the Naval War College, I taught (not "assisted" as the authors say) a course in moral philosophy. The readings were not directly professional. They included the Book of Job, Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Mill, Sartre, even Wittgenstein, as well as Dostoyevsky, Koestler, Camus, and Solzhenitsyn. We studied moral philosophy by looking at models of human beings under pressure, their portraits drawn from the best material we could find in philosophy and literature. The professional implications for military men and women followed. We didn't have to draw diagrams; they came up naturally in the seminar discussions.

The authors are right on target when they say that a course in moral philosophy "can provide the occasion to step back from immediate moral or leadership obligations in order to ask what they mean, to consider what can be done in cases of moral conflict . . . to provide some solid content to what otherwise might be dismissed as mere hortatory slogans e.g. duty, honor, country."

The question is, however, where do we get the teachers qualified to offer such courses to soldiers? The authors admit this is a problem. They say that the more successful elective ethics courses have been taught with the aid of a visiting philosophy professor. Then they add, "But senior officers with scholarly credentials

in ethics are few, and philosophy professors with appropriate military experience are scarce. Junior officers, even with the best scholarly credentials are not likely to hold this group's interest, nor are civilian professors who cannot identify with specific issues in military ethics."

Even though the authors suggest no solution to the difficulty, the fact that they admit that the problem exists is a valuable corrective to those who believe that courses in military ethics can be laid on like courses in "behavioral science" by those who (to paraphrase Aristotle) are not fitted by nature, by habit, or by education to teach them. In this connection, I'm thinking particularly of men like William Sloan Coffin, who for some peculiar reason is mentioned favorably on page 51.

Hunt, Barry D. *Sailor-Scholar. Admiral Sir Herbert Richmond, 1871-1946*. Canada: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1982. 259pp. \$12

This book is not a biography, though it seems to be offered as such. At the same time it is not easy to say what it is. It deals with four themes, no one of which is fully developed, but treated in an interlocking way that makes it hard for the reader to catch what the thrust of the book really is.

The four themes are: (1) Richmond, the highly competent naval officer, rising to flag rank; (2) Richmond, the critical gad-fly—not of the Royal Navy—but of the Admiralty and its handling of the Navy; (3) Richmond, the reformer of naval officer education, and (4) Richmond, the serious naval historian and able theorist of naval power and its uses.

Somewhere among readers with naval interest there are bound to be audiences for each of these themes taken separately, but it is unlikely that there will be a general audience for this book. Yet, readers with single interests will miss something if they do not at least skim it.

A quotation sets the tone: "The ethics of military professionalism can never fully accommodate the fundamentally subversive tendencies of the academic mind." What is the situation when both

qualities are fully developed in the same man? The possibility is rare; but when it does occur the result is likely to be awkward. Richmond, entering the Navy at a very early age, was thoroughly well-grounded as a professional officer, and never ceased to be one. He was quickly recognized and a potential career was marked out for him by his superiors. At a critical point, however, he chose a different line: he refused an important appointment because he wanted to avoid "an exclusive concern with the technical and routine side of the naval profession as might get him into a rut." The alternative, as he pursued it, was an interest in naval history, in problems of naval strategy and tactics, and sooner or later in naval education to ensure that such matters received systematic study.

At the same time, since he was a trained professional, there was nothing remote or abstract about these interests. They were always to be applied to real and current problems of naval policy and its relation to national interests. This got him into a pattern of consistent pressure for the reform of Admiralty organization and direction of naval operations.

The Admiralty, under Sir John Fisher, was already adjusting to technological advances, but to Richmond (who had been a Fisher protégé) and to a group of naval Young Turks who thought of their