

# MILITARY VIRTUES FOR TODAY

*Author: Peter Olsthoorn*

For most militaries today the primary task is the handling of international crises, ranging from humanitarian assistance to peacekeeping, peace enforcing and post-conflict reconstruction. It will be obvious that these new operations require a great deal of self-control on the side of military personnel, who have to do their work in circumstances that are in general stressful, and sometimes frustrating. Incidents in Iraq and Afghanistan, such as the killing of 39 civilians by Australian special forces in Afghanistan between 2005 and 2016, underline the importance of finding ways to prevent military personnel crossing the line between legitimate force and unlawful violence.<sup>1</sup>

To that end, militaries traditionally relied on rules and codes of conduct. Rules make clear to military personnel which actions are off-limits, and rule-based ethics point to the importance of having universal, categorically binding moral norms. Such a confidence in the beneficial effects of rules and codes has its drawbacks, though. According to some the impact of codes of conduct is fairly limited to begin with,<sup>2</sup> while others point out that rule-based approaches are rigid, and largely ineffective when there are no witnesses around. Rules can even impede the ability to see the moral aspect of what one is doing, while that ability is evidently an important prerequisite for morally sound decision making. Although rules ideally codify what is just, in concrete cases what the rules stipulate can be manifestly unjust. Following the rules without too much thinking could in some instances thus lead to “crimes of obedience.”<sup>3</sup> Rules, in sum, lack flexibility, even when that flexibility is obviously needed, and soldiers should therefore have some autonomy in their decision making.<sup>4</sup>

To use this autonomy in an ethical way, soldiers need a good disposition, and it is for that reason that many militaries see a virtue-based approach to military ethics and military ethics education as a necessary counterpart to rules imposed from above. Virtue ethics is in keeping with the tendency of many militaries to move away in their ethics education from a functional approach towards an aspirational approach that aims at making soldiers better persons, mainly based on the view that bad persons are not likely

## *Abstract*

*How can military personnel be prevented from using force unlawfully? A critical examination of typical methods and the suitability of virtue ethics for this task starts with the inadequacies of a purely rules-based approach, and the fact that many armed forces increasingly rely on character development training. The three investigated complexes also raise further questions which require serious consideration – such as about the general teachability of virtues.*

*First, the changing roles and responsibilities of modern armed forces are used to refute the notion that timeless, “classic” military virtues exist, for example physical courage. With regard to today’s missions, virtues of restraint seem more necessary. Reflecting on the four interrelated and less military-specific cardinal virtues of courage, wisdom, temperance and justice could bring the military and civil society closer together. At the same time, this would be a logical step towards promoting personality development.*

*Respect is one example of such a “contemporary” inclusive virtue that some armed forces have adopted into their canon of values. Apparently, however, it often refers only to members of one’s own organization. And it is no less inappropriate to use it to justify moral relativism or excuse immoral practices, such as the widespread sexual abuse of Afghan boys by men in positions of power (“boy play”).*

*Finally, the essay asks about the general suitability of a virtue-based approach in ethical education, since social psychological research has shown that situational factors strongly influence behavior. The research findings do not render such an approach worthless, but they should be integrated into military personality training.*

to form morally good soldiers (although they still could be effective ones ...). Such an aspirational approach sits rather well with the way most militaries see themselves: as being in the business of character-building. It is therefore a pity that many militaries seem to have adopted this aspirational virtue ethics approach in too carefree a manner.

There are, in fact, quite a few unanswered questions regarding the suitability of virtue ethics for the military, and this paper aims to address three of the more pressing ones. The most important question, first of all, is of course *which* virtues we need. Are new virtues emerging because of changes in military tasks? Have some virtues gained significance? Have others lost their importance? Next, this paper addresses a virtue that has a modern ring to it but that we perhaps do not need, or at least not in all of its forms. Finally, the last section before the conclusion deals with the sobering question whether virtues matter at all.

### **Which virtues do we need?**

Which virtues military personnel need today depends at least partly on whether what makes up a military virtue is place and time dependent. At first sight a convincing argument can be made that this is *not* the case. Some military virtues are valued in all eras and cultures, for instance because they perform an important function in or for the military.<sup>5</sup> The archetypal military virtue of physical courage seems a textbook example. But a closer look shows that the type of courage that militaries need tends to change over time. Aristotle's famous definition of courage as the mean between rashness and cowardice,<sup>6</sup> for instance, fitted the hoplite warfare of his day very well, as both an excess or a deficiency of bravery would destroy the organized whole the phalanx was. At present we see how the rise of a number of new technologies makes this type of physical courage outmoded for at least some parts of the military: cyber soldiers and UAV operators, for instance, do not seem to need this type of courage at all. They probably do need moral courage, a subspecies of courage that asks us to stick to our principles even if others disagree.<sup>7</sup> Regarding other central military virtues regularly appearing

on lists of military virtues, such as loyalty, discipline or obedience, it is at the minimum less evident what positive role they could have for, for instance, cyber operations or operating armed drones.<sup>8</sup> More worrisome: most military virtues mainly pay attention to the interests and aims of the organization and colleagues. They are more functional than aspirational, which means among other things that they do contribute to the objectives of the military, but that there is

### ***In light of the changed tasks of the military, the virtues needed at present are most likely more about exercising restraint than about demonstrating physical courage, loyalty, and discipline***

little in them that limits the behavior of soldiers towards civilians. Assuming that the traditional martial virtues such as physical courage are of diminished use in today's conflicts, we need to look for virtues that are better suited for today.

In light of the changed tasks of the military, the virtues needed at present are most likely more about exercising restraint than about demonstrating physical courage, loyalty, and discipline. Such virtues of restraint will be less military-specific, and could therefore bring the military into closer alignment with general society (and perhaps also with the principles of other professions that in general give central place to the interests of outsiders to the organization). Opting for virtues that are closer to "common morality" would fit the aspirational approach that militaries are moving towards better – we already noted that there is a tendency in many Western militaries toward a less functional approach. Now, it is fairly evident that there are important differences between mainly functional role morality and more aspirational common morality: lawyers, policemen and doctors all have obligations and rights other people do not have, and for good reasons.<sup>9</sup> Although for military personnel role morality clearly differs from ordinary morality too, as they are members of a profession that can legitimately use force, one could convincingly argue that militaries need a more outward-looking set of virtues for today's

missions that more often than not require restraint on the side of their personnel.<sup>10</sup> If true, that still does not mean we have to design a new set of virtues from scratch. A likely source to turn to first when looking for such aspirational, comprehensive virtues are the “general” and time proven cardinal virtues that can be found in the work of authors such as Plato and Cicero.

As it stands, of the four cardinal virtues, only courage has made it to the traditional lists of military virtues. The equally cardinal virtues of wisdom, temperance and justice, today probably at least as needed as courage is, are absent on most lists of military virtues (although they do appear in a recent volume on military virtues<sup>11</sup>). That is a loss, seeing that wisdom, justice and temperance are a lot more wide-ranging than the traditional military virtues are. What is more, they are typical virtues of restraint. Choosing these cardinal virtues would also do justice to the idea that all the virtues form a unified whole, and that therefore you cannot have one virtue without possessing the others, too. Wisdom uninformed by justice may come close to cunning, for instance. Likewise, courage is of little use without practical wisdom to guide it, while that same courage is a not a virtue if it does not serve a just goal. And, somewhat similarly, if one lacks the courage to defend what is just, being just is not of much value to begin with. Such interconnections are absent in the rather random collections of virtues that militaries nowadays live by.

### A virtue less needed?

Despite their ancient roots, opting for the cardinal virtues would give the military a set of virtues that is more modern and comprehensive. Interestingly, however, there is already one seemingly outward-looking virtue that many militaries include on their value lists, and that is respect. Listing respect as a virtue is however not the concession to the current tasks of the military it might seem: a closer look reveals that respect in the military is often tacitly limited to respect toward colleagues.<sup>12</sup> So although “respect” certainly sounds inclusive, at present the way some militaries interpret it bars it from being that. Such interpretations fail to take into account that military personnel will often be doing their

job amidst the local population. Why exactly militaries are disinclined to include outsiders remains a puzzle, given that respect for outsiders does not diminish the amount of respect left to show colleagues. A more all-encompassing interpretation of this virtue would seem a welcome step ahead.

But respect as an inclusive virtue has a flip-side: there are occasions in which a broad interpretation of respect can in fact be too much of a good thing. When deployed, Western military personnel regularly encounter local practices that clash with their Western values, and sometimes pre-deployment training underlines the importance of respect for such local customs.<sup>13</sup> This is partly for good reasons: military personnel sent abroad need to have sufficient knowledge of local sensitivities. Yet emphasizing the need to respect other people’s customs can provide Western soldiers with a ground for not intervening in cases of corruption or the cruel treatment of women and children. In Afghanistan, Western military personnel regularly witnessed the practice of “boy play,” a euphemism for men in positions of power “owning” boys who serve tea, dance – and suffer sexual abuse. A soldier deployed to Afghanistan relates how the subject wasn’t discussed at all during mission-specific training, but that they “did learn that we must respect local culture.”<sup>14</sup> Soldiers on a mission sometimes end up believing that “the situation is culturally determined and therefore unchangeable,” when it is in fact not.<sup>15</sup> The gradual eroding of moral standards plays a role too: referring to the practice of boy play, a member of the Dutch military explained that “[t]he peculiar thing is that it becomes more and more ‘normal’ (...) After six months, you start to adjust and start to assimilate local customs and we practically never talked about it, you get used to it.”<sup>16</sup>

In reality, our idea that the sexual abuse of boys is part of Afghan culture is mistaken; like everyone else, most Afghans think the practice immoral, and the sexual molesting of boys is not defensible within the value framework of Afghan society. Ironically, the Taliban suppressed the practice of boy play during their years in power fairly successfully; it resurfaced after their rule ended. Afghan law, by the way, still forbids it. But even if most or all Afghans thought that

child molesting was right, would that really imply that we should respect their position? Clearly not, because child molesting is a clear violation of important external standards; condoning every practice that meets internal standards would overlook that we are also member of a more cosmopolitan moral community. That the majority in certain societies approves of certain practices does not make these practices right. A seemingly inclusive virtue like respect does more harm than good if it provides soldiers with a ground to look away.

This looking away is sometimes defended with the argument that moral judgments are place and time dependent. This moral relativism consists of the empirical claim that there is widespread moral disagreement, and the metaethical claim that the truth of moral judgments is “relative to the moral standard of some person or group of persons.”<sup>17</sup> Some think that the empirical claim demonstrates the metaethical one. But that empirical claim is most likely incorrect; the nearly universal taboo on killing and stealing testifies to that.<sup>18</sup> That most Afghans do not approve of the practice of boy play also suggests that there is some basic morality that most people agree on. Most of what looks like disagreement about values is in fact disagreement about the norms that we derive from these values. Only the most radical forms of relativism do not see a role for at least some very basic rights to serve as a check on all too particularistic practices.<sup>19</sup> Not speaking out against such practices also overlooks that tolerance, like respect, is a matter of reciprocity: there is no obligation to “bear” the intolerant.<sup>20</sup>

That leaves us with the question where a line should be drawn. According to Thomas Scanlon, a good test when thinking about right and wrong is “thinking about what could be justified to others on grounds that they, if appropriately motivated, could not reasonably reject.”<sup>21</sup> Clearly, the practice of boy play does not pass that test. It is therefore important that respect is balanced by other virtues that can function as correctives to too much relativism and the accompanying tendency to put aside one’s own values. The already mentioned cardinal virtues such as justice and wisdom, but certainly also (moral) courage, can perform that role. Such

virtues can provide guidance to military personnel in morally ambiguous situations, where providing general rules and guidelines for such complex situations will not work.

### **But do virtues make a difference?**

In the sections above the focus was on virtue-based approaches to military ethics as this is the approach that most militaries have embraced – partly because of shortcomings of more rule-based approaches. But a virtue-based approach has its own drawbacks, the main one being that it assumes a direct relation between character and conduct. An assumption that might very well be wrong: over the last few decades a host of empirical research has shown that situations determine conduct to a far greater extent than character does. We tend to make

***We tend to make a fundamental attribution error, meaning that we underrate the influence of situational factors and, as a consequence, over-attribute behavior to personality and character***

a fundamental attribution error, meaning that we underrate the influence of situational factors and, as a consequence, over-attribute behavior to personality and character. This is at heart the old intuition that knowing what is good and doing good are not the same thing.<sup>22</sup> Especially Milgram’s famous studies on obedience and Zimbardo’s equally well-known Stanford Prison Experiment have popularized the idea that situations can make us harm innocent others.

Ethicists take these insights about how situations determine conduct more and more into account, fearing that virtue ethics suffers from a mistaken focus on the individual. The idea that it is unvirtuous individuals that commit atrocities could well be false, seeing that the situational forces soldiers experience in combat are so much stronger than the situational factors that already caused so many research subjects of Milgram and Zimbardo to transgress the most basic norms.<sup>23</sup> Sleep deprivation, de-

humanization, stress, (racial) ideology, strong loyalty to colleagues and the organization and negative peer pressure can make unethical behavior just about inevitable.<sup>24</sup>

Modern social psychology research challenges both virtue ethics and, as a consequence, also any military ethics education that builds on this school of thought. If this so-called situationism is true, militaries are duty-bound to increase awareness of the factors that determine the conduct of military personnel, and make efforts to improve the ethical climate of the organization. The truth of the claim would also imply that the current emphasis on character formation and instilling virtues is by and large ineffective. Some, however, have drawn attention to the fact that the gist of the argument rests on an incomplete, or even biased, understanding of some famous studies in social psychology.<sup>25</sup> We only read, for instance, about the participants in the experiments of Milgram and Zimbardo that succumbed to situational pressures, not about the many who resisted.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, virtue ethics assumes that we can acquire virtues if we work hard enough; it does not at all assume that we are born virtuous. The aim of military training is to teach relevant virtues, and situations might hence have less influence on well-trained soldiers than on the average participant (often a student) in a social psychology experiment.

The unspectacular conclusion that our character and the situation both have an impact on our conduct leaves some ground for optimism concerning the role of character formation. Nonetheless, a military ethics education that does not pay sufficient attention to the shortcomings of a character-based approach would be too theoretical. Military ethics education

should not only aim at building character, but also at giving insight in the factors that make unethical conduct more likely to take place. The social psychologist's advice to avoid morally challenging situations is clearly not of much use in a military context, but with a better understanding of the influence situational factors have, a lot more can be done to make the erosion of moral standards less likely to occur.

## Discussion

Today's soldiers do need virtues, but not necessarily of the "duty, honor, country" kind. The virtues we teach military personnel are to fit their tasks, and if the virtues militaries traditionally promote are of less use in today's conflicts, formulating a new list of virtues would be an obvious way ahead. Above, a few suggestions have been made regarding virtues needed and less needed, and whether virtues make much of a difference to begin with. However, these questions – which virtues, and do they matter? – are just a few of the questions surrounding a virtue ethics approach to military ethics education. To highlight a few of the others: virtue ethics is based on the idea that virtues can be educated, but is this true? And if it is, how should this be done? If virtues are acquired through training and practice, how do we teach virtues in a classroom? And at what age? – if one's personality is formed before adulthood, this presents a challenge for militaries that want to mold characters.

A more fundamental question is whether virtue ethics actually forms a better basis for military ethics education than deontology and consequentialism. Virtue ethics is about the flourishing of the possessor of virtues, and that makes virtue ethics somewhat self-regarding compared to, say, the utilitarian credo of the greatest happiness for the greatest number, or the deontological golden rule that you should do unto others as you would have them do unto you. For instance: most deontologists think torture should always be forbidden, regardless of what is at stake, while a utilitarian could point out that the harm torture causes outweighs the benefits (that other utilitarians might argue the opposite probably explains the bad reputation that utilitarianism has in military ethics). A vir-

## The Author



*Peter Olsthoorn is Associate Professor in Military Leadership and Ethics at the Netherlands Defence Academy. Besides leadership and ethics, he teaches on armed forces and society, war and the media, and on ethics and fundamental rights for Frontex. His research is mainly on topics such as military virtues, military medical ethics, armed drones, and the ethics of border guarding. Among his publications are "Military Ethics and Virtues: An Interdisciplinary Approach for the 21st Century" (Routledge, 2010).*

tue ethicist, though, would highlight that the most important matter is to be the kind of person who would never use torture. Torture, from a virtue ethics perspective, “does not tend to produce in its practitioners the virtues of courage, justice, temperance, and practical wisdom but rather (...) their opposites.”<sup>27</sup> But would a potential victim of torture care about the character of the torturer? To complicate matters a bit further: militaries promote virtues for external goals like mission success or stimulating the ethical use of force, as we have noted above, and that makes it doubtful whether it is really virtue ethics that is practiced here. Encouraging certain virtues because of their good effects amounts to what is sometimes described as character utilitarianism.<sup>28</sup> That is not necessarily a bad thing, but it does testify to a rather functional approach towards ethics. Military ethics educators should have the courage to seriously grapple with such questions and complications instead of leaving them largely unaddressed.

1 Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force (2020): Afghanistan Inquiry report. <https://afghanistaninquiry.defence.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-11/IGADF-Afghanistan-Inquiry-Public-Release-Version.pdf> (accessed 15 November 2021).

2 Verweij, Desiree, Hofhuis, Kim and Soeters, Joseph (2007): Moral Judgment within the Armed Forces. *Journal of Military Ethics*, 6(1), pp. 19–40, pp. 24, 34.

3 Kelman, Herbert C. and Hamilton, V. Lee (1989): *Crimes of obedience: Toward a social psychology of authority and responsibility*. New Haven.

4 According to one textbook in military ethics, “in any situation where law and ethics set different standards, a member of the military profession will follow the higher standard, inevitably the one required by ethics.” Coleman, Stephen (2013): *Military Ethics*. Oxford, p. 268.

5 See also Neitzel, Sönke (2020): *Deutsche Krieger: Vom Kaiserreich zur Berliner Republik – eine Militärgeschichte*. Berlin; French, Shannon E. (2003): *The Code of the Warrior*. Lanham, MD.

6 Aristotle (1962): *Nicomachean Ethics*. Indianapolis, 1115.

7 Peter de Lee describes an acting sergeant overseeing a Reaper team who, against the opinion of all present, stuck to her judgment that a parcel on the back seat of a motorbike piloted by a Taliban target was in fact a child – which it in the end turned out to be. Lee, Pater (2019): Case Study 2: Moral Courage. In: Skerker, Michael, Whetham, David and Carrick, Don (eds): *Military Virtue*. Havant.

8 See also Olsthoorn, Peter (2021): Ethics for Drone Operators: Rules versus Virtues. In: Christian Enemark (ed.): *Ethics of Drone Strikes Restraining Remote-Control Killing*. Edinburgh.

9 Coleman, Stephen (2013), pp. 37–39.

10 One could also argue, however, that by aiming to instill both “general” virtues such as integrity and honesty, and more military specific virtues such as courage and discipline, the military already combines an aspirational and a functional approach.

11 See Skerker, Michael, Whetham, David and Carrick, Don (eds) (2019): *Military Virtues*. Havant.

12 The US Army describes respect as “trusting that all people have done their jobs,” adding that “[t]he Army is one team and each of us has something to contribute.” This definition limits respect to colleagues. <https://www.army.mil/values/> (accessed 15 November 2021). The Dutch military published a code of conduct in 2006 that contained the sentence “I treat everyone with respect.” The accompanying explanation made clear that the pronoun “everyone” referred to colleagues.

13 Schut, Michelle (2015): *Soldiers as Strangers: Morally and Culturally Critical Situations during Military Missions*. Doctoral dissertation, Nijmegen, p. 106.

14 Schut, Michelle (2015), p. 116.

15 Schut, Michelle (2015), p. 94.

16 Schut, Michelle (2015), p. 116.

17 Gowans, Chris (2021): Moral Relativism. (Spring 2021 Edition). In: Zalta, Edward N. (ed.): *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/moral-relativism/> (accessed 15 November 2021).

18 Gowans, Chris (2021).

19 See also Donnelly, Jack (1984): Cultural relativism and universal human rights. *Human Rights Quarterly*, 6, pp. 400–419.

20 Forst, Rainer (2017): Toleration (Fall 2017 Edition). In: Zalta, Edward N. (ed.): *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2017/entries/toleration/> (accessed 15 November 2021).

21 Scanlon, Thomas M. (1998): *What We Owe to Each Other*. Cambridge MA, p. 5.

22 Arjoon, Surendra (2008): Reconciling Situational Social Psychology with Virtue Ethics. *International Journal of Management Reviews* 10 (3), pp. 221–243, p. 235.

23 “If situational pressures of the sort adduced in the experimental record can impair the exercise of normative competence, we can reasonably conclude that the extreme and often prolonged situational pressures typical of warfare can induce quite severe impairments in normative competence.” Doris, John, and Murphy, Dominic (2007): From My Lai to Abu Ghraib: The Moral Psychology of Atrocity. *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 31 (1), pp. 25–55.

24 Doris, John and Murphy, Dominic (2007).

25 Croom, Adam M. (2014): Vindicating Virtue: a Critical Analysis of the Situationist Challenge Against Aristotelian Moral Psychology. *Integrative Psychological and Behavioral Science* 48(1), pp. 18–47.

26 See for instance Griggs, Richard A. and Whitehead III, George I (2014): Coverage of the Stanford Prison Experiment in Introductory Social Psychology Textbooks. In: *Teaching of Psychology* 41 (4), pp. 318–324; Perry, Gina (2013): *Behind the Shock Machine: The Untold Story of the Notorious Milgram Psychology Experiments*. New York.

27 Gordon, Rebecca (2014): *Mainstreaming torture: ethical approaches in the post-9/11 United States*. New York, p. 121.

28 Railton, Peter (1988): How Thinking about Character and Utilitarianism Might Lead to Rethinking the Character of Utilitarianism. *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 13, pp. 398–416.