

Ethics Education in the Military

Edited by Paul Robinson,
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Reviewed by Dr Hugh Smith

Almost everyone agrees that ethics education in the military is desirable. Almost everyone has different ideas about what it should seek to achieve and about how it ought to be provided.

Is the purpose of ethics education primarily *functional* – enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of the military instrument – or *aspirational* in that it seeks to produce soldiers who are virtuous people (in the terms used by Jessica Wolfendale in this collection of essays)? Should ethics education aim at intellectual understanding or at character development? Should it focus on law-like rules and codes of conduct or on developing moral virtues? Should the content of ethics education be specific to the military profession or should it range over ethical issues relevant to the wider society?

Debate is further fuelled by questions about the nature of military activity (do military ethics now need to incorporate peacekeeping, law-enforcement and humanitarian intervention?), about political-military relations (is loyalty to one's state or government a sufficient basis for military ethics?) and about the modern soldier (does he or she have a greater right than before to judge the morality of the cause for which they fight?).

Then there are practical issues. How should such education be presented (at what academic level? in what depth? over what length of time?), who should teach it (chaplains? soldiers? academics?), who should be taught (officers? NCOs? other ranks?), and at what institutions (cadet academies? staff colleges? in the unit?). Often, one suspects, the ethics education actually adopted by armed forces reflects what free space can be found in the training program, who is at hand to teach it and when military personnel are available to learn.

This edited collection tackles these questions and more. There are ten chapters by different contributors on ethical education in eight democratic countries, including the US, UK, Israel, Japan and Australia (by Jamie Cullens of the Centre for Defence Leadership Studies at Weston Creek). As one might expect, each country's approach reflects its own history, society and military experience.

Britain, for example, is anxious not to be too intellectual about it, relying on a lingering tradition of the 'Christian gentleman' and preferring an institutional 'ethos' over individual ethics. Canada with its unified military has centralised its ethics teaching. Germany, anxious to escape its past, emphasises the 'citizen in uniform' and promotes internal guidance (*innere Führung*) in its soldiers. The Japanese contributor harks back to *The Imperial Precepts to the Soldiers and Sailors* of 1887. Israel, which uses conscription and compulsory reserve service more extensively

than most states, eschews character development in favour of clear, logical principles of conduct.

The Australian approach to ethics education is pragmatic and shows, as Jamie Cullens argues, a commendable readiness to debate and discuss contemporary ethical issues such as those surrounding the ADF's experience in Rwanda, the crash of two *Black Hawk* helicopters in 1996 and the *HMAS Westralia* fire. Inquiries by Parliamentary committees into various incidents, policies and personnel matters have no doubt helped in creating this openness. Rather less valuable in Australia's ethics education, perhaps, is heavy reliance on positive exemplars and the ADF's proud history, and a generally *ad hoc* approach to delivering such education. (In passing, this reviewer would like to correct a media error relating to his earlier proposal for a centre for military ethics: the estimated budget was not \$300 million but a much more modest \$300,000 per annum.)

Four chapters, including an excellent introduction by the editors, discuss more general issues. Don Carrick, writing on the future of ethics education, believes that there is a growing desire to develop 'good soldiers who are also good people', that soldiers increasingly need stronger reinforcement for their moral integrity in the tasks they undertake (the increase in PTSD among returning soldiers seems evidence for this), and that armed forces risk losing their 'moral compass' if they move away from idealistic, perfectionist ethics towards a more caring and virtuous ethics. Alexander Moseley, taking a classical liberal position, questions loyalty to the state as a basis for ethics in the military – on the grounds that this is relativist rather than universal. Moseley also argues for the development of 'unlimited criticality' in the soldier, to the point where he or she may reject military service; such an approach, he concludes, will ultimately make for better soldiers and better citizens.

The contributions to this book are variable in quality and focus. Martin Cook, for example, is particularly insightful about who 'owns' ethics at the US Air Force Academy. Patrick Mileham is revealing about the evolution of ethics teaching in the British Army as a whole. Overall, this is a valuable review of the many issues surrounding ethics education for the military. It does not seek to provide all the answers but certainly demonstrates the extent of the challenge in teaching ethics in the armed forces and provides much material for debate. ♦

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