

**ETHICAL
BASES
OF THE
MILITARY
PROFESSION**

by

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Ever since the publication of his book *The Soldier and the State* in 1957, Samuel Huntington has been much referred to as an authority on the nature of military service as a profession.¹ However, there are new voices in the current lively discussions of military professionalism which raise some excellent questions not adequately addressed by Huntington and others with similar concerns. This essay seeks to: (1) delineate a concept of the professions that suggests a basis for consensus; (2) characterize the military profession in both its distinctiveness from and its similarity to other professions; and (3) indicate the importance of professional ethics.

**PROFESSIONS: A DEFINITIONAL
FRAMEWORK**

After examining a whole range of proposals defining the word "profession," Morris Cogan finds a definite consensus on one point: the word "profession" is an honorific word. Based on what he finds to be fairly common among a variety of views, Cogan suggests four characteristics signifying why it is an honor to be a professional: (1) A professional is engaged in a "vocation whose practice is founded upon an understanding of the theoretical structure of some department of learning or science, and upon the abilities accompanying such understanding"; (2) The professional applies this understanding and these abilities to vital and practical human activities; (3) The practices of the professional are modified "by knowledge of a generalized nature and by the accumulated wisdom and experience of mankind, which serve to correct the errors of specialism"; and (4) The professional, serving the vital needs of human beings, has as a first ethical imperative altruistic service to clients.²

Cogan's inclusive understanding of that which confers the honorific status of profession on some kinds of work has been criticized by those who seek to distinguish more sharply the professions from other forms of remunerative activity. Eliot Freidson claims that a profession is founded not only on learning, but on science.³ For

Freidson, this means that ministers are not professionals, and that lawyers, in contrast to medical doctors, inadequately possess the ideal character of the professional. Presumably the uninitiated can grasp the law and apply it in ways that are not analogous to medicine. Freidson's view, however, represents a deviation from the major bulk of scholarly thought on these matters.

A. M. Carr-Saunders and P. A. Wilson choose to exclude some commonly recognized professions on the grounds that they are not involved in the vital practical human affairs of which Cogan speaks. Astonishingly, they exclude the army "because the service which soldiers are trained to render is one it is hoped they will never be called upon to perform."⁴ The ethicist James Luther Adams finds it unbelievable that the army is omitted from such a broadly conceived study, given "the increasing role of military bureaucracy in our world and also the military man as diplomat and as government executive."⁵ I would certainly agree with Adams.

Even the criterion of altruism has come under attack by the relentless Freidson. After all, he argues, anyone can be altruistic or egoistic; how can altruism, then, be seen as a distinctive feature of a professional? Freidson correctly points out that some of the ethical concerns of professionals do come from moral standards that everyone shares, but what he overlooks is the importance of appropriate ethical standards for professional conduct as shared by the community, and how these shared standards apply uniquely to ethical issues and problems of a given profession. Therefore, a demand for professional altruism, though necessary, is not a sufficient moral demand to make of any specific profession or its activities. The military profession is no exception in this respect.

PROFESSIONS: UNIVERSAL CHARACTERISTICS

The traits Cogan singled out as typifying a true professional thus bring us close to a complete and widely held view regarding the nature of professions. We would add the

further conditions that professions possess standards of competence defined by a comprehensive and self-governing organization of practitioners, a high degree of autonomy for individual practitioners and the professional group, and some specific code of ethics or ethical standards by which members of a profession are guided in the performance of their services. To all of this, some would add that service to the larger community rather than economic gain is the dominant motive.

Every profession involves a client-professional relation demanding professional adherence to some set of ethical standards. Decisions involving the conduct of war, the acceptance and handling of divorce cases, or the advisability of surgery are scarcely to be seen as morally neutral. To be sure, each of them involves an assessment based on particular knowledge, skills, and experience. But at the same time each involves an assessment of whether one is ultimately increasing or decreasing benefits and injuries to those served by the professional activities in question. Decisions regarding the development and application of technology used by professionals are similarly never totally neutral. When to activate or deactivate a respirator, when to declare an issue within or outside the province of the courts, when to consider a weapon appropriate for development and use—all these require ethical reflection. With respect to weapons, there are critical problems currently before

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us. To what extent can we morally justify the proliferation of weapons that predictably destroy the lives of noncombatants? Difficult questions regarding the protection of innocent lives arise at a number of points in the entire weapons decisionmaking process.

On the basis of the foregoing considerations, we may now establish the three broad characteristics of all professions: (1) special or unique competence in the performance of special tasks and services; (2) general or social competence in the performance of professional and community-related tasks and services; and (3) a professional-client relationship. These characteristics are further elaborated in the outline in the adjacent column.

THE MILITARY PROFESSION

With these professional characteristics in mind, we can see why Huntington's account of the military as a profession has been and continues to be useful. He has delineated the specialized military expertise imparted to officers through their military training. Furthermore, he finds a commitment to general social competence, based in large part on appropriate education at the college and graduate level. This education includes much more than the specialized learning that distinguishes military officers from physicians, lawyers, and other professionals. Indeed, there is considerable stress in the military upon disciplines concerned with human relations and the understanding of societies. As with all professions, military service, in Huntington's view, is an essential social service.

Going further, Huntington specifically identifies the sense in which we can speak of a professional-client relation between officers and those they serve. In essence, he defines the client of the military professional to be society and the special responsibility of the military professional toward the client as that of providing military security. The most immediate expression of this responsibility is in the subordination of the military professional to the state or government that represents the wishes of the client, that is, the wishes of society. Huntington locates the

THE THREE CHARACTERISTICS OF PROFESSIONS

I. Special or Unique Competence in Special Tasks and Services.

- Specialized training and education (e.g. medical school).
- Autonomy based on unique skills (e.g. setting a broken limb).
- Performs unique social service (e.g. practice of individual medicine).
- Skills subject to rational analysis and judgment by standards of competence.
- Membership in professional associations (e.g. American Medical Association).

II. General or Social Competence in Professional and Community Tasks and Services.

- General training and education (e.g. liberal arts, counseling, behavioral sciences).
- Broad social service (e.g. community health endeavors).
- Membership in community associations (e.g. civic, religious, social).

III. Professional-Client Relationship.

- Consultation and service.
- Based on special trust, confidence, understanding, and confidentiality.
- Based on conformity to ethical principle.
- Primary motive is service, not financial gain.

ethical aspect of this professional responsibility in the officer's love for perfecting his skills, but, beyond that, in his social obligation to use those skills solely for the benefit of society (the client). It should be noted also that the military has the earmarks of a typical professional organization in the rules and regulations governing the conduct of its members and in the moral conscientiousness demanded of its members in adhering to those regulations.

Huntington also gives a plausible account of the unique expertise of the military. It is the management of violence. The claim of uniqueness is not totally correct, of course, since police forces are also managers of violence in subordination to the state. However, police do not manage violence from the perspective of national security, although they are part of achieving national security.

In a general way, therefore, Huntington has covered the major characteristics that are normally regarded as distinctive of professionalism. Yet, there are some additional and serious questions that should be raised about Huntington's account of the specific nature of the military profession. Indeed, Zeb Bradford and James R. Murphy specifically point to the insufficiency and narrowness of seeing the unique expertise of the military as the management of violence.⁶ They argue correctly that the military is also involved in certain aspects of peacekeeping and deterrence. James L. Adams and Donald F. Bletz both refer to military officers as diplomats, possessing what Bletz calls "politico-military" expertise.⁷ Surely it would be unrealistic to overlook the vital role that military officers have played in the restoration and maintenance of order following a number of major military conflicts in which this country has been involved. There is no reason to negate or downplay this role. It will surely continue to be important.

Bradford and Murphy also point out that much of the expertise that officers require and many of the tasks of the military are not directly related to anything we could call the management of violence. But we should not stress this insight unduly, because the military would lose its special reason for being if management by military officers could not be construed as management of personnel and techniques designed either to engage in violence or to deter others from it. In this sense, Huntington is on target.

However, even if we include these

refinements of Huntington, none of the writers yet referred to deals explicitly with the way in which ethics relates to military professionalism. That military officers are supposed to be ethical is clear. That the military has an ethically responsible task is also clear. However, what military people need to know about ethics and how ethics relates to the management of violence is not adequately discussed by the literature I have seen on this subject.

For example, there is no consensus as to whether a military ethic should or should not be based upon some kind of code. In fact, the value of a code is disputed. Compare this situation with that prevailing in medicine and law. Both of these professions have codes and are engaged in discussions, not to eliminate codes, but to improve the existing ones. We see an exciting and growing debate within law and medicine regarding the extent to which knowledge of ethics as a field will help in this process and, beyond that, will be helpful in shaping professional responsibility and reducing abuses of clients. Increasingly, medicine and law are not only thinking about how to assure that professionals are morally sensitive, but also how to educate professionals in identifying and resolving ethical issues raised in the professional-client relationship itself.

In sum, some of the oldest professions are currently reassessing their formal ethical standards and the means by which these standards are set. The military has always sought to inculcate high moral standards in training its officers. It is not surprising, therefore, that many of the questions being raised by medical and legal professionals are being asked seriously and intelligently by military professionals of every rank. This concern for ethics in the military is only partly the result of serious instances of questionable professional conduct in recent years and the publicity attending honor scandals at the military academies. For it has been a long-standing and admirable tradition of the military to ask how best to achieve exemplary moral behavior on the part of its professionals. In keeping with this fine tradition, I wish to consider some of the ways

in which the military profession has conceived of itself ethically, and to suggest how these conceptions may be extended and refined. I do this not in the spirit of giving final answers, but rather in the spirit of urging an agenda worthy of further discussion and debate.

A TENTATIVE OUTLINE

A traditional approach to professional responsibilities in the military consists of emphasizing the three central concepts: duty, country, and honor. Some have maintained that these concepts are no longer adequate for thinking about ethics in the military, but we shall discover why they are still cogent and rich in meaning.

Duty

Duty implies not only the obligation to do one's job conscientiously, but also to do so within ethically acceptable norms. The ethical aspect of duty for military professionals has at least two major facets. First, military professionals, like all other professionals, need a knowledge of basic moral principles and some facility in applying them; professionals also require some understanding of why these moral principles are essential to our daily life together as human beings. Second, professions have their own particular moral responsibilities and ethical guidelines that specify how best to recognize and maintain their specific obligations to clients. In its broadest dimensions, probably the most basic set of guidelines for military professionals is found within the criteria evolved by the various theories of the just war.

In this short essay, it is not possible to discuss every relevant moral principle, but we can at least illustrate the value of being explicit about moral principles and the reasons for adhering to them.⁸ Take truth-telling, which is surely one of the most fundamental moral principles, not only for military life but for every human community. Consider for a moment why this is so. Would I enter into any agreement with you or be

willing to engage in any joint venture, never mind the dangerous ventures characteristic of combat, if I thought that you did not recognize lying as morally wrong? All communication depends on trust in the reliability with which information and instructions are given.

Of course, it can be argued that the foregoing is just the kind of simple notion of duty that is unrealistic for guiding behavior. Surely all of us recognize that if in lying we can save a life, we would, other things being equal, tell a lie. This is generally the case. However, such an example only underlines the necessity to be very clear about our most basic moral affirmations, because in a wide variety of circumstances life is valued more than truth. But there is also a wide variety of circumstances in which lives and important practical affairs hinge on absolute fidelity to the truth. Since this is so, it is important to understand cases in which people are convinced that they should forgo their adherence to truth. It is understandable, for example, that General Lavelle in the war in Vietnam could reason that, by instructing his pilots to fire before taking the risk of being fired upon, he would be potentially or actually saving the lives of many of his men.⁹ However, at the same time, Mr. Kissinger, relying on the truthfulness of American officers, was publicly claiming that no such actions were being taken by American pilots. The potential failure of negotiations to end the war in Vietnam occasioned by such ignorance on the part of America's chief negotiator could have involved many more lives than those being contemplated by General Lavelle.

I know the Lavelle case is not a simple one. I wish only to claim that actions such as General Lavelle's deserve questioning. It may be true that he was asked to perform an action which he should not have been asked to perform. Yet, if that is granted, there were reasonable alternatives to lying which he might have chosen. Suffice it to say that part of educating a professional is precisely to increase the extent to which the morally appropriate options in difficult contexts are identified and understood. Sometimes actions

are proposed, implicitly or explicitly, which are morally intolerable and must be seen as such. Every military person who is properly instructed knows that orders may be unlawful or immoral, and that it is not always one's duty to obey them.

The essential imperative of truth-telling is no less clear in the duty to report combat readiness. Falsifying a combat readiness report is potentially destructive of lives; further, it handicaps national leaders in making decisions concerning whether to engage in an otherwise justifiable war. A pattern of inaccurate readiness reports can lead to mistakes both moral and strategic.

As mentioned earlier, one of the most important sources of guidance for those who are slated to manage and deter violence is just-war theory. Such theory has persisted in Western thought precisely because of the recognition that, although resort to violence and killing should generally be regarded as evil, we would occasion even greater evils if we desisted from violence and killing in all cases. Augustine, who is one of the first in the West to discuss just-war criteria, speaks about how he is to fulfill his love for his neighbor in situations where someone is about to kill a friend. Should he, Augustine, stand idly by and permit this to happen? Surely not. He should intervene and do whatever is necessary to prevent this unjust and unprovoked attack which threatens to lead to the death of his friend.

In a few simple statements, we have now reached the very heart of the service we expect from our military professionals—protection of the innocent against aggression in the form of violence. This means, however, that those of us who are not professional managers of violence are giving our approval to the use of violence. Under what circumstances should we give that approval? In giving it, we do not want to breed violent persons, nor do we wish to give away our usual high regard for refraining from violence; hence, we resort to just-war theory, which is designed to help guide us in this deliberation.

Space does not permit an extended

explanation here of just-war theory. I refer the reader to Ralph Potter's admirable bibliographical essay and the work of LeRoy Walters.¹⁰ For our purposes, it is sufficient merely to list the acknowledged just-war criteria.

In most accounts of just-war criteria, it is agreed that war or other military actions that would involve killing or the risk of killing can be justified only if the following attributes characterize the action being contemplated:

- Just cause.
- Just intentions.
- Sanction by the highest lawful authority.
- Public declaration of what is contemplated.
- Due proportion, that is, less evil following from acting rather than not acting in the manner contemplated.
- Reasonable hope for success.
- Last resort after all reasonable pacific alternatives have been tried.
- Employment of just means to minimize risks to innocent noncombatants, avoiding also terrorism and torture.

As military professionals are well aware, a number of these criteria, particularly those pertaining to just means, form the basis for the current understanding of the laws of land warfare. All of us are becoming painfully aware, however, that the laws of land warfare, admirable though they may be, need to be thoughtfully and carefully updated to include the new dimension of nuclear weaponry. Military professionals as well as civilian leaders have a profound obligation to develop nuclear weapon employment policies and procedures that maximize national security, while at the same time minimizing injury and loss of life among noncombatants. This is no easy task, but it is essential to the future survival not only of morality, but of civilization. Helping all of us think through the necessity and character of just means in contemporary defense systems could well be one of the most important contributions that military professionals make to the peace, welfare, and moral quality of humanity.

One word about the insistence that using

force should come as a last resort. Although it is clear that the civilian government has a strong obligation to encourage and create conditions for negotiating with actual and potential enemies, the military has always had a vital role in encouraging and carrying out diplomacy. This is the time to strengthen rather than weaken that time-honored military tradition.

Country

The military professional's clients are the people of his country. Strictly speaking, faithfulness to one's fellow citizens is expressed appropriately as a vow to uphold the Constitution. This means that effort on the part of any group, even the government itself, to advocate or use violence in an unconstitutional manner is subject to challenge by the highest authorities within the military profession. Every civilian leader and every military leader is sworn faithfully to follow the Constitution as the foundation of the law of the land.

But the ethics of military professionals must go beyond fidelity to law and its legal underpinnings. No constitution or law is obeyed and understood without the cultivation of moral conscientiousness and moral sensitivity. That is why every professional ethic, including the military's, also includes concern for honor.

Honor

It was possible to create a constitution that would found and undergird a community such as ours only because there were leaders who clearly discerned the most basic rights and freedoms that belong to human beings. A commitment to freedom, to the value of human life, and to equality of opportunity characterized those who drew up the Constitution and must equally characterize those who profess fidelity to it. Such concerns are quintessentially ethical in their import. They presuppose an education that sees ethics as an area of knowledge equal in importance to other disciplines and areas of technical know-how. To treat morality and ethics as

purely subjective or personal concerns—and thus outside the pale of disciplined thought—is quite out of character with the findings of moral philosophy and religious ethics.¹¹

In any discussion of honor, it is important to cite the necessity for courage, fairness, and complete trustworthiness on the part of military professionals. These are admirably stressed by General Maxwell Taylor in his provocative and thoughtful essay advocating a code of ethics for the military.¹² He is careful to emphasize the necessity for moral development alongside the necessity for acquiring physical, intellectual, and other forms of professional competence.

It is unfortunate when discussions of military ethics devolve to debate as to whether the military should have a code or should instead stress ethical awareness as products of educational and developmental processes. The distinction seems based on a false dichotomy. Evolving and contemplating a code are themselves ethically educational and developmental processes of importance. General Taylor unfortunately does not say anything about just-war criteria in his suggested code. This seems to me a serious omission that should call for broad and open discussion among military professionals. At the same time, many professional schools are recognizing that it has been an error to drop formal instruction in ethics from their curricula. Whatever the limitations of such formal instruction, the very fact that it is not seen as sufficiently important is in itself a failure to give proper stress to reflection on the moral life and what it means to live one's life with honor.

I have tried in this essay to suggest something about our general understanding of professions, something of the unique qualities of the military professional, and something about the military ethic. I would like to close with a moving plea for education in ethics, as formulated in 1906 by Colonel Charles W. Larned while a professor at West Point:

[Modern secular education] subordinates the

ethical to every other idea . . . , renounces disciplinary control . . . , generally neglects the training of the sensory faculties and activities . . . , fails to enforce systematic physical training . . . , fails to inculcate the principles of good citizenship First, last, and always our civilization is irrevocably committed to morality and high principle as the heart's core of its life; and no education that does not base itself upon ethical actions as its prime motor can have any part or lot in civilization's higher development. Its first and its continuing function should be to guide the perceptions toward moral truth; to teach the discipline of passion; to cultivate the power of right perception and action, and the idea of the common brotherhood of man.¹³

NOTES

1. Samuel Huntington, *The Soldier and the State* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1957), pp. 7-18.
2. Morris Cogan, "Toward a Definition of Profession," *Harvard Educational Review*, 23 (Winter 1953), 48-49.

3. Eliot Freidson, *Profession of Medicine* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1970), pp. 3-22, 77-84.

4. A. M. Carr-Saunders and P. A. Wilson, *The Professions* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933), p. 3.

5. James Luther Adams, "The Social Import of the Professions," *Bulletin of the American Association of Theological Schools*, No. 23 (June 1958), 152-68.

6. Zeb Bradford Jr. and James R. Murphy, "A New Look at the Military Profession," *Army*, 19 (February 1969), 58-64.

7. Adams, pp. 152-68. Donald F. Bletz, "Military Professionalism: A Conceptual Approach," *Military Review*, 51 (May 1971), 9-17.

8. For discussions of moral principles, see for example Arthur J. Dyck, *On Human Care: An Introduction to Ethics* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1977); and William K. Frankena, *Ethics*, 2d ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1973).

9. Gordon A. Ginsburg, *The Lavelle Case: Crisis in Integrity*, Air War College Professional Study No. 5255 (Maxwell AFB, Ala., 1974).

10. Ralph B. Potter, *War and Moral Discourse* (Richmond, Va.: John Knox Press, 1969), pp. 87-123; LeRoy Walters, "Historical Applications of the Just War Theory: Four Case Studies in Normative Ethics," *Love and Society: Essays in the Ethics of Paul Ramsey*, ed. James Johnson and David Smith (Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1974), pp. 115-38.

11. Dyck, *op. cit.*; Frankena, *op. cit.*

12. Maxwell D. Taylor, "A Professional Ethic for the Military?" *Army*, 28 (May 1978), 18-21.

13. Charles W. Larned, "West Point and Higher Education," *Army and Navy Life*, 8 (June 1906), 9-22.

