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Military Ethics Education – What Is It, How Should It Be Done, and Why Is It Important?

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Abstract

This paper explores the topic of military ethics, what we mean by that term, what it covers, how it is understood, and how it is taught. It suggests that the unifying factor that makes this a coherent subject beyond individual national interpretations of it is the core idea of military professionalism. The paper draws out the distinction between training and education and draws on research conducted by a number of different people and agencies, including the International Committee of the Red Cross, to establish what factors contribute to effective pedagogy and the inculcation of appropriate attitudes and behaviours. The paper concludes by looking at the way military ethics contributes to military outcomes from protecting civilians and the vulnerable to building resilience in our own military personnel to protect their mental health, through to the strategic costs of losing the moral high ground if behaviour is seen to fall short of that expected from military professionals.

Keywords: *military ethics education; professional ethics; continuing professional development*

I. What do we mean by military ethics?

Military ethics is a specialist subset of applied ethics. Applied ethics is concerned not with conceptual or even existential questions about what ethics is, what the terms ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ mean or what grounds our understanding of morality (if anything), but rather with what the right thing to do is in a particular context. For us, that context is military service. In their short but excellent

essay “What Should We Mean by Military Ethics?” that marked the start of their joint tenure in charge of the *Journal of Military Ethics*, Sykes and Cook argue convincingly that *military ethics* does not, or rather should not, exist as a descriptive subject.¹ Its purpose is to provide practical guidance to those who need to know what is the appropriate thing to do, often in challenging situations. As such, military ethics refers to the principles and values that should guide the behaviour and decision-making of individuals within the military, encompassing and addressing the type of real-world challenges that are likely to arise in this particular area of human activity. Importantly, this should cover not just wartime activity, but also the behaviour and attitudes of the military in all their other day-to-day activities.

Due to the scope that the subject of military ethics embraces, it can be useful to break it down into three component areas – related and often overlapping, but also distinct.² The *Individual in the Profession* focuses on the military virtues, values and standards expected of professional military personnel, such as courage, integrity, and loyalty, and how they might be applied appropriately in specific situations.³ The *Profession at Work* is concerned with the laws, rules and principles that guide and govern the work of military personnel at all levels of responsibility.⁴ This ranges from understanding issues relating to defence planning, officership and followership, through to when and against whom it is appropriate to use force which of course includes an understanding of the laws of armed conflict – International Humanitarian Law (IHL). It also extends to informing an understanding of the context within which the military exists, looking at the way decisions to use military force at the level of governments and states are made, and how these translate through to the extraordinary permissions, rights, and duties of uniformed personnel when they act on behalf of those political communities, up to and including the use of lethal force. The

¹ Martin L. Cook and Henrik Syse, “What Should We Mean by ‘Military Ethics?’” *Journal of Military Ethics* 9, no. 2 (2010): 119-122.

² The following tripartite approach is taken in NATO’s Public Administration and Governance Defence Management and Economics Ethics and Leadership, *Partnership Action Plan on Defence Institution Building: Reference Curriculum* (Kingston, ON: Canadian Defence Academy, 2008), https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2015_10/20151013_151013-pap-dib-eng.pdf; the author has found this approach particularly useful when considering how to effectively design a comprehensive curriculum.

³ See Michael Skerker, David Whetham, and Don Carrick, eds., *Military Virtues: Practical Guidance for Service Personnel at Every Career Stage* (Hampshire: Howgate Press, 2019).

⁴ For an accessible overview of this area, see Deane-Peter Baker, ed., *Key Concepts in Military Ethics* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2015).

third area, the *Profession and Society*, is concerned with understanding the relationship between the state and those who serve it.⁵ It explores the responsibilities and duties on both sides of the civil/military divide, and also explores how wider social values relate to the military institution. It also, crucially, sets the limits on military obedience by explaining what the military can legitimately be tasked with doing – as well as what it cannot.

One of the challenges that arises when talking about military ethics is the question as to whether the challenges in the three areas set out above have different answers depending upon where you are the world. On the face of it, it is difficult to argue with the fact that different cultures have different ethical codes or values. Therefore, it would appear to follow that ethics, and in this case *military ethics*, can have no objective truth because they are simply based on opinions derived from one's cultural norms.⁶ If indeed true, this leads us to the question, is there one *military ethic* or many? As well as being a fascinating topic to explore, this question also has very practical implications from a pedagogic perspective. I teach at a UK military institution that receives over 50 different nationalities on its flagship Staff Course to study and learn alongside British officers. I have taught at other institutions around the world, from Brunei to Colombia, via Ireland, France, and Nigeria, and many others. Is it really the case that *military ethics* can be treated as a single subject that can be taught in the same way wherever you are? What could provide the unifying factor that can tie the subject together into a coherent discipline and allow us to talk meaningfully about *military ethics* as if it is a single subject?

I believe the answer is to focus on what John Rawls might call the “overlapping consensus” – that common core of *professional* military values that do not change from place to place, demonstrating that even when some values conflict, many more will still be shared.⁷ I will explain this a little more below, but the implications are that, while this chapter is titled Military Ethics Education, what we actually mean here is *Professional* Military Ethics Education, because that is what provides the core basis for the agreement. Part of that will be a commitment

⁵ An excellent starting point for understanding this area is Pauline Shanks Kaurin, *On Obedience: Contrasting Philosophies for the Military, Citizenry, and Community* (Annapolis, MD: US Naval Institute, 2020).

⁶ David Whetham, “The Challenge of Ethical Relativism in a Coalition Environment,” *Journal of Military Ethics* 7, no. 4 (2008): 303.

⁷ David Whetham, “Expeditionary Ethics Education,” in *Routledge Handbook of Military Ethics*, ed. George R. Lucas, 123-132 (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2015), 129.

to upholding the laws of armed conflict and routine training in IHL, but this is also significantly bigger than simply about being a legally compliant organisation. There is a legal requirement for all military personnel to receive regular IHL training and all senior commanders should be supported by, or at least have access to, appropriately qualified legal advisors. Obviously, ethics and the law are closely related, but they are also not synonymous. While the law defines what can and cannot be done, professional judgment is required to determine what actually 'should' be done in a given circumstance within those, often wide, parameters. This is where professional military ethics informs decision-making and therefore shapes military action.

II. How should military ethics be taught?

Different contexts will inevitably have an impact, sometimes profound, on the way that professional military ethics are understood, and therefore taught. For example, the states of the former Soviet Union or contemporary People's Liberation Army in China can pose cultural challenges when exploring the limits of obedience, where dissent is not viewed as something to be encouraged (to put it mildly). One can easily see that military service appears to require just such a disciplined obedience and that this that must be maintained, so that orders in the face of overwhelming danger on the battlefield will be obeyed without hesitation. That is something all professional military forces understand, because such attitudes are required for the military to be effective. But that does not mean that asking questions is universally discouraged. A special forces unit or a liberal state with a relatively flat hierarchical structure as far as attitudes are concerned may have a developed military institutional idea of 'reasonable challenge' that is designed to empower all individuals within an organisation to be able to speak up and be heard when they recognise that something is not right.⁸ Such an approach was advocated for strongly in the UK's Chilcott Inquiry launched in the aftermath of the highly controversial invasion of Iraq.⁹ The inquiry noted in excruciating detail significant failures in the planning of the campaign and specifically focused on

⁸ United Kingdom Ministry of Defence, *The Good Operation: A Handbook for Those Involved in Operational Policy and Its Implementation* (Assets Publishing Service, 2017), 62, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/674545/TheGoodOperation_WEB.PDF.

⁹ The National Archives, Committee of Privy Counsellors, *The Report on Iraq Inquiry*, November 23, 2017, <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20171123122743/http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/the-report/>.

the dangers of groupthink and how detrimental this was for effective organisational culture. How can both positions be true – a requirement for rigid hierarchical obedience *and* reasonable challenge? While some life-and-death situations will absolutely require an instant response, the need for discipline is all too often used as an excuse not to listen to or offer alternative views when there is the time and opportunity. That way, disasters can be avoided.

That does not mean that all states will encourage such a degree of questioning throughout its military institutions. But even in the most rigidly hierarchical of contexts, unquestioning obedience under *any circumstances* is not something that is taught. The military profession, as with all professions, is defined and governed in large part by its ethic: the rules and behaviours by which its members conduct themselves. Any professional military force, anywhere in the world, sees itself as distinct from a ‘mere’ group of mercenaries or long-term contractors, and that self-identity is based on more than simply being a recognised servant of the state, authorised to employ violence as and when required. A degree of autonomy over how that violence is employed and the structured adherence to laws, codes, and accepted norms is part of that identity. That means that there are also some orders that must never be obeyed regardless of how important the person issuing the order is. ‘I was only following orders’ is not a defence against being found guilty of committing a war crime, and there is a positive duty in law as well as a professional obligation to refuse such an order. Importantly, that core idea does not vary between different militaries around the world. Unquestioning obedience in all situations, regardless of what it is you are being required to do, is *not* the mark of a professional organisation. A breach of those rules may be legally wrong and therefore make the perpetrator liable to legal sanction, but it is also likely to be seen as institutionally wrong in the sense that it will be considered unprofessional. A military that follows orders but, in the process, deliberately commits war crimes has failed the standard required to be considered a professional organisation. This also explains why for members of the armed forces, to be called ‘unprofessional’ is a significant insult. While civil military relations, the type of recent operational experience or even the demographic makeup of different militaries may vary from state to state, there are also core assumptions and an acceptance of core duties and obligations towards serving something bigger than simply an individual at the top of the hierarchy. This commitment towards serving the state and the corresponding responsibility for seeing the ‘bigger picture’ does not vary as much as one

might think.¹⁰ Where unquestioning obedience to an individual rather than that bigger idea is demanded and provided, we have good reasons for questioning whether such an organisation should really be considered professional in a meaningful sense.¹¹

While some ethical ideas may vary between (and even within) societies (although I think that the degree of difference is often overemphasised, which in the process tends to overlook the incredible amount of agreement that also exists across and between different cultures), there are also certain core ethical understandings that mean that the same principles do form a common grounding and also therefore a common normative language for discussing the rights and wrongs of different courses of action in a military context *wherever you are*.¹² This becomes obvious when you are talking with people that come from different countries but share membership of that military profession. The values that they agree on and the things that they consider to be important to uphold are surprisingly uniform (pun intended). In part, this is what Walzer refers to as the War Convention – that “set of articulated norms, customs, professional codes, legal precepts, religious and philosophical principles, and reciprocal arrangements that shape our judgments of military conduct.”¹³ While it is easy to focus on specific differences in how to apply a principle (for example, see which states have signed up to the anti-personnel landmine ban, or how some states can interpret the use of lethal force in individual self-defence to include defence of property, while others cannot), disagreements take place against a backdrop of extraordinary consensus. The fundamental principles and things like IHL – the Geneva Conventions having been universally ratified by every single state in the world – provide an astonishing level of agreement (even if some states do not always uphold those principles in practise in every case).¹⁴ It is just such a level of

¹⁰ The topic of military professionalism is explored well in chapter 3 of Stephen Coleman, “Professional Ethics, Duties and Obligations,” in *Military Ethics: An introduction with Case Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 35-64.

¹¹ For example, whereas it is difficult to argue that the Wehrmacht in the Second World War were not operationally competent, the personal oath to serve their Führer that they were obliged to make from 1934 onwards, rather than the German people and the country, made them effectively a private military rather than a professional one.

¹² For example, stealing, lying, or torturing babies are not activities recognised as being ethically good in any society, and for good reason.

¹³ Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 44.

¹⁴ Knut Dörmann, “Geneva Conventions still going strong at 60, other, International Committee of the Red Cross,” *International Committee of the Red Cross*, August 7, 2009, <https://www.>

consensus that makes organisations such as the International Society for Military Ethics (ISME) possible.¹⁵

Of course, even where the idea of professionalism provides that unifying factor, that is still not the same as saying that it is therefore possible to teach military ethics in the same way wherever you are because *context matters*. The disagreements that arise are often actually very narrow in focus. To return to our obedience example above, the difference will not be about whether there is an obligation to refuse certain orders, but rather how such an obligation should be discharged. That understanding will likely shape other areas about how an organisation responds to other types of disagreement as well. While the principles may be broadly the same, the way that some of them are understood and applied may also have a degree of variation that needs to be appreciated and understood in context. Understanding the culturally appropriate way to raise a legitimate challenge is exactly the kind of context-specific activity that means a one-size-fits-all approach to military ethics is likely to be poorly received in many places.

Traditionally, another thing that is common across multiple states and jurisdictions is that military ethics was not a subject that was, historically, formally taught at all. Paul Robinson cites a process of ‘institutional osmosis’ as responsible for much of the values exhibited by the British Armed Forces in the past.¹⁶ While that may have changed for the better today, much of the training and education done in this area is still not always done explicitly, or even consciously, and is still often taught through example and environmental exposure rather than formally. The bedrock of military ethics around the world is the institutional articulation and inculcation of certain ‘values and standards,’ representing a virtue ethics approach that would have been very familiar to Aristotle. Virtue ethics concentrates on the importance of character and on how we can nurture the right types of behaviour by practicing what we should do. The more we do the right thing, the more it becomes habit and therefore part of one’s character.¹⁷ While stated as values rather than virtues, the different services around the world

icrc.org/en/doc/resources/documents/interview/geneva-convention-interview-120809.htm.

¹⁵ For example, for more information, see the website of the European Chapter of the International Society for Military Ethics: www.euroisme.eu.

¹⁶ Paul Robinson, “Introduction: Ethics Education in the Military,” in *Ethics Education in the Military*, eds. Paul Robinson, Nigel de Lee, and Don Carrick, 1-12 (Hampshire and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008).

¹⁷ David Whetham, “What Senior Leaders in Defence Should Know about Ethics and the Role That They Play in Creating the Right Command Climate,” *The International Journal of Ethical Leadership* 8 (2021): 74.

provide institutional articulations of expected behaviour and expect recruits to learn and absorb them. For example, the values of the Australian Defence Force are professionalism, service, courage, respect, integrity, and excellence.¹⁸ In the UK, the Royal Navy core values are: commitment, courage, discipline, respect for others, integrity, and loyalty.¹⁹ The Royal Navy values are very similar to those of the British Army, and this is not that surprising when thinking about the purpose of those values.²⁰ One will see very similar values wherever one finds martial virtues articulated in such an institutional setting because long experience suggests that certain virtues are important in such a context.²¹ The institutional hope is that, by fostering such behaviours in initial training, reinforcing it through exemplars of such behaviour, and promoting those individuals who consistently demonstrate them, people will be able to both recognise and actually do the right thing when the situation demands it. This inevitably leads to a focus on character. In theory at least, those with good character will flourish, while those who do not possess it, or cannot be moulded into having an appropriate character through training and education will be excluded.

Such a hope can be found in the reporting processes of both officers and enlisted personnel around the world. A focus on character development is often combined with continuing professional development opportunities at key career points, usually connected to promotion, to periodically acquire or reflect on effective analysis, and ethical decision-making skills as professional responsibilities grow.²² However, there is a risk in focusing on character at the expense of understanding and appreciating the wider context. The Afghanistan Inquiry into allegations of war crimes committed by Australian Defence Force personnel notes that the power of the situation to undermine even the strong-

¹⁸ Australian Defence Force, *Military Ethics* (Canberra: Directorate of Information, Graphics and eResources Lessons and Doctrine Directorate, 2021), 29-30, <https://theforge.defence.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-10/ADF%20Philosophical%20Doctrine%20-%20Military%20Ethics.pdf>.

¹⁹ Royal Navy, "Chapter 21: The Divisional and Regimental System. Section 7," *Naval Personnel Management*, Ministry of Defence, 2016, <https://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/-/media/royal-navy-responsive/documents/reference-library/br-3-vol-1/chapter-21.pdf>.

²⁰ British Army, *A Soldier's Values and Standards*, Ministry of Defence, 2023, <https://www.army.mod.uk/who-we-are/our-people/a-soldiers-values-and-standards/>.

²¹ Paul Robinson explores the similarity in language used around the world in "Introduction: Ethics Education in the Military," 1-12.

²² Although it should be noted that this tends to be focused on officer education rather than enlisted training. For a discussion on this, see Paul Robinson, Nigel de Lee, and Don Carrick, eds., *Ethics Education in the Military* (Hampshire and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008).

est of characters is now well-documented.²³ Preparing people for the environmental factors that will impact on their ethical awareness and understanding is also an essential function of *effective* military ethics education. Only in this way can a military institution build the essential resilience in its people to ensure that they do the correct thing – not simply say the right thing in a classroom, but actually *do* the right thing in the field. Drawing on rich empirical evidence of what is effective in terms of ethics education, Canadian military psychologist Deanna Messervey suggests the type of activity that is required:

First, ethics training can be conducted in a non-stressful environment so that key lessons can be absorbed (such as the impact that crowds can have on ethical decision making). This information can be repeated to increase retention of key lessons. Next, ethics training can simulate stressful situations (such as surprise and shock) to teach soldiers how to respond when confronted with ethical dilemmas under stressful conditions. This can also allow soldiers to practise coping with strong emotions such as anger. Finally, when conducting scenario-based training, soldiers and leaders can practice intervening during a staged ethical misconduct.²⁴

Of course, the range of areas addressed by the broad subject of military ethics means that different approaches will be required for those different areas. What is common across them all is that if one can normalise the discussion of ethical issues and turn it into a routine activity rather than an exceptional one, this can have an ongoing affirmation of the skills and attitudes that you are trying to promote. Reminding people about ethics on a regular basis has a positive impact on their behaviour.²⁵ This strongly suggests that military ethics education must be seen as an ongoing professional development process, not something that is limit-

²³ Commonwealth of Australia, “Annex A to Chapter 3.03: Special Operations Command: Leadership and Ethics Review,” *Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force Afghanistan Inquiry Report*, by David Whetham, IGADF, 2020, <https://www.defence.gov.au/about/reviews-inquiries/afghanistan-inquiry>.

²⁴ Deanna L. Messervey and Jennifer M. Peach, “Battlefield Ethics: What Influences Ethical Behaviour on Operations?” in *The Human Dimensions of Operations: A Personal Research Perspective*, eds. Major Gary Ivery, Kerry Sudom, Waylon H. Dean, and Maxime Themblay, 83-101 (Kingston, ON: Canadian Defence Academy Press, 2014).

²⁵ Nina Mazar, On Amir, and Dan Ariely, “The Dishonesty of Honest People: A Theory of Self-Concept Maintenance,” *Journal of Marketing Research* 45, no. 6 (2008): 633-644.

ed to initial training, and best practice suggests a need to embrace a full range of learning environments, both formal and informal.

This was the thinking behind the creation of a variety of online course materials and the innovative ethics education playing cards. Fifty-two questions from across the broad area of military ethics have been carefully developed by the King's College London Centre for Military Ethics (KCME), based on professional military ethics education curricula, in conjunction with research and testing on military focus groups, and in consultation with specialist lawyers.²⁶ The questions are matched to physical playing cards which are available (at cost price), along with the (free) android and Apple app, to military units everywhere.²⁷ These can be used to prompt informal discussion about the ethical challenges faced in military environments. Questions include:

- Should a soldier challenge an order if they consider it to be illegal? If so, how?
- Is necessity ever a reason to break the laws of war?
- Can soldiers refuse to serve if they disagree with their government's decisions?

Understanding that simply asking the question is not sufficient to create a learning moment, to ensure an appropriate 'take away' from any discussion, each card has a QR web link to the KCME webpages where there are additional prompts, questions, and information for each question, along with reading and articles. Groups of questions can be thematically linked so impromptu or pre-planned supported discussions can quickly be developed using the open-access material. The intervention can be integrated into formal classroom settings or taken completely out of that environment – to the firing range, pre-deployment briefing, or informal downtime between activities, permitting the type of regular engagement and socialising of values that is so important when building organisational ethos. The cards are used regularly by British, Australian, and Canadian units, and with assistance from international partners, such as Euro ISME, the military versions have so far been translated into Spanish, French, Portuguese, German, Serbian, Turkish, Arabic, Greek, Ukrainian, and Russian. In addition, a military

²⁶ "Playing Cards," Centre for Military Ethics – King's College London, accessed September 28, 2023, <https://militaryethics.uk/en/playing-cards>.

²⁷ King's College London – SSSP, "Enhancing ethics education for the military: SSSP Impact Prize Video," YouTube Video, 3:27, September 15, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X-EAVNZagLc>.

medical ethics deck has also been developed to address the specific concerns that clinicians are likely to be faced with in different operational environments.

III. Why is teaching military ethics important? Does it work?

In short – yes. We know that even short courses in military ethics, “delivered in the right way, by the right people, using the right material and methods of delivery can have very real results on the behaviour of personnel deployed on operations.”²⁸ Teaching military ethics has been shown to reduce suffering and distress. For example, a training package, delivered to a US Infantry Brigade in Iraq, was administered between December 2007 and January 2008 in the middle of a fifteen-month high-intensity combat deployment. The package involved a session of leader-led discussions on popular movie vignettes, with structured questions relating to whether people agreed with the choices made on screen, and the thinking behind such decisions. At the end of the deployment, reports of unethical behaviour and attitudes in this group were compared with a randomly selected sample from the same brigade, pre-training. Though limited the intervention was, the ethics intervention was associated with significantly lower rates of unethical conduct of soldiers and a greater willingness to report and address misconduct than in those before training or for those that did not receive it.²⁹

Research conducted by the International Committee of the Red Cross, and published in the *Roots of Restraint* in 2020, moved attention away from simply focusing on why people break the rules, to looking at why they don't.³⁰ In the process, the study identified that organisational culture is essential; simply focusing on the rules alone would be less successful than also appreciating and nurturing an ethical culture in the organisation itself. Many of militaries around the world will have advanced military ethics programmes and will have thought long and hard about how to do this will. Many more simply do not have the institutional capacity or pedagogic expertise to develop and deliver effective curricula to everyone who needs to be able to access it. Ensuring that there are quality materials freely available that can be used by anyone is therefore very important if we are to support those

²⁸ Whetham, “What Senior Leaders in Defence Should Know,” 86.

²⁹ Christopher H. Warner et. al., “Effectiveness of Battlefield-Ethics Training During Combat Deployment: A Programme Assessment,” *The Lancet* 378, no. 9794 (2011): 915-924.

³⁰ International Committee of the Red Cross, *The Roots of Restraint in War*, June 20, 2020, <https://www.icrc.org/en/publication/4352-roots-restraint-war>.

institutions around the world. King's College London has a simple mission: to make the world a better place – and that accords with the 'public good' approach that we take to promoting and supporting military ethics education around the world.³¹ As of July 2023, the KCME free online resources have been accessed by over 53,000 unique users from 178 different countries, with over 90,000 hours of video content and answered over 340,000 questions on military ethics worked through.³² The medical ethics cards and app have been integrated into NATO courses and have been utilised in the training programmes provided by the International Committee of Military Medicine.

While adoption rates can be measured relatively easily, showing that any of this has actually worked is more challenging. Definitively demonstrating impact on behaviours rather than just attitudes is not an easy thing to gather data on – especially during a combat deployment – KCME has extensive validation from practitioners in different parts of the world on the different courses and pedagogic tools that are available. To give one example from our collaboration with the Colombian War College in Bogota, by April 2022, over 3000 mid-ranking and senior military personnel had successfully completed our *Key Concepts in Military Ethics* course. In their post course feedback, the majority of these perceived that military ethics was not only able to improve intra- and inter-unit cohesion but is also positively correlated with military effectiveness (2,272/2,828 respondents). A clear majority of respondents who took the course understood that adhering to ethical principles of conduct is always a must, regardless of how one's adversary behaves. We already have significant evidence that the cards are an effective tool for enhancing existing military ethics education materials. For example, in Colombia, 881/945 respondents from the Army (93.2%) stated that they found the cards useful. The tools have also received very positive reviews from military educators around the world. For example, this one from a US-based educator:

The KCME Military Ethics Education Playing Cards Deck is an exceptionally versatile tool that has great utility for both individual reflection and organizational-level ethics education. It should become part of professional military ethics education toolkits across the U.S. Armed Forces and its allies and partners.³³

³¹ "Vision and Strategy," King's College London, <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/about/strategy>.

³² King's Centre for Military Ethics internal data.

³³ Ray Kimball, "Playing at Ethics: Reviewing Military Ethics Education Playing Cards," *The*

One of the areas that is attracting considerable attention at the moment is the role military ethics education may be able to play in ameliorating moral injury and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) prevention. Evidence strongly suggests that ambiguity and uncertainty over rules can contribute to PTSD and may also be linked to the idea of moral injury. The term *moral injury* was proposed by the American psychologist Jonathan Shay a decade ago to describe unseen wounds thought to be distinct from the more closely studied experience of PTSD. Shay suggests that *moral injury* is present when “there has been a betrayal of what is morally correct; by someone who holds legitimate authority; and, in a high-stakes situation.”³⁴ Placing people into situations that they are unprepared for can contribute to this, so military ethics appears to have a role to play in looking after the psychological wellbeing of our own personnel as well as looking after the physical wellbeing of civilians and wounded enemy combatants.³⁵ Familiarising people with what they are supposed to do, socialising those appropriate responses among peers, and in the process giving people the confidence to be able to challenge if they are placed in an ethically compromising situation is a key part of building organisational resilience.

In 2022, KCME proactively approached the British military to support Ukrainian troops being trained in the UK. The existing military ethics materials were translated into Ukrainian, and then a partnership of KCME, Euro ISME and Case Western Reserve University funded the printing and distribution of 500 packs of cards. We have subsequently been asked to provide additional packs directly to units in Ukraine to be used by psychologists supporting front line troops as part of the Ukrainian version of Trauma Risk Management (TRiM). The ethics cards are used to explore different scenarios and situations and establish what options are available and what are the most appropriate responses given the context. In addition to help protect the mental health of their own personnel, the Ukrainians appear very aware that international support is closely linked to their overall strategic success or failure. Maintaining the moral high ground and demonstrating that they take internationally accepted military ethics norms seriously, is therefore closely associated with preserving international public support.

Strategy Bridge, May 4, 2022, <https://thestrategybridge.org/the-bridge/2022/5/4/playing-at-ethics-reviewing-military-ethics-education-playing-cards>.

³⁴ Jonathan Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), 20.

³⁵ Whetham, “What Senior Leaders in Defence Should Know,” 81.

To ensure that the material is genuinely useful, it needs to draw on the real-life experience and expectations of those using it. Therefore, soliciting feedback and constructive criticism is essential to ensure currency. For example, the practical experience of using the Ukrainian language version of the Military Ethics Education cards in field conditions are being fed back into the design and development stages so they can be refined and made as useful as possible. This focused research is done *with* practitioners, leading to pragmatic, accessible and relevant tools that are both desperately needed and can make a real difference.

IV. Conclusion

The type of ethical challenges that are posed by military service sometimes do not have straightforward answers. Sometimes, there are competing answers, leading to the perception that ‘it’s all relative.’ However, it is important to note that the disagreements that arise are often actually very narrow in focus. Philosophers and ethicists tend to be drawn to the complicated examples where it is not straightforward to see how to apply the rules in that specific situation, but that is very different from saying that there is no agreement on the 99% of other situations. Discussing complicated examples allows us to explore which principle is best applied in which circumstance, and the strengths and weaknesses of different tools to do this.

Clearly, good training is better than no training, but this is also exactly why there is a need for genuine education rather than simply training in this important area. Training, done well, teaches what to do in a specific situation. Education, done well, is about equipping individuals with the tools and skills to be able to make sense of and do the correct thing in *any* situation, regardless of whether it has been trained for. It is precisely the questions that do not have black and white responses that need to be engaged with, thought about and discussed by the people for whom they are most pertinent – military practitioners – before those people are put into situations where they need to actually make those decisions. There is an institutional cost in time and money of doing this properly. The cost of not doing it, an on individual, organisational and strategic level, is likely to be considerably higher.

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