

Personal Morality and Professional Ethics: Overcoming the Division

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Introduction

The theme of this conference is the challenge of integrating personal moral vision with professional commitments. In the midst of an increasingly pluralistic and diverse society, military personnel face the challenge of integrating their personal morality and professional ethical obligations in the context of their missions. What are the tensions and conflicts? How might they be resolved? What happens when there is no resolution?

We have a robust slate of presentations and speakers addressing various facets of this challenge. My task this afternoon is briefly to set the stage for the week's conversation.

The last decade or so has seen a blossoming of interest in public ethics and personal morality. Whether it is a matter of schools, businesses, politicians, religious institutions, or the military, we seem to be witnessing a widespread concern about personal morality, public ethics and how the two intersect (or fail to).

Often this conversation morphs into lamentations of the personal failings or character flaws of individuals, or it becomes fodder in the "culture wars" and fuels partisan mud-slinging. Sometimes it prompts institutional critique – along the lines of denouncing the differential adjudication of offenses in military justice and decrying that "rank has its privileges."

In addition to these popular themes, behind them actually, there is deeper source of the problem. It is a facet of the problem that we ignore at our own peril. Indeed, ignoring it all but guarantees that whatever "solutions" we craft will not hold.

The issue to which I refer is the creation of the private and public as distinct spheres of human activity. Much of the moral conversation is about how the personal and public should relate. How these two distinct domains should relate to one another. It takes for granted that there are two distinct realms – the person and the public/professional.

But permit me to ask at the outset: Why do we think in these terms, personal morality vss public, professional ethics? Why do we think there is such a thing as personal morality on one hand and then such a thing as a public, professional ethic or morality on the other? From where did this personal/private – public/institutional split come?

What I want to suggest is that *the very construction of the personal and the public is part of the problem*. In what follows I consider the construction of the distinction, some of the moral problems that stem from it, and directions to pursue for a solution.

The Construction of a Problem

This distinction between the personal and the public is a hallmark of modern life. It is the condition of possibility for the theme of this gathering. The title "Personal Morality and Professional Ethics" is but a translation of the private / public split; it is one form that the split takes.

Yet the split is relatively new.¹ Four or five hundred years ago no one would have had any idea what we were talking about. The moral philosopher David Hume is often credited with first articulating the split. In a famous passage in his *Treatise of Human Nature* (1739), Hume denounced ethicists who claimed to draw an “ought” (a moral imperative) from what “is” (the indicative, empirical, the way things are).² This is sometimes referred to as “Hume’s Guillotine” for the way in which it severs moral values from empirical facts.

Perhaps the best-known account of this division comes from Max Weber (1864-1920), one of the great early figures in the development of sociology. Weber unpacks the private - public split in several ways, most of which I trust you will recognize because this division is so deeply ingrained in modern modes of thinking and acting.

First, there is the distinction he draws between facts and values. Facts belong to the domain of the sciences. Sciences clarify what is the case. Whereas values and meaning belong to the realm of religion and philosophy. About this division of labor, he writes:

Science today is a ‘vocation’ organized in special disciplines in the service of self-clarification and knowledge of interrelated facts. It is not the gift of grace of seers and prophets dispensing sacred values and revelations, nor does it partake of the contemplation of sages and philosophers about the meaning of the universe.³

Facts are the object of science; values and meaning belong religion and philosophy. Moreover, the reference to seers and prophets, sages and philosophers is not unimportant insofar as the realm of values is a contemplative, reflective, interior, even mystical or other-worldly realm. This is very much in contrast with the exterior, “real” world of hard facts.

Moreover, regarding these values, these ultimate ends, Weber says there is no rational-scientific manner of deciding between them. Indeed, he refers to the realm of values as the realm of “warring gods” who are destined to struggle with one another, now and for all times to come.⁴ Morality is strictly a personal choice.

Second, Weber identifies the modern compartmentalization of life into distinct realms. He writes, “We are placed into various life-spheres, each of which is governed by different laws.”⁵ He goes on to treat a number of these “life -spheres,” among which he counts the economic, political, aesthetic, erotic, intellectual, and religious. Each of these spheres is, as he noted, governed by its own logic and order. Thus, economics is fundamentally about self-interest and politics is about power and specifically, violence, while religion is about universal (he calls it “acosmic”) love and brotherhood. Again what we have here, albeit in a slightly more complex form, is a basic distinction between the interior or private realm of values/meaning/morality and the hard facts of public life, in its various forms.

Third, (and most important for our purposes) Weber draws a distinction between two ethics or two forms of reasoning. One is an ethic of ultimate ends, and it pertains to the realm of religion and values. The other is an ethic of responsibility, and it pertains to the realm of facts and material relations among persons. The ethic of ultimate ends is other-worldly in the sense that it is concerned with absolute values. The ethic of responsibility is very much this-worldly insofar as it is not concerned with ultimate ends and values but rather focuses on the most efficient and effective means to worldly ends and purposes. Indeed, the ethic of responsibility basically eschews questions of ends, instead focusing on the technical-instrumental problem of devising the best means to any given

end.

Furthermore, regarding the public realm where we inhabit systems and institutions that bracket questions of ultimate ends, focusing instead on efficient means, this is the domain ruled by experts and bureaucrat - managers. These are folks whose authority is derived from their ability to successfully match means to any given end, to accomplish whatever mission they are given.

At this point let us stop for a moment and ask, so what? How does any of this help us make sense of the private morality - professional ethic tension?

What Weber describes for us is the conceptual origin of the tension we are gathered to interrogate. The modern world divides us between our private selves, with our individual choices regarding ultimate ends and values, and our public selves, where we serve systems and institutions that operate according to a logic or rule that purports to be neutral regarding ultimate ends and is instead focused on efficient means.

The Destructiveness of This Construction

To be charitable to the engineers of the modern world thought they were doing us a favor by dividing facts and values, private morality and public life, They thought they were protecting us from authoritarian/totalitarian religion.⁶

Whether or not modernity delivers on its promises, such a division of the self has several deleterious moral consequences worth noting. On a personal level, egoism and emotivism have blossomed while emotional intelligence has declined.⁷ As various studies have shown, in the wake of privatizing or personalizing morality, we have become individualistic, morally inarticulate and incoherent.

At the institutional level, bureaucratic reasoning likewise hinders our ability to function morally. In the worst case scenarios, we become like the doctors who worked in Auschwitz. The noted psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton, who interviewed several of them, describes how those doctors underwent what he calls “doubling.” They in effect divided themselves between who they were personally – upholding an ethic of ultimate ends – and who they were in professionally, in the camp – following a technical instrumental ethic of responsibility.⁸

I refer to this as the “ghost in the machine.” Our true moral self is the private, other-worldly self that shadows our public self who carries out our assigned responsibilities according to a different and perhaps opposing moral logic of our particular bureaucracy.

Or we become like the renowned Nazi logistics expert, Adolf Eichmann, who is remarkable precisely for his ordinariness, famously captured by Hannah Arendt in the phrase, “the banality of evil.”⁹ Reflecting on Eichmann, Nazi hunter Simon Wiesenthal said: “The world now understands the concept of 'desk murderer'. We know that one doesn't need to be fanatical, sadistic, or mentally ill to murder millions; that it is enough to be a loyal follower eager to do one's duty.”¹⁰ This is what we might call the self as “cog in the machine,” a person who in effect loses the personal moral self in the bureaucracy.

It is worth noting that both the ghost and the cog in the machine are forms of assimilation or accommodation, whereby the self manages this split. Selves that are unable to manage the split or achieve integration (more on this in what follows) are at risk for moral injury, a condition that results

from too great a dissonance between moral identity and actions one perpetrates, witnesses or fails to prevent.¹¹

At the political level, it has been noted that as a result of dividing “values” from “facts,” Western political liberalism establishes political life not on a substantive notion of the good shared by all (a *summum bonum* or what used to be called the common good) but rather on a negative freedom (freedom from interference, as per John Stuart Mill¹²) that too often gives way to sheer survival (warding off death as the *summum malum*¹³).

All of these consequences have military analogs. The ghost in the machine is the soldier who merely complies with the military’s moral vision, without giving it much thought, having fully compartmentalized the personal and military parts of life. The cog in the machine is the soldier who surrenders all critical reflective capacity, saying, “I was just following orders” or “when I joined the military I gave up my ethics. I will do whatever I am told.” Down these paths lie atrocity and moral injury.¹⁴ Institutionally, the military continues to wrestle with bureaucratic forms and habits – whether it is failures of moral leadership,¹⁵ careerism, difficulties discerning appropriate forms of dissent, or scandals that undermine the public’s trust. Politically, the military continues to struggle with the moral implications of its partial differentiation from the civilian populace.¹⁶

Toward a Solution: The Unified Self and the Professions

To this point I have argued that the problem is *not* how two halves of a divided self (personal and public) relate but rather that the problem is the *division itself*.

The solution is overcoming this divided self, resisting the compartmentalization that enables us to embrace conflicting moral visions as we assume different roles in life.¹⁷ The solution is not better individuals or more bureaucratic rules and regulations. Such “solutions” only reinforce the division and so the moral fragmentation of the modern self.

The Unified Self: Integrity and Constancy

We need to think about moral formation and the moral self in a more integrated, consistent, whole manner. There are two virtues that are particularly pertinent and both are already known in some sense to moral warriors.

The first virtue is that of integrity. Integrity is about embodying one’s moral commitments consistently within and across the various different and diverse roles one inhabits in life. As Alasdair MacIntyre describes it, “To have integrity is to refuse to be, to have educated oneself so that one is no longer able to be, one kind of person in one social context, while quite another in other contexts. It is to have set inflexible limits to one’s adaptability to the roles that one may be called upon to play.”¹⁸

Here what comes to mind is the saying that frequently a good garrison soldier is not a good combat soldier and vice versa. That does not express integrity. Compare it to the observation of Dick Couch, former SEAL and a military ethics instructor:

Warriors who see virtue and nobility in their calling are more often than not men [sic] who follow a warrior ethos off duty and in garrison. The practice of right conduct when they are not in uniform or in an off-duty status makes it a great deal easier to do the right thing in

battle. To use a sports analogy, a good basket ball player is one who moves well away from the ball.¹⁹

Integrity is acting with consistency across the various domains and in the various roles of life.

Granted, different virtues may not hold the same prominence in every domain (physical courage may be more important on the battlefield than on the assembly line) and a virtue may look different in different domains (justice in domestic life may look different from justice in the public square), but a person of integrity will act with justice and courage consistently across all roles of life.

The second virtue of particular importance to overcoming the personal - public split is constancy. Constancy names the character of a person who is morally consistent no matter the changing circumstances and situations of life. Again, MacIntyre is helpful:

Constancy, like integrity, sets limits to flexibility of character. Where integrity requires of those who possess it, that they exhibit the same moral character in different social contexts, constancy requires that those who possess it pursue the same goods through extended period of time, not allowing the requirements of changing social contexts to distract them from their commitments or to redirect them.²⁰

Now, I must admit, sometimes soldiers just cut to the chase better than philosophers. In this regard, I find a statement issued by General Krulak shortly after he assumed the office of Commandant of the Marine Corps in 1995 helpful with regard to illuminating the virtue of constancy. He said, "Our core values of honor, courage and commitment are at the very soul of our institution. There is no room in our Marine Corps for either *situational ethics* or *situational morality*."²¹ The General is making the point that our moral commitments do not change with changing circumstances. That is constancy. Constancy is about maintaining moral commitments with the passing of time, in the face of changing situations.

Professing the Profession

Having addressed filling in the divide from the personal side, let us turn to the public side. A bureaucratic logic characterizes modern institutions, where individuals are expected to bracket their personal moral commitments and concentrate on applying their expert and managerial skill in developing and applying effective and efficient means.

The antidote for this is said to be the promotion of professions and a professional ethic. But as interviews with the Auschwitz doctors and Nazi administrators suggest, professions can be corrupted. (Of course, we need not look only to the extremes to find corruption. The professions of medicine, law and divinity are rife with examples.)

Indeed, in much contemporary discourse regarding professions I see little that distinguishes the professions *morally* from highly skilled experts who serve as instrumental means to any given ends. For example, much is made of how professions entail rigorous entrance requirements, specialized training and education, how they are accorded a certain autonomy to self-regulate, how they exercise a monopolistic control over their work, or even how professions engage in intra-professional jurisdictional disputes.

But none of this really distinguishes a professional from a mere expert. None of this gets at the *moral*

difference that traditionally characterizes a profession.²²

The term “profession” traces its roots in the Latin “*professus*,” which means to profess or confess and carries with it the sense that one is disclosing the truth about oneself. It is closely related to the Latin term “*vocatio*,” which means summons or calling. Again the sense here is that this is no mere choice but rather touches on one’s very being, one’s identity. We could say that professions deal not merely with knowledge and skill (knowing and doing, an expert) but being as well. A profession is not just something you do, it is not just a job or a hobby; it is something you *are*. It is part of your identity.

Thus a profession, at least as traditionally understood, is not amenable to the divided self of modernity. To profess one’s vocation is to assert a unity of the personal self, one’s being, with one’s knowing and doing. Thus, when professionals act in their professional capacity, they do not bracket, “double,” or surrender the self. Rather, the profession is simply one way of manifesting who they are.

This is why Mark Osiel can make the startling claim that martial virtues at their best are conducive to *human* flourishing and that good soldiers are good human beings.²³ There is a unity of being and doing, of personal moral vision and professional action. This realization is also behind the oft-repeated observation of General Sir John Winthrop Hackett, “What the bad man cannot be is a good sailor, or soldier, or airman.”²⁴

Furthermore, because professions involve a unity being, knowing, and doing, they entail moral commitments – Weber’s values and ultimate ends – that shape knowing and doing. This is to say, a profession serves others but a professional is not simply an expert, a morally neutral tool or means to whatever ends the client desires. Rather, there are goods, excellences, moral commitments intrinsic to the nature of the profession that guide – and perhaps limit at times – the application of professional knowledge and skill.

What this means is that there are some things professions cannot do, not because they lack the skill or knowledge, but because such actions would violate who they are – their identity, the moral core of their profession. (Recall General Krulak’s exhortation about core moral commitments.)

This is what distinguishes a moral warrior from a public mercenary. It is what gives rise to the cry, “death before dishonor,” which we might profitably amend to “death, defeat, demotion, discharge, unemployment before dishonor.”

More than a Professional

One caution is in order before concluding. In highlighting the profession as the systemic or institutional expression of a unified self, I am not suggesting that the moral self is lost in what might now appear to be a totalitarian or all-encompassing vocation. Such a subsumption of the self would merely replicate the “cog in the machine.”

To profess a profession, to identify with a profession and own its moral commitments, is *not* to reduce the self to one’s role. This is the case because while a profession defines a professional in the sense that it is part of one’s identity, it does not define *all* that one is. One is *more* than a professional. A profession is one facet of one’s identity, alongside other facets of one’s identity, such as sibling, parent, friend, citizen, human rights advocate, person of faith, and so forth. Hence, the

importance of the virtues of integrity and constancy, which are the virtues that maintain character, a unified moral self or identity, in the various roles one inhabits in life.

Conclusion: The Political Task That Remains

There remains one dimension of the problem of the divided self that I have yet to address: the political. What kind of politics is required to sustain a profession? To sustain the profession of arms? Many today wonder if a profession can be sustained in the midst of a political culture that lacks a center more substantial than a negative liberty and the fear of death. After all, as I have argued, professions cannot serve just any ends.

The suspicion is well-founded to the extent that the professions are dedicated to serving the polity, and none are more dedicated to the US than the military. Can moral warriors, dedicated to honor and respect, to the harder right, to the moral constraints known as just war, serve and sustain themselves if the polity those warriors serve does not share those moral commitments, if the profession becomes “fully differentiated”?²⁵

Toward averting this end, figures as diverse as Andrew Bacevich, Jean Bethke Elshtain, and Alasdair MacIntyre²⁶ call for a renewal of civic republican virtue, that is, a reclaiming of a more robust sense of the good that unites us as citizens and a more positive sense of freedom that we celebrate.

In other words, the prospects and possibilities for the profession of arms and the moral warrior depends on more than the dedication of individual soldiers and valiant efforts at institutional reform – as important as both of those are. Overcoming the divided self, the tension between personal morality and professional ethics, requires a public conversation about the ideals this nation holds aloft – such as liberty, justice, peace, happiness – and how we embody them.

1. See Hannah Arendt *Between Past and Future* (NY: Penguin Books, 2006) for a survey of the ancient distinction between household and *polis*, which is a very different kind of distinction.
2. See David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Book III, Part I, Section I, p. 469.
3. Max Weber, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*. eds. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills. (NY: Oxford University Press, 1946) 152.
4. Weber, *From Max Weber*, 148, 153.
5. Weber, *From Max Weber*, 123.
6. This paper is not the place to enumerate the problems with this claim. As Weber recognized, in protecting us from religion, modernity may have only delivered us to a new master. Certainly modernity has not lacked its own totalitarian and authoritarian systems, some overt and obvious, others less so. Weber himself saw the advancing economic order as an "iron cage." For a thorough treatment of the myth of religious violence that underwrites the standard story of modernity as enlightenment and liberation, see William Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (NY: Oxford University, 2009).
7. Note the connection between emotivism and decreased emotional intelligence. To the extent that emotivism shares in a Romantic spontaneous expressivism, free reign is given to feelings and emotions as expressions of a true, authentic self. Thus, there is no reason to consider the need for emotional discipline or the right forming of emotions and passions. Instead, they are taken as an innate given. Indeed, such discipline can be construed as a repression of the authentic self. On emotional intelligence, see Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence* (NY: Bantam Books, 1997).
8. See Robert J. Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors: Medical Killing and the Psychology of Genocide* (NY: Basic Books, 1986), 418ff. Note that Lifton differentiates "doubling" from the more traditional concept of "splitting," which entails "psychic numbing" or "dissociation" and is a disconnection from the self. The concept of "doubling" comports well with social cognitive theories of moral disengagement. See, for example, Albert Bandura et al., "Mechanisms of Moral Disengagement in the Exercise of Moral Agency," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 71.2 (1996): 364-74.
9. Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (NY: Penguin, 1994), 252. See also Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (NY: Harper, 1998).
10. Simon Wiesenthal, *Justice, Not Vengeance: Recollections* cited in Alan Levy, *Nazi Hunter: The Wiesenthal File*. Rev. ed. (NY: Carroll and Graf, 2002), 157-8.
11. The literature on moral injury is expanding at a rapid pace. For a succinct overview, see Brett T Litz, et al, "Moral injury and moral repair in war veterans: A preliminary model and intervention strategy," *Clinical Psychology Review* 29 (2009): 695-706.
12. John Stuart Mill, in his essay "On Liberty," offers the quintessential modern definition of freedom when he writes: "The only freedom which deserves the name, is that of pursuing our own good in our own way, so long as we do not attempt to deprive others of theirs, or impede

their efforts to obtain it." See John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism, On Liberty, Considerations on Representative Government* (Rutland, VT: Charles E. Tuttle Co., 1972), 81.

13. See Judith N. Shklar, "The Liberalism of Fear," in *Political Thought and Political Thinkers*. Ed. Stanley Hoffmann (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

14. For a compelling account and analysis of the moral struggles of soldiers, see Nancy Sherman, *The Untold War* (NY: W. W. Norton, 2010) as well as the classic text by Jonathan Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* (NY: Simon and Schuster, 1995).

15. Don Snider links recent failures to the persistence of bureaucratic habits regarding admission – failing to evaluate commitment – and accountability – assessment remains top-down. See Don Snider, "The Moral Corrosion within Our Military Profession," Available at: <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/index.cfm/articles/The-Moral-Corrosion-within-Our-Military-Professions/2012/11/27> [Accessed 12/7/2012]

16. I have experienced a certain level of discomfort with owning a robust moral vision in some military circles related to the belief that that is prohibited by a commitment to civilian control. The result is a bureaucratic vision of the military: Fearing moral differentiation that might undermine its subordination, the military is confined to being an expert force available as a means to whatever ends civilian leadership determine.

17. With this statement I do not mean to imply that a solution is quick, easy, or unidimensional. This division is not the sole source of modern moral difficulties, nor is a unified self necessarily a moral improvement. Such would depend on the nature of virtues or vices that unified the self and resultant society.

18. Alasdair MacIntyre, "Social Structures and their Threats to Moral Agency," *Philosophy* 74.289 (July 1999): 317.

19. Dick Couch, *A Tactical Ethic: moral conduct in the insurgent battle space* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2010), 92.

20. MacIntyre, "Social Structures," 318.

21. "General Krulak's Five Pillars," <http://jdgrosl15.tripod.com/nrotc/pillars.html> [Accessed 4/25/2014] Italics added.

22. I do not mean to suggest that the moral dimension is completely absent. Eliot Freidson, for example, does a fine job of stating the moral point when he notes that a profession serves more than the whims of client, that it serves transcendent values, even when client tries to stifle. The problem is that such insights remain sidelines in the literature. See Eliot Freidson, *Professionalism: The Third Logic* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 122-3, 131, 221.

23. Mark Osiel, *Obeying Orders: Atrocity, Military Discipline and the Law of War* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2002), 18, 335.

24. John Winthrop Hackett, "The Military in the Service of the State," USAF Harmon Memorial Lecture #13 (1970). Available at: <http://www.usafa.edu/df/dfh/harmonmemorial.cfm>. Accessed

September 9, 2011.

25. The term is Anthony Hartle's. See his, *Moral Issues in Military Decision Making* 2d (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2004).

26. See Bacevich, *Breach of Trust*; Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Women and War* (NY: Basic Books, 1987); Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* 2d. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984).