

Competing for Relevance – The Army Ethic in an Age of Moral Relativity

“What’s wrong with my values and why do you think I need news ones? What makes the Army Values any more relevant or valid than mine? Isn’t the Army supposed to be a reflection of society?”

These are a fair series of questions and ones that can be legitimately asked by any of the thousands of young men and women seeking to enter the United States Army. Much has been written regarding the moral and philosophical outlooks of American society to include its drift toward moral relativism. This trend will create natural friction points between Society and the Army’s approach to its Values, its Professional Ethic, and character development.

Perhaps the greatest risk to the Army Professional Ethic is not that it will never be formalized, but that even if formalized, it will not be universally embraced by Soldiers who find it culturally out of step with their personal views on morality and ethics. This will in turn lead to growing moral and operational risk to the Army.

This paper will examine the growing gaps between the Army Values, the draft Professional Ethic and societal values. The paper will also identify the risks these gaps cause to the Army and go on to offer suggestions regarding some of the difficult choices the Army must make to address these issues.

Competing for Relevance – The Army Ethic in an Age of Moral Diversity

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“What’s wrong with my values and why do you think I need news ones? What makes the Army Values any more relevant or valid than mine? What right do you have to impose your values on me? Isn’t the Army supposed to be a reflection of society?”

These are a fair series of questions and ones that can be legitimately asked by any of the thousands of young men and women seeking to enter the United States Army. To date, the Army does not appear to have fully examined the natural friction points between changing societal norms and the Army’s approach to its Values, its Ethic, and character development.

This paper will examine the growing gaps between changing societal values and the Army’s espoused Values, as embodied in the draft Army Ethic. The paper will also identify the risks these gaps cause to the Army Profession and go on to offer suggestions regarding some of the difficult choices the Army must make to address these issues.

Moral Diversity: Losing a common reference point

The most common techniques used to call for fire are adjusting from a known reference point, polar plotting, or using grid coordinates. But what would happen if a call for fire came into a Fire Direction Center (FDC) using coordinates created by the forward observer (FO) from an individually hand drawn map with its own unique coordinate system? What if every call for fire arrived at the FDC using a different system, each of which was individually devised by each FO?

Unfortunately, this analogy describes a trend in American society that increasingly embraces a post-modern worldview. While actual definitions vary, a worldview is generally described as “a particular philosophy of life or conception of the world.”¹ Worldviews matter because they provide a mental and emotional framework by which individuals interpret the world and the events that they experience. For instance, a person’s worldview shapes whether or not an individual is inclined to accept moral absolutes, or believe that ethics are relative; whether religious truths are valid, and if so, which ones; and whether the existence of the universe is due to random chance or divine origin. These and other elements have an impact on how an individual will interact with other people and what they perceive as acceptable behavior.

“Post Modernism” is a worldview on the increasingly accepted in the United States. While definitions vary among sources, the post modern worldview generally accepts that objective truth does not exist, that ethics are relative within the context of each culture, and that religious truths are entirely a matter of personal preference.² This relativistic viewpoint has gained increasing acceptance while one of its natural counter balances, religious thought, has been decreasing among Millennials, who are

significantly less religious than previous generations, even accounting for where they are in their life cycle.³ In a New York Times Op-Ed, David Brooks writes that “In many parts of America ... there are no basic codes and rules woven into daily life, which people can absorb unconsciously and follow automatically.”⁴ While hotly debated, our educational process, primarily the common core approach to facts and opinions, renders moral judgments to be mere opinions and appears to reinforce a relativistic viewpoint.⁵ Individuals that enter the Army carry, on average, 18-22 years of societal norming and are potentially already primed at that part of their lives to be moral relativists.⁶

Due to these and other societal phenomenon, some of the traditional moral anchors of American society have begun to lose significance and are being replaced with non-judgmental relativism, or effectively the null set. The result is that American society has an increasingly diverse view of what constitutes a moral baseline. This viewpoint will increasingly collide with a fairly rigid military moral code that is backed up by law, the Uniformed Code of Military Justice and numerous regulations.

We are already seeing this tension play out in the force. Upon entrance into the military, much is suddenly expected of individuals and many are simply not prepared to meet these demands. The Army’s internal research indicates that in 2011, Soldiers committed over 78,000 criminal offenses, approximately two thirds of which were committed by E1-E4s⁷, those most likely in the 18-22 year old demographic. Analysis of the same data also indicates that approximately a full third of the documented criminal conduct from the same year was committed by non-commissioned officers, warrant officers and commissioned officers. Note also that these statistics do not even address non-judicial punishment, but it is logical to assume the same trend would be reflected in that category of misconduct as well.

If we want ensure that that all individuals, to include those with morally diverse backgrounds, who enter the Army move past simple rule following and embrace the Army ethic, we must examine how we approach character development.

A Bridge to Nowhere

Many of the young men and women who enter the Army are still forming their adult personal identities and moral character. The Army can have especially significant influence with these individuals and even doctrinally addresses the need for character development. However, in framing its approach to character development, the Army makes the fundamental assumption that Soldiers and leaders inherently know what is right and want to live ethically.⁸ This assumption, along with several other questionable ones, has led the Army to accept a laissez-faire approach to character development that

is clearly inadequate to the challenges the Army now faces.⁹ This approach will not help empower the type of moral courage we desire in our future leaders.

Risk to the Army

The risk to the Army falls in two categories. Perhaps the greatest risk is that with the Professional Ethic, even when published, may not compete well in the hearts and minds of the Army. It may not be universally embraced by Soldiers who find it either culturally out of step with their morally diverse personal views, or simply another list of rules and ideas that brief well, but lack sufficient depth to apply to on the ground situations. The second risk is that the Army will not operationalize the concept of “character over competence” at an institutional level and simply continue with previous methods of instruction and development in the hope that because the Army Ethic makes sense to Generation X and senior leaders, that it will make equal sense to Millennials. The Army Ethic is too important to the Army as an institution to gamble its acceptance by the next generation on “the same ‘ol same ‘ol” approach.

A Way Ahead

This paper began by looking at the increasing moral diversity in American society and some of the clear risks this dynamic will increasingly pose to the Army. While the risks are significant, the Army has addressed previous challenges and, with courageous leadership, can address this one also. The following recommendations, while certainly not all inclusive, could assist the Army in competing as an institution in the marketplace of ideas.

Clearly Make Ethics and Morality Leader Business. Leaders are the stewards of the profession. While Chaplains, Staff Judge Advocates, academics and others have an important role in the discussion of ethics, the Army appears to have intellectually outsourced its thinking and advocacy on these issues to technical experts vice practitioners (commanders). Current Professional Military Education (PME) offers little if any discussion on the complex issues involved in ethics and morality. While “Character over Competence” expresses a strong sentiment, if the Army does not apply resources to it in terms of training and education, it will remain another unfunded mandate that competes with numerous other ones for the scraps of unit time after other priorities are met. This is not to suggest that the answer lies in yet another program directed by the Department of the Army, but a real and substantive investment in the curriculum at the Army’s PME schools where our rising leaders are trained and educated.

Develop a Logic, Process and Language for Ethical Decision Making. The Army Ethic, when published, will be a good step forward, but explaining the complex issues involved in its application will fall on leaders if it is to be embraced by the force. However, the Army currently lacks a coherent logic, process and language for rationally

working through, and resolving, ethical dilemmas. Simply asking “is it legal?” only scratches the surface of what can be very complex issues. Without this accepted framework and commonly defined terms, we will struggle to have even an effective dialogue as the Army Ethic competes with different moral reference points. This is especially true when dealing with the foreign cultures Soldiers will interact with while deployed. Not all frameworks are equally good, but some are better than others and if we are able to establish a baseline, we will at least have a common point of departure for effective discussions.

Rethink Our Approach to Character Development. As previously discussed, the Army’s current approach to character development is inadequate in achieving the Army’s desired goals and needs an immediate re-examination. We can, and must, do better than a laissez-faire approach if we are to operationalize the concept of “character over competence.”

While the challenges are serious, there is good news. The Army is a highly respected organization¹⁰ that has an opportunity to shape a generation of Millennials who are open to change.¹¹ If we as an Army accept the premise that we must compete in the marketplace of ideas, we are more than capable of competing well and adapting to changing societal conditions. However, as General Shinseki has aptly stated, if we don’t like change, we will like irrelevance even less.

¹ Oxford Dictionaries, <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/english/world-view> accessed 7 April 2015
² BBC, “Postmodernism,” <http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/atheism/types/postmodernism.shtml> (accessed April 10, 2015).

³ Pew Research Center, “Religion Among the Millennials,” February 17, 2010, <http://www.pewforum.org/2010/02/17/religion-among-the-millennials/> (accessed April 11, 2015).

⁴ David Brooks, “The Cost of Relativism,” http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/10/opinion/david-brooks-the-cost-of-relativism.html?_r=0 (accessed April 11, 2015).

⁵ Justin P. McBrayer, “Why Our Children Don’t Think There Are Moral Facts,” March 2, 2015, http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/03/02/why-our-children-dont-think-there-are-moral-facts/?_r=0, (accessed April 7, 2015).

⁶ Daniel Engberg, “The Kids Are All Right,” March 16, 2015, http://www.slate.com/articles/health_and_science/science/2015/03/does_common_core_teach_children_to_be_immoral_as_justin_mcbrayer_says_meta.html (accessed April 10, 2015).

⁷ U.S. Department of the Army, *Generating Health and Discipline in the Force Ahead of the Strategic Reset* (Washington, DC:GPO, January 2012) 97.

⁸ U.S. Army Doctrinal Publication (ADP) 6-22, *Army Leadership* (Washington, DC: GPO September 2012), 3-6).

⁹ Brian M. Michelson, “Character Development of Army Leaders: The Laissez Faire Approach,” *Military Review*, September-October 2013, 37.

¹⁰ The Pew Research Center, “War and Sacrifice in the Post-9/11 Era,” October 5, 2011, <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2011/10/05/war-and-sacrifice-in-the-post-911-era/6/#chapter-5-the-public-and-the-military> (accessed January 15, 2013).

¹¹ The Pew Research Center, “Millennials: Confident. Connected. Open to Change,” February 24, 2010, <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2010/02/24/millennials-confident-connected-open-to-change/> (accessed January 15, 2013).

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