

The world is an imperfect place and humans are imperfect actors within it. In light of this, societies have developed ethics to guide their members through life by assigning “good/right” or “bad/wrong” value judgments to their actions. These value judgments steer the members toward preferred behaviors. Three of the most common ethical frameworks are virtue ethics, mission ethics, and duty ethics. The world is too complex, though, for one’s moral compass to be attuned solely to one of these schools of thought. Not one ethical paradigm provides a flawless framework to guide moral behavior. Perhaps the most compelling case for this argument is that if one paradigm were clearly sufficient, it would be universally adopted. This is not the case, though, and even people from similar cultures often incorporate elements of virtue, duty, and mission ethics. In order to maintain appreciation for the complexities inherent in each of these ethical lenses, organizational leaders would be well served to see the ethical landscape of their organization, and for each individual within that organization, as a moral magnetic field, characterized by the interplay of these concepts.

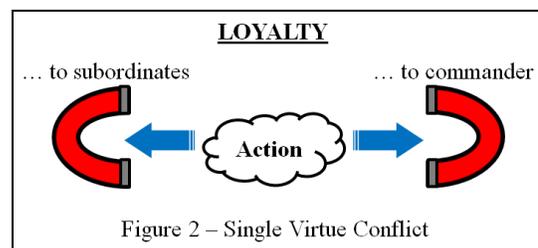
More than a decade ago, the Army instituted the Army Values, a set of principles intended to provide ethical guidance to Soldiers. Though referred to as values, the Army Values of Loyalty, Duty, Respect, Selfless Service, Honor, Integrity, and Personal Courage are consistent within the context of virtue ethics. Aristotle described a virtue as the “golden mean” between the extremes of excess and deficiency in a certain quality.¹ This is a useful way to consider each of the Army Values. Using the Army Value of Personal Courage as an example, this virtue exists as the “golden mean” between cowardice (an extreme of deficiency) and foolishness (an extreme of excess). However, the challenge is finding the “golden mean” in



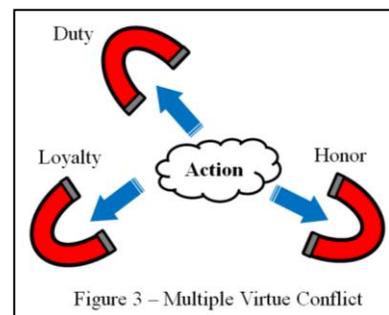
practice since the lines between cowardice, courage, and foolishness are not always

distinct (see Figure 1). In a firefight, when perfect awareness is impossible, under what conditions is it courageous or foolish to move out of a covered position? Ultimately, the answer is a judgment call based upon the individual’s understanding of the situation and ability to remove emotions from the decision-making process. Understanding that a virtue which may seem straight-forward is actually imbued with nuance and uncertainty in practice is an important first step toward sensing the moral magnetic field.

The application of virtue ethics to Army Values does not end here, though. There are times when, even when one seems to find the “golden mean,” a virtue may be in conflict with itself. In describing the Army Value of Loyalty, the Army’s official website describes a loyal soldier as “one who supports the leadership and stands up for fellow Soldiers.”² There may be times when loyalty to both the commander and subordinates are not congruous. One may then feel pulled between these two metaphorical magnets (see Figure 2). When this occurs, the magnitude of these forces may be unequal - pulling the leader toward one side.



Additionally, a leader may experience a situation where multiple Army Values seem to be in conflict with one another (see Figure 3). Again, the magnitude and vector of these forces may vary and this variance can help the leader arrive at a decision. For instance, in some hypothetical case, the ethical pull of Duty may more closely align with the ethical pull of Loyalty to the commander, thus helping the leader decide between several ethically imperfect decisions.



Using the moral magnetic field as a mental model is not bereft of potential hazards. Like a true magnetic field, an ethical magnetic field can be felt. Unlike a true magnetic field, though, it cannot be empirically measured. For a leader considering multiple ethical options, the moral magnetic field will not provide a numerical solution, able to be expressed in terms of greater or lesser ethical virtue. Instead, the worth of the moral magnetic field lies in approaching ethical decisions with a more nuanced appreciation of the decisions at hand and the multiple ethical factors at work.

The same mental model of an ethical magnetic field can be applied when considering duty ethics versus mission ethics. Duty ethics (or the “ethics of rules”) and mission ethics, (also known as outcome-based ethics) each have strengths and weaknesses. Rules can be thought out ahead of time, and they simplify and expedite ethical decision-making. This provides a standard for ethical behavior to be applied in every situation. The greatest weakness of duty ethics is that

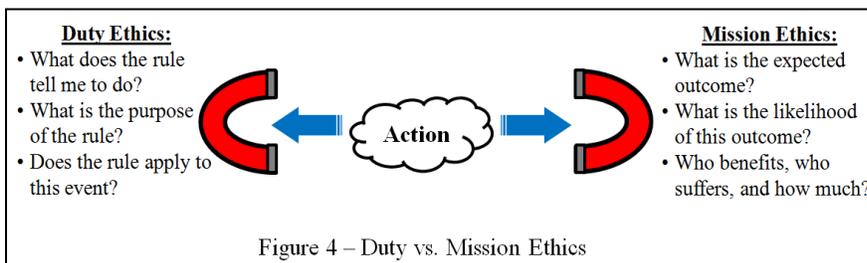


Figure 4 – Duty vs. Mission Ethics

rules cannot be generated in advance for every conceivable scenario, potentially leading to a

mindless adherence to rules resulting in tremendous harm. Conversely, the value of mission ethics emphasizes anticipating the outcome of an action and drives a decision that would generate the most good or least harm. The greatest flaw with mission ethics is that the world tends to be unpredictable. A leader’s expectation that a certain action will result in greater good than harm does not guarantee the case in reality. In dealing with this dilemma, applying the magnetic field approach may be useful where the magnitude of the force of duty ethics may be

governed by the applicability and purpose of the rule, while the magnitude of mission ethics is determined by the likelihood, recipients, and severity of the outcome (see Figure 4).

Each of the ethical frameworks examined above – virtue ethics, duty ethics, and mission ethics – have advantages and disadvantages. While fully subscribing to one framework or the other may ease one’s ethical decision-making, it does not guarantee better ethical decisions. The world is simply too complex. A “one size fits all” approach to ethical decision making also does not account for the fact that most people are impacted by virtue, duty, and ethics at varying times and to varying degrees with each ethical decision they face. People feel buffeted by questions of “what is the virtuous thing to do here” and “what do the rules tell me to do” and “what will produce the greatest good” all in rapid succession. The moral landscape as a magnetic field with various forcing pulling the needle of one’s moral compass in different directions. Understanding the complexity of this magnetic field is a necessary first step toward ethical leadership.

End Notes

¹ Command and General Staff College. E103 Virtue and the Soldier Leader site. *Virtue Theory Summary* (n.d.) online at <https://cgsc.blackboard.com/bbcswebdav/pid-55419-dt-content-rid-119916_1/xid-119916_1> accessed on October 15, 2013.

² The United States Army. Army Values. *The Army Values* (n.d.) online at <<http://www.army.mil/values/>> accessed on October 15, 2013.