

**Elucidating the Future:  
Soldiers and their Civil-Military Environment**

## *Military Ethics and Action Competence*

by Jarmo Toiskallio

### **Introduction**

According to a preliminary definition action competence “includes the capacity to be able to act, now and in the future, and to be responsible for one’s action”<sup>60</sup>. In order to understand the nature of the term action competence it is important to add that it does not only refer to the actions of separate individuals but also to the collective and historically continuous action in the meaning of ethos or collective identity.

Challenges like terrorism, asymmetrical warfare and non-restricted warfare alongside with the new modes of peace operations have raised a profound question not only at the political but also doctrinal, operational and organizational levels. There is the problem of the transformation of soldiers as human beings as well. From a wider scope we should call it the problem of transforming soldiership. Soldiership means, in simple words, to be a soldier, a human being in uniform in the armed forces.

There is much talk about the transformation of the military in order to meet the challenges of the new century. But it seems that we are in need of more reflection on the theoretical concepts and frameworks for the transformation processes. There is also a need for new thinking at the pedagogical level of education and training.

The concepts of ‘soldiership’, ‘embodied agent’, and ‘action competence’ form the main construction of my article. The aim of this article is to outline ‘action competence’ as such a theoretical approach to the future military education and training. This approach is based on Charles Taylor’s view that a human being should be seen “as essentially

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<sup>60</sup> Jensen, B., Schnack, K. 1997. The Action Competence Approach in Environmental Education. *Environmental Education Research*, Vol. 3, No 2, p. 175.

an embodied agent, engaged with the world”<sup>61</sup>. Human beings as ‘embodied agents’ refers to a concept of a holistic view of human beings acting by way of their minds, bodies, and contexts with material, social, cultural, and moral aspects.

### **Soldiers and Soldiership**

The evolving complexities and difficulties of military actions make it necessary to consider humanity and individuality more profoundly than this was commonly done in traditional military education and training. It is no longer enough to say that the soldiers must only be well-trained. The individual soldier as an embodied agent comes especially to the fore when the soldier as a rational human being should be held responsible for his own actions.

We have to consider soldiers to be more than mere instruments of war. One of the growing critical problems might be what the soldiers personally are fighting for. What are they actually defending – what is their identity as soldiers? It might be the worst scenario that they will be new kinds of mercenaries with moneymaking as their identity.

It is part of the contemporary military discourse that individual soldiers will have a growing role in battle. Words like ‘thinking’, ‘creative’, ‘multi-skilled’, and ‘adaptive’ are often used to describe the modern – or better, the postmodern – soldier. What is wanted are people with “competence, character, imagination, and intelligence”<sup>62</sup>. But what do we actually mean with all those words? Do they only refer to discrete competencies without a coherent theory of soldiership?

Is soldiership really under transformation, and if yes, how to develop education and training? Most often there are quality requirements from the operational side, but what are their pedagogical equivalents? If we really want to further some kind of development in military pedagogy, we should start from the basics. The profound level of those basics is

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<sup>61</sup> Taylor, C. 1995. *Philosophical Arguments*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. p. 22.

<sup>62</sup> According to Colonel Douglas A. Macgregor these should be the features of the new information-age army leaders. Macgregor, D. 2003. *Transformation Under Fire. Revolutionizing How America Fights*. Praeger: Westport.

called ontology. Ontology asks the nature of the subject we are reflecting on. In the military sciences, and especially in military pedagogy, one of the central ontological questions should concern soldiership: What does it mean to be a soldier?

Soldiership is a composition of many various aspects like skills, physical fitness and mental capacities, values, and attitudes, as well as organizational and technological structures, cultural, social, and political views, situations, and contexts. By its essential nature is a historical and cultural construct; on the one hand, it is quite a different issue to be a soldier in the highly technological armed forces of the information-age than in a pre-industrial army of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. On the other hand, on the most fundamental level, soldiership is, and will be, very similar everywhere and throughout history.

### **The Ethical Dimension of Action Competence**

The new operational environment, more complex by nature, has brought forth burning ethical problems: "...when transforming the military profession, one must address not only its structure and organization, but its ethics as well"<sup>63</sup>.

Also in the military it is important to understand the role of individuals and their action, because "it is individuals who act, not nations"<sup>64</sup>. Action competence approach highlights the potentialities of individuals to cope with the environments, conditions, and tasks and underscores the meaningful role of individuals in military organizations without being an apology of individualism<sup>65</sup>.

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<sup>63</sup> Pfaff, T. 2004. Ethics in Complex Contingencies: New Demands on the Warrior Ethic <http://www.usafa.af.mil/jscope/JSCOPE04/Pfaff04.html>

<sup>64</sup> LeShan, L. 2002. The Psychology of War. Comprehending its Mystique and its Madness. New York: Helios Press.

<sup>65</sup> As Peter Foot says, "no longer can we divide the work of the (military) profession into those characteristic levels of command, strategic, operational, and tactical ... the people even at the lowest levels must have knowledge. They must have wisdom." Foot, P. 2003. Challenges to Security and Defence Related Education and Training. Connections, Athena Papers, No 7.

The role of individuals is tightly involved with ethics. The recent revision in military thinking suggests that concerns of ethics and efficacy are increasingly congruent; that ethical behavior and technical competence are highly correlated<sup>66</sup>. Practical judgment (or ‘practical wisdom’, as I will call it as a part of action competence) is needed and moral reasoning has to be brought into the very core of effective soldiering: “Greater situational attentiveness to the moral aspects of decision will also help professional soldiers become better ... human beings”<sup>67</sup>.

The basic ethical question is: How should I/we act in order to act in a good and right way? In our context we could also say that an individual cannot be action competent without being ethically competent. That is why ethics can be called the hard vehicle of action competence. Of course, it is an extremely difficult task to say what it means in practice to be an ethically competent person. One of the basic features is to be responsible for one’s own actions. It is actually this aspect that makes oneself truly human. But in the postmodern, globalizing information age it seems to be more and more difficult to be truly human in that sense. It is more and more difficult to know in advance what kind of consequences our actions will have, and how all the things are affecting our decision-making. That is why ethics is greatly growing in importance.

But are we able to train and educate expert soldiers with a strong sense of personal independence and with a high level of ethical awareness? Ethos means habits, socially shared values, rules, and modes of behavior. As such, ethos is a step towards ethics. Habituation, the growing into the ethos of a social group, is a necessary phase to become an ethical person. But on the other hand, there cannot be any deeply functioning ethos without ethical persons as members of the community. Without acting subjects, all kinds of moral rules and codes will remain dead words.

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<sup>66</sup> Osiel, M. J. 2002. *Obedying Orders. Atrocity, Military Discipline & the Law of War.* New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, pp. 170-171.

<sup>67</sup> *Op. cit.*, 360 61.

In the US Army program “Warrior Ethos” it is determined that warrior ethos is the foundation for the soldier’s total commitment to victory in peace and war: “Soldiers who live Warrior Ethos put the mission first, refuse to accept defeat, never quit and never leave behind a fellow American. They have absolute faith in themselves and their team.” In other words, the soldiers must have a strong moral identity. But it seems to include only “we”. It does not include the potential adversaries as human beings; they are only labeled enemies who have to be killed. It often happens under the circumstances of war that soldiers lose their moral self-control – something J. Glover calls the erosion of the moral resources – and start to carry out acts of cruelty, for instance physical and psychological torture. There can even be “the love of cruelty” and “the festival of cruelty” with massacres<sup>68</sup>.

It is a profound problem if the military training is based on the idea that “soldiers have to be brutalized and tribalized ... if they are to operate effectively”<sup>69</sup>. Glover sees tribalism as one of the most important sources of cruelty, which is why “Warrior Codes” are needed: “Warriors need a way to distinguish what they must do out of a sense of duty from what a serial killer does for the sheer sadistic pleasure of it”<sup>70</sup>.

The ethical component has a crucial place in the totality of action competence, because it has an integrative and executive role in decision-making. When reflecting the pedagogical principles for the development of ethical action competence, it seems fruitful to apply the idea of Foucault for whom ethics meant “the self’s relationship to itself” in the sense of ethics as a kind of self-formative activity<sup>71</sup>. This is why military pedagogy should be the pedagogy of creative self-development and self-regulation.

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<sup>68</sup>Glover, J. 2001. *Humanity. A Moral History of the Twentieth Century*. London: Pimlico.

<sup>69</sup>Griffith, P. 2000. Fighting spirit: leadership and morale on the ‘empty battlefield’ of the future. In Evans, M., Ryan, A. (Ed.): *The Human Face of Warfare. Killing, Fear & Chaos in Battle*. St Leonards: Allen & Unwin.

<sup>70</sup>French, S. F. 2002. *The Warrior’s Code*.

<sup>71</sup>Davidson, A.I. 1989. *Archaeology, Genealogy, Ethics*. In Hoy, D.C. (Ed.): *Foucault: A Critical Reader*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

In order to understand action competence it is fruitful to notice – as Brigadier General Edwin Micewski writes – that “while modernity was focused on *knowledge*, a postmodern approach focuses on *wisdom*”<sup>72</sup>. *Phronesis* as practical wisdom broadly refers to thinking in practical contexts, rather than in a specifically intellectual domain. It is “characterized by a flexible and applied concern for the practical contingencies of behavior, especially in the face of uncertainty”<sup>73</sup>. I think that it is just this way we are able to get the lines of the philosophy of body and the idea of action competence together.

What is the reason to use ancient concepts like “wisdom” in order to understand the contemporary and future world? In a way it can be said that the basic questions were more pure in former times; later, in modern times, the technological approach “made us lose sight of the essential nature of ourselves as human beings”<sup>74</sup>. It might be an everlasting role of the action competence approach to be critical with the one-sided technological approach. It is not only the digital technology but altogether the relation between human beings and their tools.

Critical thinking is an integral constituent of action competence; not so much as a cognitive process but as social and ethical deliberation and decision<sup>75</sup>. It is not merely a specially refined thinking technique that is particularly suited to solving problems. In the context of action competence, critical thinking should also be understood to include views of the direction and content of thinking.

### **Education for Ethics and Action Competence**

Education for action competence does not only consist of teaching knowledge and training abilities. There is also the task of developing the will: “... teaching must emphasize the interventionist and action

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<sup>72</sup>Micewski, E. 2004. The Education Of (Military) Leadership Personnel In A Postmodern World. *Connections*, Vol. III, No. 1, pp. 67-73.

<sup>73</sup> Haslam, N., Baron, J. 1994. Intelligence, Personality, and Prudence. In Sternberg, J., Ruzgis, P. (Ed.): *Personality and Intelligence*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>74</sup> Micewski, op. cit., p. 72

<sup>75</sup> Mogensen, F. 1997.

perspective by increasing the pupils' abilities and will to influence and take part in solving future ... problems"<sup>76</sup>.

Finn Mogensen describes action competence as an educational concept as follows: "... developing the ability, responsibility and motivation of pupils to involve themselves in future problems. It entails developing their intellectual capacity and motivation to take an active part and participate in solutions to them."<sup>77</sup>

In the concept of action competence, the term 'competence' is a problem in itself. Competence should not be seen simply as a skill or knowledge, but rather as a capacity. In much current usage the notion of competence has been regarded as the ability to undertake specific tasks; it has been largely stripped of its social, moral and intellectual qualities in order not to conflate the terms<sup>78</sup>.

Competence and competences are broad capacities. In contrast, competency (competencies) is a narrower, more atomistic concept used to label particular abilities or episodes. In this way the first sense of the term (capacity) refers to persons, whereas the second (dispositional) sense refers to specific activities. That is important for the action competence approach: it deals with persons, not primarily with specific activities.

The action competence approach also has much to do with virtue ethics. Although the roots are long, the term 'virtue ethics' is a relatively recent one; it is an umbrella term encompassing a number of different theories<sup>79</sup>. Some of the central concepts in the tradition of virtue ethics are 'action', 'character', and 'habit'<sup>80</sup>. That is how the Aristotelian

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<sup>76</sup> Mogensen, F. 1997

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Smith, M.K. 2004. Competence and competency. <http://www.infed.org/biblio/b-comp.htm>

<sup>79</sup> Athanassoulis, N. 2004. *Virtue Ethics*. The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. <http://www.iep.utm.edu/v/virtue.htm>

<sup>80</sup> Aristotle wrote about two kinds of virtues, intellectual and moral. The development of intellectual virtues needs time and experience, and the moral goodness is the result of habit. Aristotle. The Nichomachean Ethics, 1103a14.

ethical idea of character education is not a revolutionary one in the military.

Virtue ethics is a form of what is called ‘agent-focused’ ethics<sup>81</sup>. Agent-focused means that great importance is put on the acting individuals and their ‘inner’ qualities like character and motives. Still the individuals are not seen as abstract, but very much modified by their traditions and cultures. But what is crucial: people are not able to do good things if their character is not good.

Could we in the military sciences call action competence a virtue? The word virtue (excellence, goodness, efficiency) comes from the ancient Greek word *arete*. It originally named the excellence of the warrior-king. One of the meanings of *arete* was ‘courage’, ‘manliness’<sup>82</sup>. Especially the Athenians thought that excellence is to be judged in terms of the standards established within and for some specific form of systematic activity, for instance warfare and combat. They also highlighted the interrelations of body, mind, and character<sup>83</sup>. For Aristotle it was important to see the interdependence of practical intelligence (*phronesis*) and the virtues of character: there is no practical intelligence without virtues, and there can be no virtuous character without practical intelligence<sup>84</sup>. MacIntyre says the virtues are dispositions to act in specific ways for specific reasons. Earlier in this chapter I mentioned the problematic relation between ‘disposition’ and ‘competence’, and I think that Aristotle thought more about competences than dispositions: competences are broad capacities.

The educational process leading to qualified action competence should always start from education as habituation – as taking the individuals as members of the life of the community, into its ethical life. But what will community actually mean in the future of the globalizing world? The very nature of community might be a problem in the postmodern world.

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<sup>81</sup>Banks, S. 2004. *Ethics, Accountability and the Social Professions*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan. p. 85.

<sup>82</sup>MacIntyre, A. 1988. *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* London: Duckworth.

<sup>83</sup>Op. cit., p. 30.

<sup>84</sup>Op. cit., p. 97 and 109. Note that MacIntyre uses the term ‘practical intelligence’ as a translation of *phronesis*. I am systematically using the term ‘practical wisdom’.

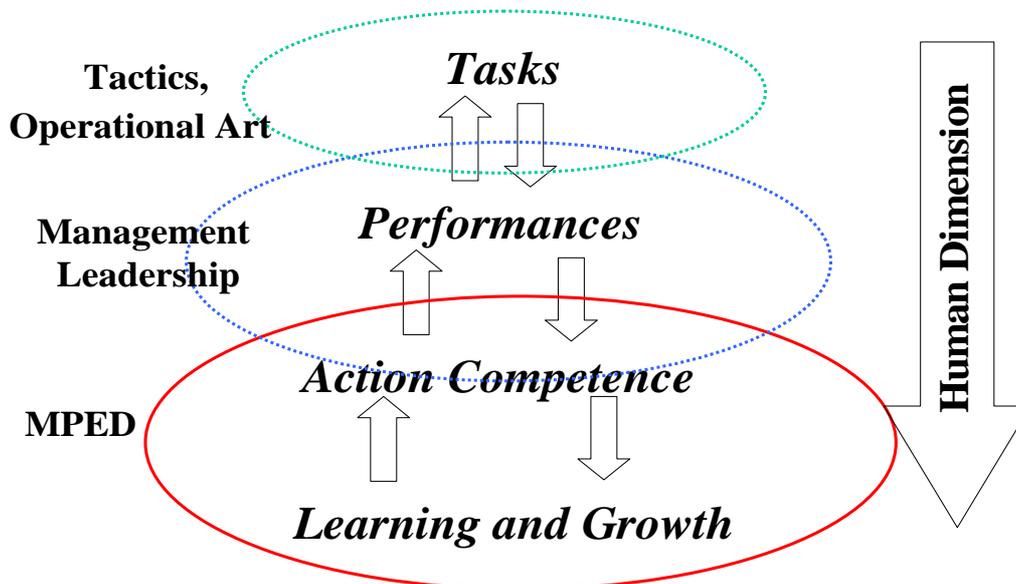
For instance, is it possible for the multinational and multicultural European Union to become a real community?

### **Inferences for Military Pedagogy as a Science**

We depart from the assumption that military pedagogy (MPED) inquires into the philosophies, cultures, visions, aims, methods, and technologies of military education and training as well as the learning and growth of people. A scientific approach appears necessary because of the everlasting need to further our understanding about the relations of military education and training regarding

- the changing nature of societies, cultures and ways of life
- the changing nature of crises, wars, battles, and peace operations
- the developments of weapon systems as well as the information and communication technologies.

In the overall context of action competence the position of MPED could be outlined as done in the graphic below:



The changing world of security and the postmodern situation of Western societies make it inevitable that our military establishments transform themselves in order to adapt to the new circumstances, tasks, and missions. According to the USAF transformation plan “people in the military should learn to think in new ways and to develop capabilities that make it possible to adapt quickly and effectively to new challenges and unexpected circumstances and situations”.

This generalizing statement is also true to the Western world of military and defense. In general terms, transformation in the military aims at a) transforming military culture; b) transforming organizations and organizational processes; and c) transforming the capabilities of individuals.

When the European Security Strategy of 2003 states that it is necessary “to transform our militaries into more flexible, mobile forces, and to enable them to address the new threats” and that a “... more effective use of resources is necessary”, the question arises what this means for the human and pedagogical levels of education and training.

In total, it boils down to what Edwin Micewski wrote in our joint publication on Ethics, Identity, and Soldiership: “In the contemporary world there is no place for training in the meaning of ‘creating marionettes’. Only a holistic approach in (leadership) education enables the student to adapt the content and transform it innovatively as demanded by the situation at hand”<sup>85</sup>.

Recently we have undertaken steps in Finland towards such a “holistic person” approach. The Finnish Defence Forces have based their conception of learning on the nature or essence of human being and knowledge. The logical consequence of which is the ascending sequence of a conception of *human being* (essence of human existence), a conception of *knowledge* (understanding the nature of knowledge and cognition), and a conception of *learning* (learning as coherent with the conception of human being and knowledge).

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<sup>85</sup>Edwin R. Micewski, Responsibilities of the Future Soldier and Military Leader – How is Military Ethics Today? in: Toiskallio, Jarmo (ed.), Identity, Ethics, and Soldiership, Finnish National Defence College, Helsinki, 2004, 21-31.

Accordingly, the basic competences of the personnel in the Finnish Defence Forces were developed so that a) a human being is a conscious, active and responsible person, who is valuable as such; b) knowledge is not a ready-made package, but it is constructed and developed all the time, with people producing knowledge in individual and collective activities, in practical life and in scientific work; and c) the basic aim of learning is to enhance the human growth as a person and as a member of a community.

The background of the holistic approach provides for the ontological frame of reference for Action Competence. The human being is an embodied subject comprising the dimensions *body* (physical existence), *mind* (mental existence), *spirit* (ethical existence), and *relations* (social existence). With respect to action competence the personal self of the individual is formed by his physical, psychical, ethical, and social identity. Carried further regarding the challenges for military pedagogy, the dimensions of education aiming at a holistic formation of a soldier involve his reason, his character, and his conscience.

## **Conclusion**

It is argued that there are four main categories of military expertise: military-technical, human development, political-social, and ethical-moral. The profession's educational priority is to inculcate virtues that support individual self-awareness and adaptation<sup>86</sup>.

With his large historical material from the cruelties of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Jonathan Glover goes into the core of ethics: "If we are serious about wanting to grow away from our barbaric past, this extra dimension [the moral identity and the moral resources of the individuals] has to be made central to ethics"<sup>87</sup>. In the environments of battles, especially in close combat, the moral resources of soldiers are heavily contested and they may be eroded. In the postmodern world it can be a difficult problem how to construct, support and defend the moral identity and the moral

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<sup>86</sup>Lacquement, R.A. 2003. Understanding professional expertise and jurisdiction. Military Review, March-April 2003.

<sup>87</sup> Glover, J. 2001, p. 42.

resources of soldiers. Without this ethical element we cannot talk about action competence. It might be impossible to see any other way to moral identity and moral resources – and to a high-level action competence – than self-education and self-improvement. We cannot be ‘trained’ to be ethical persons with a healthy moral identity and with strong moral resources.

Is it possible to train soldiers to become highly action competent? It seems clear that what is needed is not only training but education, empowerment, self-education and self-improvement. But will people in postmodern societies really be ready for that? We really have to give serious thought to who will join the armed forces, with what kind of values and motives, and with what capabilities.

The aim to become action competent puts heavy challenges not only on the shoulders of the individuals, but also on the cultures of military organizations. As Donald Neill writes, the armed forces must take “a long, hard look” at traditional military culture in order to take its beneficial aspect and cut away the harmful ones<sup>88</sup>. Altogether, the task of furthering action competence is a task of human growth. And that is why also our theoretical and scientific practices have to take ‘a long, hard look’ at the human being as a whole person in context.

One of the most demanding things is that the military personnel will have to thrive in a world and in conflicts that place more cognitive, cultural, social, physical, and ethical demands upon them than ever before. In other words, everybody must think in the modern battle space. But it is the idea of this article that thinking is not only a cognitive process. Thinking should be understood as the way of being of the whole person in context.

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<sup>88</sup> Neill 2000, p. 39.