

**Cecilia Wijnbladh, Swedish National Defence College, Stockholm**

## **Approaches to Ethics for Swedish Military Officers – A Reader in Ethics for Defense Personnel**

This beautiful man, depicted on the picture below, is called *Valor*, which means Bravery. He is a sandstone sculpture made around 1665 by a sculptor from Germany, H. Lichtenberg. The sculpture stands on the roof of the House of Nobility in Stockholm, and below, on the wall one can read the maxim: *ANIMIS ET FELICIBUS ARMIS* (Through courage and victorious arms). As we are speaking of military ethics, I thought it was suitable to introduce *Valor* to you.



*Photo by Hans Hammar skiöld*

The Supreme Commander asked the Swedish National Defence College a few years ago to produce study material on ethics for military officers that would also be suitable for other employees within the Swedish total defence system. The first edition (in Swedish) consists of a basic text, examples, a teacher's manual and a collection of separate articles. The English version is a revised edition of the original text. Its chief purpose is to stimulate discussion on ethical questions at different levels within the Defense Forces.

Ethics for officers is a natural part of the Defence College concerns. The work is based on the Supreme Commander's *Ethics for Swedish Military Officers – Guiding Stars*, written under the former Supreme Commander, General Owe Wiktorin, an Air Force officer.

Ethics primarily affects an individual's actions. The main purpose of promoting discussions of morality issues within the Defense Forces is to develop the individual officer's character and ethical conduct. This book is intended to promote an increased awareness of morality and encourage discussion within the Defense Forces, and that this awareness will not only develop each officer, but will, in the long term, assist in forming a common view on the most important ethical questions of defense within the officers corps.

### **What do Ethics Consist Of? – Terms in Ethics**

Everyday language includes a number of words linked with ethics: *ethics, ethical, good, interests, moral, morals, norm, evil, injustice, justice, values, value judgments*, etc. Like most

abstract words in everyday speech they are vague or ambiguous. Different people understand them differently, and they are not always used consistently.

The military profession's technical terms usually have a more precise meaning. It is necessary for professionals to be able to understand one another. In the same way, having common linguistic usage can help communication of professional ethical issues. The above-mentioned terms are needed when discussing ethical issues. Therefore some suggestions are given in the reader for increasing precision.

The meaning of "moral" can best be understood by first considering its opposite. If you say a person is *immoral* or *acts immorally*, you express a strong disapproval. You do not say this about trivial matters. Perhaps you do not like it when someone has unpolished shoes. You think the person is sloppy, tasteless, or the like, but hardly immoral. The word is too strong. In other contexts, "immoral" is too weak a word. Someone who hurts and torments others out of pure spite is more than immoral; that person is *malicious*.

The word "immoral" is more suitable to describe someone who profits at another's expense: forging a signature, selling an article under false premises, taking advantage of someone else's difficulties, etc. It clearly refers to situations where two or more people's interests conflict, especially when the actor's interests are involved. The word "interests" is used here to describe *needs, goals and aspirations, legal claims, wishes, etc.* – in other words, all that is important in a person's life.

### Professional Ethics

Conceptions about what one should, and should not do, can vary considerably between cultures. Within a community, people's influence upon one another decreases the differences between the individual's norms. However, the individual variations can be considerable.

Many occupational groups, for example the military, experience a need for a fairly uniform view of what is permissible in the practice of the profession, or as a representative for the professional group. There may also be need for an ongoing discussion of ethical issues within the profession. The reasons are manifold and include the following three:

- If complied with a set of professional ethics clarifies what expectations principals, clients, colleagues and the public may have of the practitioner.
- The practitioner may be faced with special moral problems seldom met by other people.
- The practitioner is often at an advantage compared with clients, etc., which places different demands upon him/her than in relations with peers.

The following two reasons are sometimes mentioned as well:

- Public confidence in a profession is promoted by good ethics.
- A uniform set of professional ethics strengthens the profession's status.

### What are Ethics for? – A Couple of Examples

As a military officer one has to make a number of decisions every day. As one gains experience, the decision-making process will usually go quickly. One will rarely get stuck and feel perplexed, but this will happen from time to time. If one never gets stuck, then it is possible that one is taking one's responsibilities too lightly.

The military officer's training program aims, among other things, at making the officer a better leader and decision-maker. One learns to manage a number of different kinds of situations of choice: personal, technical, administrative, etc. Hesitating in a choice situation can be attributed to not having enough knowledge. What rules apply? How should a certain rule be interpreted? What

will the consequences of my action (or non-action) be? How will these consequences be experienced by my subordinates, by my superiors, by those nearest to me, and by others?

In such a situation it is often possible to acquire the knowledge that is needed. However, what if time does not permit...? This is when acting in a state of uncertainty becomes necessary. If you are not used to making important decisions while experiencing doubt, then it will take more time to reach a decision than time available. Even if you know what you think you need to know, you can hesitate. In this case, it is probably because you are in a conflict situation.

There are many types of conflict. An order conflicts with a rule. A rule considered binding would lead to undesirable consequences. For instance, you wish to achieve an important military goal but fear that it will cost many lives. Is the goal worth the probable losses?

Some such conflicts represent *moral* problems. What this may mean is that moral problems arise in conflicts between moral *norms*. But conflicts between norms are only one part of what we perceive as moral problems. Many authors/thinkers prefer to characterize moral conflicts as value-conflicts. Many value-conflicts, however, lack a moral loading.

A norm does not necessarily have to be expressed in words. *Social norms* are often unspoken and are expressed through human behavior other than speech and writing (non-verbal communication such as facial expressions or body language, which can be very effective, I might add).

To acquire a set of ethics, however, is to adopt norms consciously. If one consciously adopts a norm one should preferably be able to explain why. Ethics therefore, is not only about norms for action, but also contains of how such norms can be explained.

**Cecilia Wijnblad,**  
M.A., Expert Consultant,  
National Defense College, Stockholm