

## **Ethics and Leadership Responsibility**

## ***Military Acting in the Spirit of Moral Obligations***

by Wolfgang Royl

### **The Characteristic of Soldierly Acting**

There are people who are fond of military collectibles, interested in military history or keeping up their memories of their time of service in the Army. Their perceptions of what makes a soldier stand out may even shape their own disposition: So in their life as civilian they do not take up unpleasant challenges which concern them; they behave straightforwardly in conflicts and keep their promises. 'Reliability' is one of the character traits they appreciate in others. Above all, such people have a positive attitude towards what first the Greek philosopher Platon called the cardinal virtues: Wisdom, bravery, prudence and justice. Immanuel Kant throws the bridge from these virtues to moral behavior:

"Virtue is the moral strength in fulfilling one's duty which should never become a habit but always emerge right from the beginning and genuinely from one's way of thinking."

However, a virtuous life does not only consist in moral reflections. Rather do parental education and the socializing effect of community life convey agreements on moral behavior on children and young people. When they are adult, they are supposed to have made these conventions their second nature. Such development can certainly be observed with individuals and groups alike. They adapt their behavior to the valid moral codex and are outraged whenever others fail to do so.

The more intensively someone has managed to internalize elements of virtuous behavior, the more will his morale be strengthened to meet actively any duties he has assumed. When speaking of the 'iron fulfillment of one's duties', his will is going to corroborate this moral attitude. This explicitly means that any duty will be fulfilled irrespective of one's own chance to survive. Kant's categorical imperative refers to situations in which one's own survival should, if need be, take second place to one's fulfillment of duties. The way in

which someone acts with determination and highest moral standards should form an appropriate basis for laws appropriate to exert a binding effect also on anyone else.

Reasonably enough, Kant still stipulates that the fulfillment of a duty "should never become a habit but emerge always right from the beginning and genuinely from one's way of thinking." The habit of educated people to quote, whenever the opportunity arises, one of the three versions of the 'Categorical Imperative' from the Grounding of the Metaphysics of Morals' has nothing to do with moral behavior as such. They rather show their mental ability to retrieve pieces from an existing knowledge base of philosophy. There may be a big difference between this repeated retrieval of philosophical knowledge and the actual moral behavior of someone who occasionally recapitulates Kant's famous statements in his eagerness to learn without making them a guideline for his practical life. But behaving dutifully, Kant says, must not become a habit. The acting individual should rather prepare himself always right from the beginning and genuinely for a moral conflict and consider this conflict to be a special situation, assess it according to the given circumstances and then decide. Any routine behavior in solving moral conflicts will consequently be ostracized, also in order to prevent moral acting from becoming rigorous and running the risk of getting inhuman.

The recollection to moral theory is particularly required with military acting in the light of incidents in the past: Innocent civilians were taken hostage and shot in revenge of guerrilla attacks. Military retaliation strikes on cities inflicted great losses on the civilian population. Prisoners of war were mistreated in gross violation of the Hague Convention on the Laws and Customs of War on Land and of the Geneva Convention.

The characteristic of military acting in combat compared to the use and abuse of violence in civilian life is due to the fact that military force is feasible to an immeasurably higher quality and extent and that it is indeed used in operations. To emphasize in a particular way the question about its moral relevance, military action will not as such be made the central topic of this paper but the "acting in the course of a

process". Therefore, in formulating this topic the term military 'acting' was intentionally preferred to military 'action'.

Emphasising "acting in the course of a process" is a special matter of concern also to the Finnish military educationalist Jarmo Toiskallio who is concentrating in his research studies on the acting in the armed forces. He has founded the "Research Centre for Action Competence, Identity and Ethics" at the Defense College in Helsinki with the aim to diagnose and assess processes of the cultural and organizational transformation in which the military, its organizations and soldiers find themselves today. The most remarkable characteristic of this research concept is its all-encompassing approach to military acting, the way the soldiers see themselves and the universal moral code. This working program is supported by the cooperation with other international representatives of the community of military educationalists. The integration of moral obligations into personality dynamics

To determine more closely the role moral obligations assume for the acting, a model interrelation has been used which Ajzen & Madden (1986) developed in their 'Theory of Planned Behavior'. The authors employed this theory to specify the conditions whose modification may influence observable behavior. They started with three predictors whose effectiveness was empirically examined by four criterion variables in a path-analysis. The value of the determined path coefficients indicates the constant positive influence of the selected variables on planned behavior. It is therefore true that observable behavior depends on certain psychological conditions that can individually be described. Influencing these determinants makes it possible to stabilize appropriate behavior or to initiate behavioral changes.

The moral obligations in conjunction with the normative and the personal beliefs determine the start point for an observable behavior. Whether or not they will influence this behavior depends decisively on the question how the respective individual will internalize such socio-cultural conditions. This happens when certain beliefs and obligations from the cultural stock take on the quality of subjective *norms*. Moral obligations are selected on the basis of requirements arising from one's

personal commitment to career and private life. However, they do not take full effect because this would disturb the individual's identity balance. So no individual can feel morally obliged to fight all the miseries in this world. This task would mentally stretch him too far. The complexity of deplorable moral circumstances will rather be reduced to what falls in the individual's own responsibility. The area of responsibility of a Federal Minister of Defense is wider, that of an infantryman comparably smaller. Depending on the respective official competence, offences against legally enacted moral obligations, e.g. observation of secrecy, are punished under the Civil Service Law while disregard of comradeship falls under military law.

Subjective norms come into being when the individual makes a binding selection from the total of *normative beliefs*, potential *moral obligations* and all his *personal beliefs*. Such binding selection can also be enforced by way of a military motive. The general Code of Conduct for the soldiers of the U.S. Army has been formulated in the psychologically meaningful form of an ego-statement that has a strong didactic effect:

"I will never forget that I am an American fighting man responsible for my actions, and dedicated to the principles which made my country free. I will trust in my God and in the United States of America."

And as a supplement:

"I am an American fighting man. I serve in the forces which guard my country and our way of life. I am prepared to give my life in their defense."

If an officer cadet in WestPoint is obliged to observe the rules: A cadet does not lie, he does not steal and does not defraud, and he will then also be expected to internalize this particular 'Code of Honor'. Everything that had already been of high moral significance in family, school and social life will become during the military training a cardinal condition for the cadet to be accepted and able to hold his own among the officer corps. The mental acceptance of, and agreement with, the prescribed military Code of Honor must therefore become part of the personal *attitudes* should essential prerequisites for an observable

behavior be met. To acquire an attitude means to be subsequently able to express subjective norms in language, body gestures and social appearance. If this really takes place depends on the determined *intention* as a performance of the will, aiming at letting personal attitude govern one's acting. The individual's self-observation takes over the task of *behavioral control* that will intervene whenever psychological dynamics start to weaken the supporting effectiveness of subjective norms for the individual's attitudes while the individual is about to implement an intention to act.

A look at the path analysis diagram makes clear that the role of the 'moral obligations' does not only depend on personal and normative beliefs. Moral obligations are part of the psychological dynamics of acting whose process development dictates whether or not moral behavior becomes effective. A wide range of personality variables therefore determines whether an unobserved soldier deserts his wounded comrade or tries to save him with a complete disregard of his own life. An equally great variety of influential options for military training and education can therefore be derived from these variables with which the trainee can be supported in the behavior-related self-regulation of his personality dynamics. If someone fulfills moral obligations on his own initiative, it is justified to conclude that the all other personality variables are consistently harmonized and take effect. As regards the personality of a soldier, this corresponds to the military-educational objective of 'integrity'. Behaving with integrity in a stress situation depends on the extent to which the soldier can rely on himself and his comrades on him. Behavioral deficiencies that become obvious as early as in the military training will usually not be permanently eliminated by threats or measures of punishment. It is more reasonable to determine in as much which personality variables should be strengthened to enable a permanent behavior with integrity. Ajzen & Madden's behavioral theory provides recommendations for diagnostic observation as well as questions to be asked in order to initiate an analysis of behavioral deficiencies in individual cases. The moral obligations that a soldier accepts for his acting can be recognized by his perceptions of morals, by his ideas of the behavior he thinks to be appropriate in military conflict situations. Putting these perceptions in

the linguistic Ego-form represents a method to enrich the contents of one's ethical conscience and concurrently to compare it with one's existing attitude towards moral obligations. The more responsible military operations become through the use of highly effective weapon systems, the more important will it be to teach valid moral perceptions and to convey their acceptance in a military-educational way. Immanuel Kant's statement of 1786: "Duty is the necessity to act out of respect for the moral law" (p.29) has until today retained the character of a supra-epochal and supra-institutional rule.

### **Embedding Military Acting into the Conscience**

The path analysis for the empirical examination of Ajzen & Madden's behavioral theory provides measures for the diagnosis and build-up of moral behavior with individually binding force for the military everyday life. Wildförster (1998) had already described this possibility in his "Education to Loyalty " with general validity for the educatee:

The model perception of the self-responsible planning of one's own behavior is suitable to formulate and pursue learning goals according to specific variables. So the educatee will reach a meta-level of reflection at which he himself is able to observe which behavioral pre-conditions (beliefs, moral obligations, attitudes, subjective norms) have already been met and which are still defective." (p.167)

Such development process of the military behavior *in actu* must still be structurally integrated into the soldier's personality if military leadership is to produce lasting results. This permanent integration requires that the educatee will accept moral obligations also after he has left the military, e.g. when he is to assume civilian responsibilities in the community.

The psychological location at which acting is subjected to moral control is the conscience. For reasons of simplicity and completeness, the psychoanalytic personality theory of Sigmund Freud is used to give a structured perception of the psychological composition of an individual. According to this theory, 'conscience' is a function of the Superego. It represents the behavioral rules and bans which the "Ego"

has internalized while encountering the outer world but also the behavioral norms that have developed during the interaction of the "Ego's" defense functions with the experiences within the psychological organization. The conscience reacts to the difference between good and bad, between unjust and fair, between responsible and negligent. As the "clear conscience" it confirms the compliance with moral obligations. The soldier has bound himself to such obligations by his vow to serve loyally and to bravely defend his nation.

The psychoanalytic perception of the function of the Ego implies that the stressing psychological tension between high demands imposed by the outer world and the 'Ego' exposed to them is set off by the identification with discrepant factual references and ideals. Identifying oneself with them averts external moral demands. The psychological representation of moral obligations with which the individual identifies himself is incorporated into the superego and there subjected to the conscience function's control.

From the psychoanalytic view, the superego possesses also the so-called "Ego-ideal". This is the essence of the optimal perception of how an individual desires to be. A soldier who feels committed to his profession, comrades, superiors, nation and the allies shows, so to speak, a reaction of his "ego" to his 'soldierly' superego. Fulfilling moral obligations to the best possible extent, imagining how one should behave to be a good soldier is psychologically anchored in the 'Ego-ideal'.

This personality theory, which outlines the hierarchical instances of the Superego, Ego and Id, complements very usefully Ajzen & Madden's behavioral theory in the appropriate assessment of the importance of the example-setting function of a superior. The behavior of an officer should be largely impeccable. This is a moral demand that is made in vain as long as there are no examples for the examples. A dead-drunk superior dragged out by his aide to his quarters after a stag party in the casino loses his example-setting function for everyone who happened to watch or hear of this incident. To activate the defense mechanism of identification, the soldiers must experience the personal distance to his

superior who meets higher demands in word and deed and therefore becomes an example for his subordinates. Placing oneself par with subordinates must therefore alternate with establishing a personal distance to one's subordinates. So the officer has got the moral obligation to withdraw as an individual from his subordinates frequently during the process of military acting. He must keep a stable balance between comradeship and dangerous mission accomplishment even for the case that he must give a binding order while anticipating that whoever has to follow this order will risk his life.

### **Consequences for Soldier's Education and Training**

The moral commitment to one's nation, Army and own troops is mandatory for all military status groups. Such an internalized obligation represents at the same time a defense against the temptation to bully subordinates for any reason whatsoever or to put comrades under pressure for selfish motives. As soon as aggressive pulses from the "Id" threaten to break through the instinct barrier, it is the task of the Ego-instance to keep this pressure to act under control with the support of the conscience. To enable this control successfully, the military leadership is required rather to foster the development of the ego-strength as a psychological function of the soldier's personality than to criticize the self-assured manners of subordinates. So the means and methods of military leadership include the clearly expressed interest in the personality development of the soldier, the informal praise by the superior, the formal appreciation of outstanding performances on duty. If this is done before the background of the behavioral theory of Ajzen & Madden in conjunction with the theory of hierarchical instances in psychoanalysis, it is possible to influence directly the variables and instances of the subordinate's personality by the individual concern of the superior, by commendations and moral appeals. The military everyday life and, in particular, operations under UN mandate offer an abundance of relevant opportunities. The way U.S. Army regulations are designed and laid out renders helpful support to the military leadership as regards the development process of reasonable behavior and the fine finishing of the personality structure.

A relevant example is given by an extract from Field Manual 100-122 under the headline "We the People":

"The American people rightly look to their military leaders not only to be skilled in the technical aspects of the profession of arms, but to be men of integrity." (p. 22)

The subsequent comments to "Beliefs, Values, and Norms" are complemented by describing some cases of exemplary behavior through which soldiers stood out in the course of combat actions. Illustrating details of outstanding soldierly behavior are subsequently subsumed under four elements of professional army ethics: Loyalty, duty, selfless service and integrity. (p.29)

The selfless service is explained as follows:

"You may have to put the nation's welfare and mission accomplishment ahead of the personal safety of you and your troops. You must resist the temptation to put self-gain, personal advantage, and self-interest ahead of what is best for the nation, the Army, or your unit. Selfless service is necessary to develop teamwork, and military service demands the willingness to sacrifice."

In a similar way the U.S. Army is advertising the revival of soldierly values under the Internet address [GoArmy.com](http://GoArmy.com). Members of the generation in Western Germany who had been politically re-educated after World War II by the military governments of the occupation forces as well as members of the generation of 1968, whose slogan had been "Rather red than dead" in the face of a possible military confrontation with the Soviet Union, would have reacted with strong reservation, if not with complete disapproval to such texts which so strongly appeal to the morale obligations and the defense readiness of a soldier. Meanwhile, however, the opposition within the German Armed Forces against out-of-area missions has been overcome. A military-political development can be seen at the horizon leading to the conversion of the German conscript army into a professional army. The fear that in this case only soldiers with a comparably minor degree of education might be recruited will confront the officer corps with similar leadership tasks that have already become quite usual in the U.S. and

other professional armies. The commitment of superiors to this educational work will then become a specific moral obligation that would also require an extended military competence to act and a personnel increase in the officer corps.

## **Conclusion**

Considering Jarmo Toiskallio's (2002) central theme of the possible modification of soldiers by implanting military-technological features into their bodies to produce 'cyborgs', it is about time to recall the moral dimension of soldierly acting. It is recognizable in reality and still continuously related to ethics and morals. The intent to interrelate military acting with the spirit of moral obligations meets the historic development and the status quo of the occidental culture. Reputed scientists such as Hans Küng (1997) show their commitment to raising peace as the central motive in a globalized world, a motive which is to be stabilized by the formulation and public promotion of a world ethos. In accord with this, the military educationalists support theories of the medium-range soldier as a counter-pole to the apocalyptic vision of military-technological developments. Reportedly it had already been possible in the second war against the Iraq to precisely target unmanned airborne vehicles (drones) remotely from operation centers in the U.S. (Nevada).

In applying Ajzen und Madden's theory of planned behavior to the analysis and conveyance of moral behavior it has been proposed that this theory could provide the military-educational acting in the troops with an instrument for the development of, but also for the deficiency diagnosis in, soldierly acting. Concurrently, by applying the psychoanalytic theory of instances it has been suggested how moral competences, in particular the conveyance and acceptance of moral obligations towards one's own nation and the Western defense alliance, should be embedded into the psychological organization of the soldiers with regard to his acting. The concrete development work on futuristic weapon systems makes it necessary to deal also with the moral development of the experts and their contractors who are equipping the military with doomsday weapons of ever increasing efficiency. In

contrast, the danger can actually be neglected, which the well-known military sociologist Charles Moskos has envisaged, that the military is bound to degenerate owing to the increasing employment of civilian service providers in the troops.

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