The Morality of Obligation and Aspiration: Towards a Concept of Exemplary Military Ethics and Leadership

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A fundamental tension in military ethics is not just how to prevent unethical behavior, but also how to inspire supererogatory conduct “above and beyond the call of duty.” In this article, we provide a conceptual analysis and integrative framework for understanding the dynamics of military ethics based on two contrasting but complementary moralities—moralities of obligation and aspiration; and two types of moral motivation—rule-following and identity-conferring. We then provide analysis of the exemplary leadership required to inform and inspire military members to realize the aspirations embedded in an exemplary military ethic.

The preeminent military task, and what separates [the military profession] from all other occupations, is that soldiers are routinely prepared to kill . . . in addition to killing and preparing to kill, the soldier has two other principal duties . . . some soldiers die and, when they are not dying, they must be preparing to die.

—James H. Toner, True Faith and Allegiance: The Burden of Military Ethic

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Militaries are certainly called to do many things, from disaster relief to rebuilding civilian infrastructure, but these are neither why professional militaries exist nor their core competencies. As noted in the epigraph, what makes militaries distinct is the lethality of their profession. Their primary purpose is to project and employ force under the direction of nation states in order to defend their peoples or their rights and interests (Abbott, 2002; Snider & Matthews, 2002). Given the lethality inherent in its primary purpose, a military force requires an exemplary ethic to guide the conduct of its members, as well as exemplary leadership to embody and enforce that ethic (Chadwick, 1998). If a military suffers under an inadequate ethic or inadequate leadership, it risks losing moral legitimacy, with ensuing adverse consequences not only for the military and its members, but for the nation that expects and depends on its military to fight and win its wars. Such was arguably the case for the U.S. military in Vietnam.

A military ethic or, more generally, a professional ethic, typically serves two purposes: from a negative perspective, it constitutes a set of legalistic restrictions that constrain the conduct of its members; from a positive perspective, it provides an assurance to the military’s stakeholders, namely the nation it serves, that its members will adhere to certain ethical standards (Matthews, 1991). Both of these purposes operate under the implicit assumption that absent the constraints codified in an ethic, the conduct of military members will tend to fall beneath acceptable moral standards. An ethic, then, once internalized, is intended to provide a moral floor for the conduct of military professionals. Our position is that such an approach to military ethics is inadequate for the moral tensions and moral complexity inherent in military operations, which often demand supererogatory conduct from military members. Ethical issues in combat rarely have clear-cut answers. Multiple competing values and loyalties (e.g., self-preservation, protection of unit members, protection of noncombatants, personal values, and organizational and unit values) must be assessed and adjudicated by individuals. Sometimes these situations require military members to go “above and beyond” the call of duty. In the face of such demands, we propose that an ethic based on constraining the conduct of military members is necessary but insufficient to guide ethical behavior. Instead, we propose that an ethic must embody the moral aspirations of the military, typically understood as traditional martial virtue and honor, in order to inspire military professionals toward supererogatory conduct.

The purpose of this article is to examine (a) what constitutes an exemplary military ethic based on honor and moral aspiration as opposed to legalistic obligation, and (b) how military leaders can establish and enforce that ethic in individuals and units when it counts most, in combat or other extreme contexts. We focus our analysis on military ethics and leadership at the individual level. We define a military ethic as a set of shared explicit and implicit moral values and principles intended to guide the conduct of military professionals in the performance of their duties. In the next section we further describe the basis for a military ethic and the resulting
tensions faced by military members. We then provide in later sections a model of an exemplary ethic and the role of leadership in its creation and sustainment.

**THE TENSIONS INHERENT IN MILITARY ETHICS**

Military ethics are generally distinguished by two levels of moral discourse: *jus ad bellum*, which pertains to the morality of engaging in a particular conflict, including the strategic-level public policy regarding the Justifications for war; and *jus in bello*, which pertains to the conduct of the combatants themselves once forces are engaged, including things such as the laws of armed conflict and codes of conduct (Walzer, 1977). In a democratic society, *jus ad bellum* is largely the purview of political officials who send their militaries into conflict. *Jus in bello* has always been about the warrior’s ethos—the warrior’s moral character and the code by which he or she conducts actions in defense of the nation, the honorable moral principles and ideals that military professionals embody and that guide and inspire the conduct of warriors in combat (Walzer, 1977). From a *jus in bello* perspective, the fundamental issue in military ethics is not just how to constrain the conduct of military professionals to prevent unethical behavior, for example, law of war violations, but also how to inspire the conduct of military professionals toward supererogatory behavior. This latter objective is arguably the more problematic of the two and constitutes the focus of this analysis.

Central to this latter objective of cultivating supererogatory behavior is the problem of how to make the preeminent military task—killing and dying—morally redeeming both for those who must undertake the task and for the society they serve. Every activity, every practice, every occupation or profession must aim at some good. At the individual level, “goods” are personal benefits obtainable through a commitment to a particular vocation, and excellence achieved in the practice of that vocation. Goods constitute reasonable benefits one could wish to have as a member of an occupation, and they are indicators of socially valued contribution (MacIntyre, 2007). For a military to sustain itself and remain vital, its members must obtain satisfactory intrinsic and extrinsic goods from their service. Yet, as lethality is the occupational core of the military profession, this can be morally problematic, both for the individual military professional and the society he or she serves.

From the perspective of military professionals, what is the personal good to be found in the killing and dying that they are asked to undertake? Combat is an irregular activity, in which the negative experiences considerably outweigh the positive, both in frequency and potency. Very few are able to sustain prolonged exposure to combat without psychological deterioration and eventually breakdown (Belenky, Noy, & Soloman, 1985; Ingraham & Manning, 1980; Marshall, 1978). Countless examples testify to the moral regression that occurs
after prolonged exposure to the adversity of combat. Homer’s *Iliad* is the first in the Western tradition to capture both the compelling desire for honor and glory as well as the wrath that afflicts warriors. More recently, in *A Rumor of War*, U.S. Marine Lieutenant Phillip Caputo (1977, p. 229) wrote that, after he and his troops arrived in Vietnam, their morals wore away as did the bluing on their rifles. He watched his men degenerate into thuggery, burning the wrong villages and killing the wrong people. Jonathan Shay (1994), in his book *Achilles in Vietnam*, described a similar shrinking of the moral horizon and undoing of character among the many veterans he counseled as a staff psychiatrist in the Department of Veterans Affairs. More recent books, such as Frederick’s (2010) *Blackhearts*, describe “one platoon’s descent into madness” in Iraq, culminating in the rape of a 14-year old Iraqi girl and the cold-blooded execution of her family. One of the perpetrators of this crime explained his actions by stating that the war in Iraq had made him angry and mean. Far more citations and examples could be given, but the point should be clear: for the individual military professional, combat is an activity in which the “bads” tend to outweigh the “goods.”

From the perspective of civil society, how does it find justification for and sanction the killing and dying military professionals undertake on its behalf? The history of warfare is headlined with stories of the heroic deeds of honorable warriors, but it is also replete with a legacy of marauding bands of men who “rape, kill, pillage, and burn” and otherwise bring destruction and death upon the defenseless. Hobbes called these latter forms of warriors “worms in the intestines of the state” (Hobbes, 1972, p. 375; cited in Coker, 2007, p. 49). Consequently, society’s approach to military ethics has traditionally been to view war as an unmitigated “bad” that must be restricted if not eliminated. Further, citizens may believe that military professionals ought not to derive “goods” from warfighting, as illustrated by the backlash U.S. Marine Corps Lieutenant General James Mattis received, both from the public and from military professionals, for his statement that “actually, it’s a lot of fun to fight. You know, it’s a hell of a hoot... It’s fun to shoot some people. I’ll be right upfront with you, I like brawling” (Schmitt, 2005). It seems that rather than deriving any personal satisfaction from war, society expects military professionals to have an aversion to it and to actively work toward its prevention and elimination. Coker (2007, p. 9) summarizes society’s perspective on military ethics this way:

[Military professionals] these days are expected to be like oncologists, whose professional specialty is studying cancer and whose professional vocation is fighting it. A soldier’s profession may be fighting, but his vocation, society believes, should be to combat war, not glory in it.

This discussion brings into sharper relief the fundamental tension embedded in military ethics. Stated succinctly, how can military members effectively perform and derive appropriate satisfaction from the preeminent military task—killing and
dying—while keeping their actions aligned with the values of the society it serves, particularly during prolonged conflict? Resolving this tension is the work of an exemplary military ethic and leadership.

A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF AN EXEMPLARY MILITARY ETHIC

A military ethic, once internalized, serves as a means of individual and collective motivation and self-control. It consists of an explicitly or implicitly articulated set of moral principles, values, and behavioral standards to guide and govern the conduct and performance of members of the military. One of the factors that make an ethic effective is that it possesses what sociologists call structural fitness (Allan, 2006); that is, it must embody the principles, values, and standards of the organization, but it also must be responsive to the demands of the complex and unstable environment in which military members operate. In this section, we examine the structural properties of an exemplary military ethic. We analyze two underlying moral logics—a morality of obligation and a morality of aspiration; and we analyze two kinds of combat motivation—rule following and identity conferring. We then combine these into an integrative conceptual framework that forms the basis for understanding military ethics and leadership.

Toward an Exemplary Ethic

A common approach to analyzing military ethics focuses on the social norms that encourage right and inhibit wrong behavior (Weaver & Trevino, 1994). An alternative conception redirects attention to the moral agent and the virtues he or she exhibits. This tradition in military ethics has its roots in Aristotle and goes as far back as Homer (MacIntyre, 2007). It theorizes ethics in terms of the development of character and virtue rather than just behavioral compliance with social norms. The shift in focus reflects the assumption that it is the constitution of the person that ultimately drives his or her behavior (Blasi, 1980; Verplanken & Holland, 2002).

This character-based approach to military ethics, rather than constraining the conduct of military professionals, seeks to inspire the conduct of military professionals. And rather than drawing from societal norms of ethical conduct external to the military profession, for example, concern for human rights, a character-based approach appeals to the time-honored martial virtues internal to the military vocation, for example, honor, courage, patriotism, sacrifice, and so on. These virtues when internalized become the social-psychological mechanisms that infuse an otherwise morally reprehensible phenomenon (killing and dying) with morally redeeming qualities, for both the individual military member and the society he or she serves (Snider, Oh, & Toner, 2010). This moral meaning is codified in an ethic and embedded in an ethos that enables military professionals
to find morally praiseworthy satisfaction and personal success in their chosen vocation. It gives military members a moral foundation for the derivation of appropriate goods—the sense of recognition and respect by fellow professionals as someone who honors their craft by preserving its most noble standards in the adversity of combat (MacIntyre, 2007). Thus, in acquiring the virtues of the profession, military professionals derive appropriate satisfaction and “goods” from the military way of life.

Attending to matters of virtue and moral agency inherent in the character-based approach to military ethics directs our attention to the moral identity or self-concept of moral agents and, in turn, to leadership that influences moral self-identity (Aquino & Reed, 2002; Hannah & Avolio, 2010). The leadership focus is thus not merely about effecting behavioral compliance with ethical norms, principles, or rules (Treviño, Brown, & Pincus-Hartman, 2003), but about effecting developmental change in which the virtues of the vocation are internalized as part of one’s moral identity (Blasi, 1980). This developmental change is achieved in part by changing the moralities internalized by the individual. By morality we refer to the moral values and principles of conduct that are internalized by the individual’s conscience (Matthews, 1991; Selznick, 1992). These moral values and principles are embedded in and derived from the culture in which the individual is embedded. They involve evaluative judgments about what is morally praiseworthy and blameworthy and influence the individual’s understanding of what is morally significant. These moralities comprise the underlying moral structure of a military ethic and fall into two broad categories: obligation and aspiration (Fuller, 1969).

Two Moralities Underlying Military Ethics: Obligation and Aspiration

In his essay on the morality of the law, Fuller (1969) distinguished between two types of moralities: a morality of aspiration and a morality of duty, or what we refer to as a morality of obligation. Here, we extend this analysis to the military domain to develop a framework for a military ethic that informs and inspires the wills of military members. This conceptualization is consistent with the moral psychology findings of Janoff-Bulman, Sheikh, and Hepp (2009), who found that some individuals demonstrate a prescriptive orientation to morality (avoid doing bad), while others have a prescriptive morality (seek to do good). Consistent with these findings, Ryan and Riordan (2000) showed that certain people have an orientation in which they seek to avoid blame by refraining from immoral actions, while others seek to earn praise through taking moral action.

**Morality of Obligation: The Moral Floor**

The morality of obligation lays down the basic rules necessary for the effective functioning of a collective enterprise. It specifically identifies those actions that cause harm or otherwise take away from the effective functioning of the organization. The morality of obligation is the morality of the Old Testament,
the Ten Commandments, and the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ), as well as various other legalistic prescriptions. It speaks in terms of “thou shalt not” “disobey a lawful order,” and less frequently of “thou shalt.” It does not condemn military members for failing to perform supererogatory deeds or achieve extraordinary results; instead, it condemns them for failing to respect the basic requirements of being a military professional. The morality of obligation is thus based on the potential condemnation from one’s social group (Jones & Ryan, 1997).

Morality of Aspiration: The Moral Ceiling

Whereas the morality of obligation starts at the bottom of minimally acceptable human achievement, the morality of aspiration starts at the top. It identifies and praises as excellences those qualities that contribute to the effective functioning of the group and the full realization of its ideals. The morality of aspiration is what is intended by character and virtue (Hannah & Avolio, in press); it is a morality of a “good soldier,” of excellence of character, of the fullest realization of martial virtue in the military context—honor, courage, sacrifice, and so on. In a morality of aspiration, there may be overtones of obligation, but these are usually muted. Instead of ideas of right and wrong, of legal obligation and moral duty, the morality of aspiration entails the conception of good and bad, of praiseworthy conduct, conduct such as befits a military professional performing at his honorable best. From this perspective, a member might fail to realize his fullest capabilities; as a professional, he might be found wanting—cowardly instead of courageous, ignoble instead of noble; but in such cases he is condemned for failure, not for being recreant to duty; for shortcoming, not for wrongdoing (Fuller, 1969).

Such a powerful form of character has been called ethos, which Hannah and Avolio (in press) defined as “Extreme levels of strength of character required to generate and sustain extra-ethical virtuous behavior under conditions of high moral intensity where personal risk or sacrifice is required in the service of others.” Hannah, Campbell, and Matthews (2010) further stated that ethos provides the inner strength compelling an individual to “willingly endure the cognitive, emotional, and physical hardships normally associated with dangerous contexts—and if ultimately needed—to risk physical injury or death; all with little extrinsic reward” (p. 180). Once inculcated, such strong character may provide affective and perhaps even a physiological basis for moral motivation, as is suggested in emerging research on embodied cognitions (e.g., Lord & Shondrick, in press; Niedenthal, Winkielman, Mondillon, & Vermeulen, 2009). That is, to act in line with one’s moral aspirations may become visceral, a felt requirement.

Fuller (1969) draws on a metaphor used by Adam Smith in his Theory of Moral Sentiments to clarify the distinction between the two moralities and show how they complement each other: the morality of obligation “may be compared to the rules of grammar” (Smith, 1997, p. 194); the morality of aspiration “to the rules which critics lay down for the attainment of what is sublime and elegant
in composition” (Smith, 1997, p. 194). The rules of grammar prescribe what is requisite to preserve language as an instrument of communication, just as the rules of a morality of duty prescribe what is necessary for daily conduct as a soldier. Like the principles of a morality of aspiration, the principles of good writing “are loose, vague, and indeterminate, and present us rather with a general idea of the perfection we ought to aim at, than afford us any certain and infallible directions of acquiring it” (Smith, 1997, p. 194).

Extending Fuller’s analysis, we propose that the structure of an exemplary military ethic must incorporate both moralities and be reinforced through leadership. Such an ethic would include military virtues that would teach its professionals what kinds of action would gain them merit and honor; and it would also include legal and moral offenses that would teach them what kinds of action would be regarded not simply as wrong, but as intolerable (MacIntyre, 2007). The U.S. Army, for example, has elements of these moralities codified in diverse artifacts such as the Seven Army Values and Warrior’s Ethos, pointing toward their highest aspirations and ideals; and the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ) and other laws and regulations delineating the hard moral floor beneath which soldiers must not fall.

Moral Continuum Separating Obligation and Aspiration

As the full range of moral issues involved in military ethics is considered, one can conceptualize a kind of continuum that begins at the bottom with the most egregious law of war violations; proceeds upwards to basic demands of being a military professional, for example, being present at his or her appointed place of duty; and then extends up to the highest reaches of military aspiration, for example, the Medal of Honor, which is awarded for “extraordinary heroism and conspicuous gallantry . . . above and beyond the call of duty.” Somewhere along this continuum there is a point where the obligations of duty leave off and the challenge of virtue begins. Determining where duty/obligation ought to leave off and the challenge of honor/aspiration begin may be one of the most difficult tasks in crafting an ethic, yet it is critical to the effective functioning of a social system. To better appreciate the significance of the relationship between these moralities, we introduce another distinction between two kinds of moral motivation: rule following and identity conferring.

Two Kinds of Moral Motivation: Rule Following and Identity Conferring

Research has shown that ethical judgments are only weakly related to actual ethical behavior (Bebeau, 2002; Blasi, 1980; Treviño & Youngblood, 1990). This highlights the important role of moral motivation (or what has been called moral conation, the impetus to act in line with one’s judgments) in bridging this gap (Hannah, Avolio, & May, 2011). Moral motivation entails processes geared toward
gaining commitment to a given moral action and the weight assigned to specific moral values over other values (Hannah & Avolio, 2010). The totality of what motivates military members in combat to behave ethically is the subject of a body of research that is beyond the scope of the present article. For present purposes, we focus our attention on analyzing the motivational dynamics associated with the two moralities identified previously—obligation and aspiration. We classify moral motivation into two broad categories: rule following and identity conferring (Kekes, 1984).

**Rule Following**

Rule following is essentially associated with extrinsic motivation and negative feedback models of self-regulation (Bandura & Locke, 2003). The motivational logic of rule following consists in minimizing discrepancies between behavior and the prescriptions of the morality of obligation. It entails motivation to comply with norms, rules, or standards in order to maintain social approval or avoid punishment (Jones & Ryan, 1997; Treviño & Youngblood, 1990). In this respect, it is akin to law-abidingness: to do or not to do what the rules or social norms prescribe or prohibit; to behave appropriately according to obligation and duty. Knowledge of the relevant rules or norms is all that is necessary and sufficient for judging whether the conduct conforms to prescription. This knowledge is not hard to obtain; militaries generally inculcate it upon entry into the military in basic training. It serves the vital purpose of familiarizing entry-level members of the military to the rules and principles governing the conduct of military members.

**Identity Conferring**

Identity conferring is essentially associated with intrinsic motivation and positive feed-forward models of self-challenge and self-efficacy (Bandura & Locke, 2003). It is based on the assumption that people are not primarily motivated by reactive discrepancy reduction as in rule-following. Rather, by setting challenging goals and performance standards and estimating what it will take to achieve those goals and standards, they motivate and guide themselves through proactive control. Then, once those goals and standards have been attained, those with high perceived self-efficacy in turn set new and higher goals and standards for themselves (Bandura & Cervone, 1983; Bandura & Locke, 2003).

In identity-conferring motivation, the “goal” or “standard” pertains to the realization of one’s ideal or possible self (Lord & Brown, 2004), as informed and inspired by the normative standards of the group that are embedded in the morality of aspiration. It is through identification with and internalization of these normative standards of the group that identity-conferring motivation becomes effective. Once inculcated and made central to the individual’s identity, such morality evokes strong motivational influence to act in line with one’s
own self-concept (Blasi, 1980; Verplanken & Holland, 2002). Military members conduct themselves ethically according to identity-conferring motivation (a) if they act based on their internalized sense of responsibility, and (b) if their motive for conducting themselves according to it is based on desire to maintain consistency with their moral identity. March and Weil (2005, p. 86) provide a useful description of the logic underlying identity-conferring motivation:

Identity can also form a basis of action—a sense of one’s self and the obligations associated with it. The motivational logic of identity consists in acting according to one’s own concept of oneself. Action is no longer justified by its consequences, by what one can expect from it. Rather, it is justified on the basis of appropriateness or consistency with a concept of ideals and identity and what it means to realize the ideals of one’s identity.

Identity-conferring motivation is deep in the sense that it is connected with what a military member is and aspires to be—the current and possible self (Lord & Brown, 2004). Identity-conferring motivation develops over the course of a military professional’s career through a combination of processes including social learning, social identity, and leader role-modeling processes (to be discussed in more detail later). Huntington notes that “people who act the same way over a long period of time tend to develop distinctive and persistent habits of thought” (Huntington, 2003, p. 61). When an individual joins the military and more specifically a particular combat unit, after learning the norms of the organization, he or she likely begins to familiarize him- or herself with its habits of thought, its feeling and behavior, its customs and mores, as well as its traditions. Over time as the individual comes to appreciate and respect the norms of the organization, he or she is likely to internalize and incorporate them as part of his or her social, and eventually, personal identity. The decisive step may come when the individual recognizes what is expected of him or her by others and firmly identifies with the other members of the organization. At this point the military member likely begins to want to live in his or her colleagues’ esteem and governs his or her conduct accordingly (Coker, 2007; Selznick, 1992; Snider et al., 2010). At this point, the individual has internalized the cultural ethos of the organization to which the individual belongs and can begin to form a sense of psychological ownership or responsibility over his or her own moral actions and those of others in the organization (Hannah et al., 2011). This is critical to generating moral action. Indeed, Kohlberg and Candee (1984) stated that a sense of responsibility must first be formed before people will initiate dedicated moral action.

The Primacy Identity-Conferring Motivation

Conduct motivated by identity can give rise to rule-following conduct, but we cannot infer from rule-following conduct that it is motivated by identification with the
norms of the organization. Rule-following conduct may be hypocritical; identity-conferring conduct cannot be. Identity-conferring motivation not only sponsors the “right” ethical conduct, it motivates it for the “right” reasons (Kekes, 1984). This becomes more important when the right or needed conduct is not obligatory, when leaders are not there to supervise and enforce right conduct, or when conduct “beyond the call of duty” is needed (Hannah & Avolio, in press). To illustrate, consider the following hypothetical scenarios.

Scenario 1: The Call of Duty

Two military members are taking effective fire from enemy insurgents in a village. These insurgents, however, have embedded themselves in houses among civilians as a protective shield. The military personnel confront this situation and must decide whether to shoot and risk killing the civilians or not to shoot and let the insurgents escape and live to fight another day.

- Military member 1 is a rule follower; he has not internalized the ethic of the vocation. He decides not to shoot to avoid punishment that would result if he killed a civilian.
- Military member 2 conducts himself in an identity-conferring manner; he has internalized the ethic of his vocation. He decides not to shoot because that’s what a good soldier—honorable and praiseworthy—would do.

Scenario 2: Above and Beyond the Call of Duty

Enemy insurgents ambush a military unit on patrol near a village. Two civilians—a teenage boy and his younger brother—are caught in the cross-fire. Two military members are near the two civilians and, at some mortal risk, could move to them and shield them from the insurgent fire. This conduct is not obligatory—neither is obligated to risk his life for the civilians; it would constitute conduct “above and beyond the call of duty”—that is, supererogatory conduct.

- Member 1, the rule-following member, does not act to protect the civilians because he values his life more than theirs, and the rules do not require him to risk his life for them.
- Member 2, the identity-conferring member, risks his life to protect the civilians because that’s what good, praiseworthy, and honorable members do according to his military’s ethic.

These scenarios are simplified but sufficient to illustrate the primacy of identity-conferring motivation and the morality of aspiration that supports it. In scenario 1, there is no observable difference between the two members’ conduct, though their underlying motivations are very different. Nonetheless, for both rule-following and identity-conferring reasons, both exercised what we would
probably consider appropriate moral restraint. In scenario 2, there are observable differences between the two members’ conduct, and the different underlying motivations account for it. The supererogatory conduct of member 2 is motivated because he \textit{is} and \textit{aspires} to be a good, honorable, and praiseworthy military professional. Member 1 lacks this identity-conferring motivation and consequently does not engage in supererogatory conduct; and the noncombatants, his comrades, and the military are deprived of this praiseworthy and necessary dimension of military service called \textit{sacrifice}.

In Figure 1, we depict how the two moralities and the two forms of motivation are related and may be complementary. A key point to note, however, is that identity-conferring motivation covers both moral domains—the morality of obligation and the morality of aspiration; rule-following motivation only covers the morality of obligation and does not motivate supererogatory conduct. Given the historical significance to military effectiveness of conduct “above and beyond the call of duty,” the preceding analysis suggests that while rule-following motivation based on a morality of obligation is a necessary baseline for an effective military ethic, an exemplary ethic must also inform and motivate identity-conferring conduct based on a morality of aspiration.

**MILITARY LEADERSHIP AND IDENTITY-CONFERRED MORAL MOTIVATION**

Due to the morally laden nature of the military context, formal leaders as well as informal leaders in groups/units can be important factors in bolstering morality,
or conversely, if not adequately morally developed themselves, immorality. Specifically, leadership can influence both morality of obligation and morality of aspiration through social learning, social identity, and role-modeling processes.

Leadership and the Morality of Obligation

Leaders and groups develop collective norms for expected behavior, which then guide the behavior of others (Power et al., 1989; Selznick, 1992). Such norms can be reinforced through ethical culture in which leaders set conditions such that ethical behavior is rewarded and unethical behavior is punished, as well as by creating normative and informational (i.e., communications, symbols, and rituals) pressures to align ethical behaviors to group norms (Brown, Treviño, & Harrison, 2005; Treviño, Weaver, & Reynolds, 2006). These normative and informational influences make groups powerful instruments of social influence by clarifying to members what their moral obligations are and what behaviors are held in esteem by the group, as well as what behaviors are unacceptable (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978). As military units normally have well-organized socialization processes, we expect these normative and informational influences to be especially powerful (Jans, 2002).

By establishing strong normative and informational influences, leaders also set the conditions for group members to reinforce each others’ ethical behaviors. Individuals in groups can influence each other through connecting events called “double interacts,” in which individual A’s display of moral behavior influences individual B’s behavior, such as to align B’s behavior with the group’s moral obligations. Then through B’s display of socially sanctioned behavior, individual A is influenced in return, reinforcing A’s continued ethical behavior. Morgeson and Hofmann (1999, p. 252) described that over time these double interactions serve as “the basic building block upon which all larger collective structures are composed.” Through initiating and sustaining these reciprocal processes, leaders can reinforce the salience of moral obligations in the unit, and thereby the ethical behaviors of members over time.

These social norms operate through social learning, in which group members learn cognitive scripts for expected actions (Hofmann & Jones, 2005). As new members enter the group, these collective scripts are then taught to new members as the correct way to act, perpetuating and reinforcing the group’s moral obligations over time (Hinds & Mortensen, 2005). Relevant to the military context, for example, groups establish norms for what constitutes courageous behaviors that are expected to be displayed by group members (Schwan, 2004). Unit members seek to align their behaviors with these expectations in order to be like other team members, which, based on social identity theory (Hogg & Abrams, 1988), would result in higher levels of self-esteem, and a positive team identity.
Exemplary leadership theories have focused on leaders who have extraordinary effects on their followers and eventually social systems, in which they transform the needs, values, preferences, and aspirations of followers from self-interests to collective interests (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999). Exemplary leaders can serve as powerful moral exemplars when as attractive leaders they provide followers with a model or “possible self” to develop toward (Walker & Henning, 2004). Observing the attractive model creates goal-directed energy for followers to mimic the leader’s behaviors through social learning processes (Bandura, 1977; Lord & Brown, 2004). For example, research suggests that through observing ethical leaders, leaders at lower levels will mimic the ethical leader’s behaviors (Mayer, Kuenzi, Greenbaum, Bardes, & Salvador, 2009). Indeed, substantial research has demonstrated that exemplary leaders can affect follower values, beliefs, attitudes, and identity in important ways (e.g., Lord & Brown, 2004; van Knippenberg, van Knippenberg, De Cremer, & Hogg, 2004).

Most professional militaries operate largely as meritocracies (Jans, 2002). Followers will thus likely compare their leaders to their implicit leadership theory (Lord, Foti, & DeVader, 1984) of what constitutes an exemplary leader. As they depend on their leader for their and the group’s safety, they are likely very discerning when assessing the leader and deciding on how much influence over the group to grant the leader (Hogg, 2001). Exemplary leadership is thus likely necessary in creating the context in which moral influence occurs and aspirations and obligations are effectively communicated and internalized across the group.

Further, exemplary leader behaviors can inspire followers to become highly committed to the mission, to make significant personal sacrifices in the interest of the mission, and to perform above and beyond the call of duty (Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993). For example, leaders who are seen as authentic by their followers (i.e., high in moral perspective, self-aware, balanced, and transparent) have been shown to enhance the moral courage and subsequent ethical and prosocial behaviors of their followers (Hannah, Avolio, & Walumbwa, 2011). These authors argued that it is in part because authentic leaders role-model acting in line with their values and ask others to do the same. Such exemplary leaders can create a context in which followers perceive that they can openly espouse and live out their beliefs, expecting that they will receive a positive reaction from the leader and others in the group. Through establishing such a context, leaders can promote higher levels of personal agency in their followers (Kahn, 1990; Kernis & Goldman, 2005) and therefore self-determined aspiration toward morality.

Research has shown that leaders’ levels of displayed moral reasoning can also influence their followers’ moral reasoning through role modeling or instruction (Dukerich, Nichols, Em, & Vollrath, 1990). Further, when leader and follower levels of moral reasoning are congruent, followers are more in synch with their
leaders and report higher levels of satisfaction and commitment, along with lower turnover intentions (Schminke, Ambrose, & Neubaum, 2005). Additionally, leadership style, such as initiating structure and consideration behaviors, can influence the ethical frameworks (i.e., formalism and utilitarianism) observed in followers (Schminke & Wells, 1999; Schminke, Wells, Peyrefitte, & Sebora, 2002). Finally, the extent that followers perceive their leaders as being ethical has been related to followers’ organizational commitment, extra effort, job satisfaction, performance, organizational citizenship behaviors, voice, and propensity to report issues and problems (Avey, Palanski, & Walumbwa, 2011; Brown, Treviño, & Harrison, 2005; Walumbwa & Schaubroeck, 2009). Together, this research suggests that leaders have extensive effects on followers’ virtuous thoughts, behaviors, and aspirations through their exemplification and the style of leadership they use.

Finally, it is clear from the discussion thus far that there is a potential augmentation effect of leadership in promoting both the morality of obligation and of aspiration. That is, leaders can set a transactional basis for followers such that they enforce minimal standards (Brown et al., 2005; Treviño et al., 2006) yet simultaneously promote “ethics beyond expectations” through their social learning and other exemplification effects (Walker & Henning, 2004).

DISCUSSION

Implications for Research

We have focused on the morality of aspiration, which we have argued is necessary to inform and inspire the conduct of military professionals in the extreme context of combat. Investigations of this approach will require future research to extend beyond merely investigating what is ethical, to what is beyond ethical. Similarly, Hannah & Avolio (in press) note that “the study of ethics and leadership has generally been limited to a narrow ‘criterion space,’ focused on predicting a limited span of ethical behaviors and identifying predictors that influence that narrow band of criteria . . . we believe that the leadership field should more fully investigate the criterion space that lies beyond transactional ethical behavior—what we might call extra-ethical, or simply virtuous behavior.” Yet, as a field we currently lack measures to tap into these more extreme ranges of the ethics criterion space, on the side of both the independent and dependent variables. On the independent variable side, the ethical leadership measure (Brown et al., 2005), for example, is largely based on a conceptualization of a moral manager who disciplines unethical behavior, rewards integrity, and establishes ethical norms. Other measures, such as transformational and authentic leadership, include items that represent exemplary leader behaviors, but not contextualized to more extreme conditions such as the military context. On the dependent variable side, measures like organizational
citizenship behaviors (OCBs) assess extra-role behaviors, such as helping behaviors, but certainly do not reflect the kind of more extreme self-sacrificial behaviors we are addressing here.

Additionally, extreme contexts such as military operations create unique forms of causation and contingencies on leadership and group processes (Hannah, Uhl-Bien, Avolio, & Cavarretta, 2009). Therefore, beyond creating new measures that cover the extended context space that we propose is required to represent constructs such as ethos, we also need to assess how these new constructs operate across a range of extremity. Applying the work on typical versus maximum performance (e.g., DuBois, Sackett, Zedeck, & Fogli, 1993; Sackett, Zedeck, & Fogli, 1988) to our model, it is quite possible that constructs such as moral aspiration will operate differently depending on the level of extremity present, as well as along the range of the independent and dependent variables where the relationship between a given predictor and a performance criterion may become nonlinear.

Further, advancing our knowledge of what drives such “ethics beyond expectations” will require a multidisciplinary approach. In this article, we have drawn conceptual insight from literature concerning the morality of law as well as moral philosophy. Recent handbooks on character psychology and moral development (e.g., Killen & Smetana, 2008; Lapsley & Power, 2005; Narvaez & Lapsley, 2009; and Nucci & Narvaez, 2008) have highlighted the need for greater multidisciplinary emphasis in ethics research, and specifically reciprocal integration between moral philosophy and moral psychology.

In addition to multidisciplinary approaches to research, multiple methodologies are required to “peel the onion” on the complex social and psychological dynamics inherent in ethics and leadership. Leadership and ethics are phenomena whose dynamics are deeply situated in context and embodied in the sensemaking processes of those directly involved (MacIntyre, 2007; Conger & Toegel, 2002). The situated and embodied nature engenders emergent, nonlinear patterns of relationships and subjective meanings that are difficult to access retrospectively or through dominant hypodeductive, prediction-based research methodologies. To this end, grounded theory has been strongly advocated for leadership research (e.g., Conger & Toegel, 2002; Parry, 1998) as well as for moral character research (e.g., Blasi, 2005). The grounded theory approach is well suited to assessing social phenomenon in unique and dynamic contexts such as the military and allows for richly assessing the unique experiences of those living the phenomenon of interest (Glaser & Strauss, 2009). Grounded theory and similar inductive and qualitative methods thus offer important complements to dominant deductive theory-testing approaches.

Implications for Practice

Our emphasis on exemplary military ethics and leadership also has important implications for practice. We briefly highlight four trends affecting the conduct
of war that increase the demand for exemplary military ethics and leadership. The first three trends relate to changing public perceptions of war and have the effect of raising the moral floor for military professionals. The fourth trend relates to the changing character of war itself, which imposes increased demands for supererogatory conduct by military professionals.

Since World War II, changing public perceptions about war have increased the importance of the ethical conduct of military professionals. Three longstanding systemic trends are notable for their impact on the professional ethics of Western militaries and the American military in particular (Coker, 2007; Lucas, 2007). First, declining tolerance for state violence has made it increasingly difficult to gain and maintain support for military operations. Associated with reduced tolerance for state violence is the increased concern for human rights and the demand that militaries go to greater lengths to protect the rights of noncombatants as well as combatants on the battlefield.

Reduced tolerance for state violence and greater emphasis on human rights has culminated in greater scrutiny of law of war violations. Lucas (2007), for example, makes a compelling argument that while the law of war that military professionals are required to abide by has not changed much in recent decades, the attention focused on the consequences to disobedience of those principles has. To illustrate, Lucas highlights a disturbing scene in the Spielberg movie, Saving Private Ryan, in which, after the initial beach assault, American soldiers taunt and then summarily execute two German soldiers attempting to surrender. The actions of these soldiers constitute a war crime. The point, however, is that, while killing enemy combatant prisoners was then and is now illegal, in the contemporary environment the consequences of engaging in such proscribed behavior are magnified immensely.

Historically, the consequences of such infractions tended to be limited to the individuals involved and usually did not impact the justifications for the prosecution of the war itself. Today, such infractions can and do have significant strategic implications; they can themselves single-handedly undermine the legitimacy of a war effort, as well as bring shame and dishonor upon the military. Such was arguably the central significance of the Abu Ghraiib scandal. Lucas (2007) argues that increased scrutiny of law of war violations is not just a “CNN-effect” of enhanced media coverage. Rather, he suggests that what is at issue is a genuinely new, different, and more demanding feature of combat itself:

Never before in history has so much power been placed in the hands of the individual Soldier, Marine, Sailor, or Airmen. And never before have the consequences of the misuse, abuse, or just plain mistakes in employing that force been so grave and so far-reaching. If the lines dividing public policy (jus ad bellum) from individual professional conduct in wartime (jus in bello) ever were so distinct, they have now become hopelessly blurred, and the two modes of moral discourse about war forever hereafter inextricably linked. (p. 27)
In parallel with changing public perceptions about the conduct of war are changes in the character of war itself, which are also increasing the importance of exemplary military ethics and leadership. The modern international security environment has undergone significant changes since the end of the Cold War. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, we have seen the rise of “asymmetric threats” and insurgencies. These changes have had significant implications for the policies, strategies, tactics, and ethics used by Western militaries, particularly the U.S. Army and Marines in their efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan over the last 10 years (Sewall, 2007).

Insurgencies are wars fought among the people. In these operating environments, the individual soldier and small unit leader have emerged as a key to victory. This has led to renewed importance and significance of individual actions, and concomitantly ethics, on the battlefield. Indeed, the American approach to fighting insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan, as articulated in the recently published U.S. Army and Marine Corps counterinsurgency doctrine, imposes extraordinary demands on military professionals at the small unit level (Sewall, 2007). It requires professionals at the tactical level who are flexible, adaptive, well-informed, culturally astute, and able to adjust their approach constantly. They must be ready to be “greeted with either a handshake or a hand grenade” while taking on missions only infrequently practiced until recently. Military professionals are expected to be nation builders as well as warriors. They must be prepared to help reestablish institutions and local security forces and assist in rebuilding infrastructure and basic services. And they must be able to facilitate establishing local governance and the rule of law.

These counterinsurgency environments in Iraq and Afghanistan have served to escalate the need for ethical and, particularly, supererogatory conduct. In Iraq and Afghanistan, American military professionals and their coalition partners not only fight with the explicit purpose of protecting and defending their nation’s security interests, but also fight to protect and defend the people of these countries. Success in these campaigns has less to do with traditional military objectives, for example, the capture of enemy territory, but with protecting innocent local populace from the threats, intimidation, and outright barbarism of insurgents. Ultimately, success in counterinsurgency means winning the confidence of the local populace, or what is commonly referred to as “winning hearts and minds.” In short, in the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, the safety and security of the population is the key objective and is won in part through supererogatory conduct. To fight among the people with the explicit objective of protecting and defending them from insurgents constitutes the traditional essence of the martial virtue and honor and the highest aspirations of professional militaries.

Taking the four trends highlighted here in total, the overarching implication for professional militaries is summarized succinctly this way: *jus in bello is jus ad bellum*—and the individual conduct of military professionals, which is an expression
of their professional identity and martial virtue, is in effect also a public policy and strategic military imperative. The blurring of *jus in bello* and *jus ad bellum* makes the practice of warfighting even more morally challenging for those who must undertake the task (Lucas, 2007). Alongside intensified human rights consciousness and greater scrutiny of law of war violations is the rise of insurgencies fought “amongst the people” with “boots on the ground” that increase the need for supererogatory conduct—conduct that comes from a morality of aspiration. The former has the effect of raising the moral floor of military ethics, while the latter raises the moral ceiling. The juxtaposition of these moral demands imposes on the practice of military ethics in combat and, more specifically, on the conscience of individual military professionals, difficult and seemingly irreconcilable ethical tensions. The upshot is that militaries need exemplary ethics and leadership now and for the foreseeable future more than ever.

REFERENCES


