

Introduction to the King's Centre for Military Ethics

BY DAVID WHETHAM

As the military operating environment grows ever more complex and the weapons systems available to combatants become more lethal, so too must the skills and education available to combatants evolve if they are to operate effectively within this environment. Combatants must be equipped not only with expertise in the technical use of their tools, but also with the cognitive skills needed to make ethical evaluations and judgements, often in extreme situations. New types of conflict are raising new ethical challenges for protecting those finding themselves in harm's way.

Over the past two decades gender aspects of, and large scale sexual violence in, conflict and their implications for sustainable conflict resolution have become a major aspect of peace and security discourses. More recently, bullying and sexual violence against fellow female and male members within the military has become recognised as a major ethical and leadership challenge. There is a clear linkage between ethical behaviour within armed forces and their conduct on operations. These discourses cross the divide between scholars, for example of ethics, feminism and international law, and practitioners, for example in the UN, regional organisations such as NATO, and member states. The UK British Foreign and Commonwealth Office in particular has been at the forefront of investigating sexual violence in armed conflict.

Given this context, there is a growing acknowledgment that military ethics and a genuine, deep appreciation of human rights issues is a crucial component of the education of every service member, wherever they may serve. Fostering ethical awareness and moral decision-making in military personnel is a proven way of reducing unnecessary harm and suffering in conflict situations. However, as yet there is no agreed way to do this effectively. If it can be demonstrated that particular ways of delivering military ethics education are successful, and if these approaches can be replicated successfully in multiple environments, it

would seem obvious that there is substantial benefit for everyone in making them available as widely as possible. That is why we decided to set up the King's Centre for Military Ethics in 2015.

Centre for Military Ethics Research Programme

Supported by Postdoctoral Researchers, PhD students and a programme of Visiting Fellows, KCL academics in the Centre will conduct studies into the ethics education provided for armed forces around the world and the way that different countries approach emerging ethical challenges in defence. Due to the lack of such research in this area, there is currently no effective way of comparing and contrasting the Professional Military Ethics Education (PMEE) that is conducted worldwide because there is no single place where current practises in this specific area of activity are recorded. This means that there can be little conscious consensus in military ethics pedagogy about what approaches are most effective in improving understanding, and more importantly, behaviour. For example, who should deliver ethics education for greatest effect – should it be the commanding officer, chaplains, military educators, or academics? Finding out who does what, and with what effect in different places, would therefore be hugely beneficial if trying to promote best practice in this area. There is also a need to develop a sound basis within the military and civilian communities in and between western and non-western countries for reflection and deeper, critical understanding of gender perspectives on armed conflict and armed forces.

Key research questions and themes include:

- What are the current ethical issues in military and security worldwide?
- What are the different responses to these challenges?
- What does military ethics 'look like' in different countries/regions?
- How do we develop deeper and cross-cultural understanding (civil-military and inter-national) of gender and security, and how can this contribute to more effective, gender-sensitive leadership within the armed forces as organisations and in operations?
- How does one measure effectiveness in the area of military ethics education and what exactly is being judged?
- Even if one makes progress in addressing any of the above issues/ questions, how does one go about transmitting and disseminating best practice?

Dissemination

Ensuring appropriate and effective dissemination through university and practitioner networks (such as the various chapters of the International Society of Military Ethics) of its research findings is an essential part of the Centre's aims. We know that there is a proven but largely unsatisfied demand for military ethics education that simply cannot be met by the few existing professional military ethicists worldwide. One of the ways to try and meet that demand is to offer quality distance learning material that can be accessed by anyone. Therefore, we are developing a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC), designed according to research-led findings, run by the Centre for Military Ethics and open to all free of any charge, to deliver this vital area of military education to a global audience. Because it is intended to be a global asset, we have already had input and support from many different military institutions, universities and international organization such as the International Committee of the Red Cross. Our first modules can be found here: <http://militaryethics.uk/en/course/>

We have employed a version of the creative commons licensing that allows people to use each section for both commercial and non-commercial purposes as long as they give full credit and do not abridge the material in any way. That way, all of the material can be incorporated into courses and used by universities or military institutions around the world without worrying about the exact structure or nature of the institutions (this would be a problem if we put in a categorical not for profit clause in the copyright) around the world.

We will continue to refine the material as we go along and learn from our experiences, and institutional and student engagement. As we secure additional resources, we hope to be able to offer modules in different languages as that the global coverage also continues to expand. As well as an introduction to the broad subject of military ethics, the first module is *Armouring Against Atrocity* and is aimed at how to maintain high moral standards while in extreme situations while deployed on military operations. This module is led and delivered by military practitioners who bring alive the research by drawing on their own extensive experience of military operations. The second module is an introduction to the *Just War Tradition*, where it comes from, what it says today, how it relates to international law and the challenges that the contemporary operating environment pose for it. Other modules we are currently developing include: *Conflict Resolution & Jus Post Bellum* (Glasgow University), *Military Medical Ethics* (Leeds, Geneva & ANU), *the Blue Shield & Cultural Property Protection in Conflict* (Oxford), and *Gender & the Military* (KCL) with more to follow.

Other resources for supporting military ethics education that the Centre for Military Ethics are developing include Military Ethics Playing Cards. Starting with the assumption that playing cards are a ubiquitous, everyday part of life, the idea is to use them as a vehicle for raising ethical awareness. Fifty-four questions from across the broad area of military ethics have been carefully developed by leading researchers and ethicists based on professional military ethics education curricula, in conjunction with research and testing on military focus groups, and in consultation with specialist lawyers. The cards are available to military units and can be used to prompt informal discussion and debate, normalising the discussion of ethical challenges faced in military environments. Beginning with the Land Edition, with questions orientated towards the Army, the concept will be expanded to cover other services and the Joint environment. Each card has a web link to the King's Centre for Military Ethics where, as the initiative develops, we will place additional prompts, questions and information for each question, along with reading and articles. Groups of questions will be thematically linked so impromptu or pre-planned supported discussions can quickly be developed using the open-access material.

The material and support we can offer will continue to expand as we add more resources such as learning tools, discussion of case studies with practitioners and an online journal.

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