Are Military Professionals Bound by a 'Higher' Moral Standard?

J. Carl Ficarrotta, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor of Philosophy
USAF Academy, CO

It's been a commonplace for a very long time that military professionals are 'held to a higher moral standard'. It's certainly part of the image some in the larger society have of the profession. The sentiment is especially prevalent inside the military. The military establishment represents itself as embracing higher expectations, even if there are occasional (perhaps inevitable) moral failures. There are codes and public espousals of a special moral commitment. Commanders exhort their troops to moral goodness and chastise them when they fall short. Military education is full of courses on professional ethics. Indeed, from the top down, part of the background noise of professional military life are these 'higher' expectations, and a belief that somehow, this line of work is one shot through with a special moral status, special moral problems, and special moral demands.

In this essay, I want critically to address what all this might amount to. I want to say more concretely what the 'higher moral standard' could be, and what reasons there might be for 'believing' in it. While my posture is a skeptical one, I think we will be able to make a partial case for special military obligations. But I don't think we will be

DISTRIBUTION STATEMENT B
Approved for public release;
Distribution Unlimited

DTIC QUALITY INSPECTED 8

19971202 028

New Text Document.txt

01 December 1997

This paper was downloaded from the Internet.

Distribution Statement A: Approved for public release;
distribution is unlimited.

able to justify the more commonly held, more robust conception of 'special demands' on the military character.

A Starting Point

This much seems to me uncontroversial. The military profession, and the conducting of military operations, poses special and particularly pressing moral *problems*. Anyone already taking the moral point of view will immediately notice them. To varying degrees, this is true of all the professions. Moral people who are also doctors, lawyers, clergy, businesswomen, whatever, find themselves faced with special moral situations that simply wouldn't come up very often in other contexts.

So this is one way we might look at the subject matter of military ethics. Assume the organization and application of military force is sometimes morally required. Assume also that there are some ways of applying military force that are morally out of bounds. The military ethicist starts from these assumptions, examines all the special situations we encounter in the military, and tries to puzzle out the right way to think about them. For instance, in a military operation, we judge it morally necessary to do whatever we can to avoid hurting innocents. Or we might judge that because we have extraordinary authority over our subordinates, we ought to do our best to look out for their welfare when issuing orders.

DTIC QUALITY INSPECTED 3

Importantly, given this way of looking at military ethics, the policies that the military ethicist endorses would apply to *anyone* who happened to find himself similarly situated. Of course, military professionals are far more likely actually to find themselves in these situations than other people. But the reason the military professional is required to do this or that is not because of some *special* moral obligation. This or that would be required of any moral person at all in the same situation. On this account, we don't get any reason to think that a 'higher' moral standard applies to the military professional. Moreover, all the moral evaluations the ethicist is making presuppose taking the moral point of view in the first place. This way of looking at military ethics doesn't give the military professional a special reason to be moral *at all*, much less a reason to conform to a *higher* standard.

So to start, if one is committed to being a moral person (setting aside the disagreements we might have over what it is to be moral), and if one reflects on the nature of the military profession, there is lots of interesting thinking to do. Indeed, on this approach, such thinking is the sum and substance of military ethics. But what I don't think we get from these initial considerations is a *special* reason for the military person to be moral, or any indications that the military professional is subject to a *higher* standard than anyone else. To find reasoning in

support of either of these assertions, we must move beyond our starting point.

What Might We Mean By A Higher Standard?

There are several ways we might cash out the idea of a 'higher' standard. First, we could mean there are military moral obligations that other people simply don't have. Second, we could mean military people have especially good reasons for holding themselves strictly to the standards that apply to everyone, including us, anyway. These two meanings are not mutually exclusive (so we might mean some combination of both) or exhaustive of the possibilities (so there might be other ways of meaning this I'm not addressing). But I want to explore several lines of argument that might lend some support to one or both or these ideas.

The Functional Line

Hackett has claimed that a bad person "cannot be . . . a good soldier, or sailor, or airman."[1] Wakin and others agree with the main thrust of this claim[2]. These thinkers base their conclusion on an argument I'll call the functional line. The thought is that there are certain demands placed on the character and behavior of military professionals that flow directly from the military function itself. For

example, military units cannot function well, especially in combat environments, if the members of the unit are not scrupulously honest with each other. Also, military folk simply will not be able to do their jobs if they are not, to a certain degree, selfless. Otherwise, they wouldn't be willing to put up with even the ordinary hardships of military life, much less be willing to risk their lives. Similar arguments can be made for the virtues of courage, obedience, loyalty, conscientiousness, etc. So if one thinks (for whatever reason) that it's important to have a military that functions as well as it can, one also is committed to endorsing these virtues and behaviors in military professionals.[3]

So if all this is right, then we have found some good reasons to think that military professionals have both some special obligations not binding on others, and some special reasons to be strict in enforcing general obligations that apply to us all. And I think the main idea here *is* right. But I think we should be careful not to conclude too much from the functional line. All this argument leads us to are 'higher standards' *in the military context.* Military people must be scrupulously honest with each other when there is some military issue at hand. They must be selfless when it comes to the demands of military work. They must be courageous when there is some military task to be performed.

What the functional line does *not* establish is that the military professional must be 'good' through and through. The argument allows

for a soldier that would never even think about lying in his unit to lie to his spouse or on his income tax. The military function will be no worse off if a sailor always puts the needs of the service above her own, but still gives nothing to charity. As long as a pilot is courageous in combat and in dealing with his fellow professionals, he might just as well be a coward with a burglar or his father or his wife. Moreover, it should be obvious that the functional line says nothing whatever about moral goodness and badness that has no relation to the military function.

Now one might be inclined to think that what I'm imagining is not possible. Either a person is honest or they're not, selfless or not, brave or not, etc. This kind of functionalist would think virtues or character traits are not something we can easily exercise in one context and then fail to exercise in another. Hence, for functionalist reasons, the military ought to be held to higher standards of honesty, selflessness, courage, etc., in every context, through and through.[4] Otherwise, this will invariably bleed through into his military life. So when a military professional, say, cheats on his taxes, or lies to a salesman, I've got a special, functionally grounded reason for being particularly disappointed.

I don't think this works. Clearly, perfectly ordinary human beings are capable of forming extremely complicated dispositions. Certainly we can expect to see moral dispositions that are sensitive to contexts and take account of what might be at stake. After all, we all easily internalize

habits of etiquette that alternately allow and prohibit us to do all sorts of things depending on the context.[5] So there is no psychological reason to think we can't form complex, context sensitive moral dispositions. I take it as obvious there is some sense in which there can be 'honor among thieves.' And the ugly truth is, history is full of examples of extremely effective military professionals (who must have had the requisite functionally grounded moral qualities) who were, all things considered, very bad people indeed.

We might try another twist on this functional approach. If the military professional has the *appearance* of being moral through and through, the 'more moral' image might contribute to military effectiveness in some way. It might make the military more effective in getting money and support with those in the public who are morally minded. Also, morally upright troops might be more inclined to follow military leaders they believe are exceptionally moral. But this argument doesn't get us very far. First, I take it we weren't exploring reasons military members have for merely *looking* good, but instead were trying to establish that they have special reasons for *being* moral. To make out the stronger conclusion using this argument we'd have to add a further premise. Specifically, we'd have to say one cannot *appear* good without actually *being* good. And I take that to be false. Besides, if we base the special obligations only on what it takes to get public support, or what it

takes to get troops to follow leaders, we might end up having to say the military has just as compelling reasons on occasion to be especially *bad.* Such are the motivational psychologies of some troops and some segments of the public.

So the functional line gets us some special obligations, and some special reasons to be moral, but only in the military context. The argument does not get us a knight in shining armor. Indeed, the moral qualities for the military professional established by the functional line are ones that even a Nazi could and would endorse.

Unique Demands of the Role

This next argument is a lot like the functional line. I'll call it the 'role-based' argument for a higher moral standard. On this view it's not just that the military function, narrowly defined as fighting and winning, demands special things. Rather, it is also the role one occupies in the military structure and in society at large that carries with it unique moral demands. We might even profitably think of this as the functional line revisited, only using a broader notion of the military function.

Take as an illustration of this idea the demands we place on police officers. A police officer is obligated to do something about a crime in progress, while ordinary citizens aren't always expected to step in. The special obligation flows immediately from the *role* the police officer is

filling. A parent is expected to care for his or her children in ways others are not morally required to do. The obligations are attached to the roles. So if one assumes a role in society (rather than *pretending* to assume it) this frequently carries with it some very definite moral baggage. As long as you're not a charlatan or a con man, you have some special moral obligations because you implicitly *agree* to them.

We might say the same kind of thing about the military professional. If one voluntarily assumes the role,[6] then there are certain standards of behavior and character to which one at once agrees. Certainly an obligation to attend honestly and conscientiously to every day military duties comes with the package. If called, doing one's best in combat seems uncontroversially an obligation attached to the role. We should also assume that the explicit oaths that demand obedience to superiors and loyalty to the constitution, etc., are part of the public understanding of the military professional's role-based obligations. When someone assumes the military role, unless he's a fraud, he at once assumes some special moral obligations.

Of course, one might ask why the military professional shouldn't be a fraud. Fair enough, and we might be able to conjure some special reasons military people have not to be frauds in regard to their role. But that is bigger game than I'm stalking here. I'm happy at this point to

explore what kind of complex, role-based moral obligations we can deduce from a more simple moral obligation like not being a fraud.

If we assume the role as found in the society, and couple it with a prohibition of fraud, I think we can establish what I've already mentioned. But how much have we gotten out of all this? The obligations I've listed (attending to duty, fighting when called, obedience to superiors, loyalty, etc.) are not any where near exhaustive of the moral possibilities. How much *more* does this military role require that isn't required of everybody else anyway? The limits of this strategy look to me a lot like the limits of the functional line: it gets us *some* special moral obligations, but clearly not an obligation to be good through and through.

Indeed, there are two worries about taking this any further. First, we can wonder if role-based expectations for the military professional in our culture actually do go beyond the uncontroversial demands I've already listed. If they don't, then we'd have no basis inside this role-based strategy to invoke any other 'higher' standards. It would be as if we told a doctor that she shouldn't cheat on her spouse *because* she was a professional. I don't think this makes sense. Granted, a doctor has some special reasons not to lie to her patients about their medical conditions *precisely because* she's filling the role of a doctor. But if it's wrong for her to cheat on her spouse, it's because infidelity would be

wrong for anyone. No special expectation attached to the role, no criticism based on such an expectation.

So does the military profession have special moral expectations attached to it as a role in society, expectations that should lead the military professional to be good through and through in virtue of her role? It's not easy for me to answer this question with certainty, but my guess is no. When a military person neglects his children, writes a bad check, cheats on his taxes, whatever, I object morally and legally. But I think the sources of the judgment are standards I'd apply to anyone, and there is not a sense that the military person has let me down specifically in regard to his role.

I might be wrong about these role-based expectations, which leads me to my second worry about taking this strategy any further. If the culture actually *does* expect the military professional to be more morally upright than others in every way, and believes this is inherent in the role, *should* this be part of their expectation? I think that if some people believe this, their conception of the role is an unjustifiable one. I don't know of a way to justify the reasonableness of our role-based expectations besides grounding the expectations in the function itself. And we've already seen that the military function, even broadly understood, only makes certain limited demands in the moral sphere. A functionally ungrounded demand that military professionals be paragons

of all virtue seems to me unreasonable, and should carry no weight as the foundation for this role-based strategy.

We're Paying Your Salary

So far I've got special reasons for the military professional to adhere to some moral standards, but not all of them. The functional and related role-based arguments allow us to draw only limited conclusions. But why assume we *need* an argument like these in support of the expectations? Assume (controversially) that the public simply expects military professionals to meet a higher moral standard, and this has nothing to do with their thinking about the function or their understanding of the role. They're paying military salaries, so if this is what they want, however overly demanding, and for whatever reason, this is how the military should be. Given the brute expectation, the professional would be cheating the taxpayer of if he took the job pretending to be especially morally upright, but didn't really take the moral aspect of it seriously.

There's an awful lot wrong with this. I'll mention, but not explore, the hypocrisy that would be involved in taking this view. How could we consistently hold one group on the public payroll (the military) accountable for 'higher', non-functionally grounded, moral standards, but not all the others on the pubic payroll (various civil servants and

politicians at almost every level)? We could also wonder once again if there *is* such an expectation in the public at large. It is by no means clear that there is a brute demand in our culture that the military be more moral than the rest of us in non-functionally grounded contexts.

Maybe worst of all for this idea, given that we stipulated this was not a reasonable, functionally grounded expectation, we leave ourselves open to a disquieting possibility. Here we say the *only* reason the military has for being obligated to some 'higher' moral standard is that this is what the public wants. What then would keep them from being obligated to *lower* standards in the future? If we uncritically base the obligation on brute public sentiment, history teaches us that this sentiment can change, and not always for the better. We might later be stuck arguing that the public *wants* Jews killed, and they're paying military salaries, so the military is obligated to do it. No, if there is a higher moral standard based on something beyond function or role, we'd better have a good reason for thinking so. And 'just because the public says' is not, by itself, good enough.

Group Image

While I wouldn't rest my case on the public's brute expectations for the military, the public image of the military is not morally irrelevant. As a section commander in the Air Force, on occasion I was required to

discipline people who wrote bad checks to merchants off-base. In addition to the appropriate punishments, I always admonished such offenders for the bad effects their actions had on the image of the military with local merchants. Because the military constitutes a readily identifiable group, many kinds of misconduct by the few can lead to bad consequences for the many. Segments of the public form general opinions, however hastily, about how they should view all military people.

So take the fact that it is easy to identify someone as a member of the military. Also admit the tendency of many people to form generalizations based on thin evidence. If someone cares about how his actions impact other members of his group, we might have yet another special reason for the military member to be moral.[7] One person's misconduct or lack of character hurts her fellow professionals.

There seems to be something to this. But as with our other arguments, I think we should be sensitive to its limitations. First, it insists only on good image and not on genuine goodness. Also, even if the argument works, it only establishes moral standards the breach of which hurts other service members because of the resulting bad image. Standards meeting that description will include a lot, but once again, not all of morality.

We should also wonder if the public *ought* to make quick generalizations about all members of a group based on the misconduct of a few. Granted, this may be a brute sociological fact. But if we decide it is wrong for people to do this, I suspect it weakens somewhat the argument for higher standards based on the practice.

Last, we should notice this is an argument that would apply to any readily identifiable group. If this line of thinking is correct, then doctors, lawyers, racial groups, women, men, members of any group really, have special reasons not to misbehave publicly. After all, the 'image problem' can effect any of these groups as well. Besides, I wonder whether protecting the group's image is the real motivation for invoking special military obligations. It's an idea that may establish some obligations, but it doesn't ring true as a full justification for a 'higher' moral standard.

Conclusion

I don't think there is any simple and single answer to the question of whether there are 'higher' military obligations, special ways to be, or special reasons for thinking so. I think a number of different functional and role-based considerations all triangulate on a relatively small number of special military obligations and special reasons for adhering to them. But these obligations mostly are restricted to the military context. Even if we stretch what counts as relevant to military duties to the

broadest extent plausible, my guess is that the 'higher' standards we can truly justify do not make up as big a set as is commonly thought. Military professionals do have *some* special standards and obligations not shared by others, but they are not as big as all morality. We ask an awful lot of military professionals, even in the moral sphere. I don't think we can justifiably ask them to be saints as well.

Still, none of what I've argued leads us away from our starting point. At the very least, a military professional is obligated by the *same* moral standards as everyone else. Morality in general still makes its unique and insistent claims on each of us, simply in virtue of the fact that we are human beings. And given the morally tough situations that come up in the military line of work, all military professionals would do well to attend to these minimal moral standards, and indeed not succumb to the temptation to *lower* them. Anscombe[8] was exactly right to warn us about the dangers of commonplace "pride, malice and cruelty" and point out how quickly warfare can become injustice, how easily the military life can become a bad life.

Perhaps it is here that we can take one last pass at making sense of a 'higher' standard for the military professional. When we take the moral point of view, recognize the moral dangers and temptations of military service, and survey the extraordinarily bad things that can happen when the military professional lets down, we may rightly worry.

If we are moral people to begin with, we'll see plenty of reasons to be on guard. And if that's what a 'higher' standard for the military professional amounts to, we should all, as moral beings, acknowledge and embrace it.

Notes

[1] Sir John Winthrop Hackett, "The Military in the Service of the State," in *War Morality, and the Military Profession*, 2d Ed, ed. Malham M. Wakin (Boulder: Westview Press, 1986), 119.

[2] Malham M. Wakin, "The Ethics of Leadership: I," and "The Ethics of Leadership: II" in *War Morality, and the Military Profession*, 191, 208, *passim.*

[3] And a well-functioning military certainly seems like an easy thing to want. Failure in the military context likely will issue in tremendously bad consequences, whether considered morally or otherwise. When the military person violates *functionally* grounded moral rules, there is potential for disaster we just don't see in many lines of work.

[4] We could take this even farther, and believe that a person is either *good* or they're not. On this more radical view, reminiscent of a Platonic-style unity of the virtues, any moral failing whatever is reason to suspect other moral failings are forthcoming. We would be committed to thinking, for example, that a person who lies on their income taxes couldn't be relied on to be brave in battle.

[5] Do I really need to cite an example? Belching and passing wind, among other things, fit the bill here.

[6] The voluntariness might not be essential. But the role-based case for special moral obligation seems stronger to me when someone voluntarily undertakes the role. If this doesn't work to establish a special obligation, the strategy would be hopeless for obligating a draftee.

[7] As was the case with fraud in the role-based argument, we are here depending on deriving a complex set of obligations from a simple and presumably noncontroversial one (not hurting one's fellows). It's once again not a knock down argument, but I think it at least counts as a *reason.*

[8] Elizabeth Anscombe, "War and Murder" in Wakin, *War Morality, and the Military Profession*, 286.