The Ethical Problem in Pluralistic Societies and Dr. Toner's "Mistakes"

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Editorial Abstract: How can the military instill high ethical standards in its members when these standards appear to be in social decline? Are military cultures out of touch with the people they protect? First published in the Portuguese edition of Aerospace Power Journal, *this piece by Dr. da Rocha responds to an earlier* APJ *article by Dr. James Toner. Here da Rocha provides an international (Brazilian) perspective in a deep, theoretical tutorial on the origins and relationships of social and military ethical standards. His article will challenge readers to think.*

IN THE PAST, the *Airpower Journal* has published many articles about ethics in the military. This article is in response to one of them: Dr. James H. Toner's "Mistakes in Teaching Ethics," which is compelling both for its content and for its goal of being practical.[1]

Sometimes academic discussions about theoretical issues can be rather abstract and remote from the practicalities of everyday life. However, I believe in scrutinizing theoretical concepts as a tool to make them useful in achieving "practical" results. I will discuss theoretical issues absolutely necessary to understanding ethical problems as they appear in today's society. Without that understanding, there is no ground for sound, practical decisions regarding ethical issues in the military or elsewhere.

Because ethics deals with value judgments about good or evil, ethical issues are preeminent where and when it comes to applying military power. This involves both individual and organizational actions.[2] The more powerful the actor, the more important the ethical issues. And we must also remember that collective conduct, in fact, stems from individual actions—hence the link between individual and organizational ethics. The bottom line is that individuals and organizations require sound ethical judgment.

Authors who write about ethics and the military, like Dr. Toner, point out that the essence of the ethical problem is being sure that decisions are "right" and lead to "right" actions. This requires clear understanding of what "being right" means, as well as establishing *who* is entitled to legitimately define those "rightness" criteria.

Since this is entirely a multifarious problem, a linear argument is poorly suited to deal with it. What follows are some comments regarding various aspects of this ethical problem. They encompass diverse concepts that will, in the end, show their commonality.

First, I intend to discuss a rather abstract issue that is key to understanding the ethical problem today—what is the nature and the source of "ethical bewilderment" seen in our society? I would suggest it comes from ideological[3] differences most people fail to notice as they engage in rational discussions about ethical matters. Because they do not share a common ideological basis, rational discussion is impossible, even though it may take on the appearance of rationality. As a consequence, it cannot produce rational agreement. Simply put, people talk in good faith but don't understand each other.

This certainly applies to the military. Military members are real people living at a particular time in history and experiencing the perplexities of changing, clashing values. The military is generally socially and politically conservative (see the section "Some Concepts 'Held Sacred' in the Military," below), if not for other reasons, because of its rigid hierarchical structure. Consequently, it is possible that many of the most cherished values in the military could conflict with newer, possibly more liberal, ones of society. New social values are not necessarily the result of a deliberate attack upon the "good old ones" but can be simply a result of social experiences.

I also discuss how personal conduct is affected by the insertion of an individual in an organization, particularly one—like the military—known for its strong "esprit de corps." Finally, I deal with the difficulties of defining the ethical standards that must be taught in a military academy and some of the problems that affect teaching. In order to focus my argument, I follow the "mistakes" pointed out in Dr. Toner's article.[4] However, I show that all of the difficulties we can identify in teaching ethics in the military are broader than mere pedagogy. In fact, they come from the very nature of the military bureaucracy.

The Ethical Problem in Pluralistic Societies

The Intuition of Good

The concept of ethics is directly related to the concept of good. Today there are two philosophical trends explaining how good originates: the universalist school affirms that the concept of good is a universal intuition—people know how to tell right from wrong because they have, as human beings, an inherent ability to do so. The circumstantialist school, on the other hand, declares that the concept of good has a social origin—it is related to the collective interests of a society to ensure its survival and development. Such interests become values that are part and parcel of the set of concepts known as the society's symbolic universe[5] and become criteria to discriminate between good and evil.[6]

There is a great difference between asserting the existence of a universal intuition of good and accepting that people are usually able to tell right from wrong in practical life. The most interesting aspect of the ethical problem is not the mystery that enables people to know what is good but whether or not they choose to act for the good they know—and why they don't when they don't.

It is not my purpose to deepen the theoretical discussion of the two schools—universalist and circumstantialist. They are mentioned only because they address in different ways an important question: how it happens that apparently everybody shares the notion of good, both those who act for the good and those who don't. Also, how is it possible that deep, uncompromising divergences about

good and evil remain among intelligent, rational people?

Actual Divergences: Opinion Conflicts

It is generally accepted that usually people know how to tell right from wrong. In many cases, however, society may be split on what is right and wrong, depending on the size and influences of various interest groups behind their causes.

When a social group is ideologically homogeneous, it is usually possible to reach consensus on what is ethically appropriate and what is not through a debate that can come very close to a rational discussion. Consensus can appear as an obvious truth, sometimes held "sacred," accepted by most people and handed down as tradition from generation to generation. In such a case, the task of ethics education involves adjusting individual behaviors of occasionally rebellious minds to the fully accepted, well-established consensus.

However, in ideologically heterogeneous societies—such as modern pluralistic societies—this is not likely to happen because people do not share the minimal ideological basis needed for true consensus. Adjusting someone, in his or her socialization, to behaviors that "everybody" follows and supports is quite different from adjusting the same young person to behaviors to which society pays lip service but does not follow all the time. The inescapable issue is this: when a society's ideological homogeneity is changed into one of diversity, the unanimous acceptance of key values, which ultimately built the concept of good, is destroyed.

Who Is the Referee for Opinion Conflicts?

When such a situation exists and rational discussion is unsuitable to settle the issue, it is still possible to rely on accepted "magisterial authority" to "teach the good." Such a magisterial authority is quite different from a political authority with power to impose specific solutions that might force desired action but would still not solve the ethical issues. So, the magisterial authority must be acknowledged, if not for its arguments, at least for its charismatic leadership.

Thus, in ideologically heterogeneous societies, how to teach ethics follows how to establish accepted social values. The puzzling thing is that most people in society have no difficulty in mentioning the values taught in times of greater ideological homogeneity. However, when it comes to making these values operational, opinions diverge greatly, making it almost impossible to find and articulate the true standards of behavior.

Conditioning the Conduct: The Organizational Influence

The previous section dealt with individual conduct relating to social standards, explicit or implicit. This one discusses regulating individual conduct by rules that bind people to their organizations, by the culture of these organizations, and by a game made out of the reciprocal expectations of behavior between organizations and society.

For expository purposes, the issue of how an organization interferes with the conduct of its members can be split in two—outer and inner. The outer aspect refers to the expectations about people's behavior related to how an organization is seen by society. Each of its members is supposed to carry out duties in accordance with the organization's social function. The inner aspect refers to the relationship between an organization and its members. One should note that such a relationship encompasses the rules inspired by an organization's interests for survival and development, including the rules that aim at building a favorable social image.

A latent conflict exists between an organization's interests for survival and development and its members' private interests. Such a conflict must be managed. Members are motivated toward maximum benefit with minimum effort. But this is at odds with the organization's need to produce in order to survive—hence the need for institutional loyalty to the organization over the individual (self-sacrifice for the sake of the team). This is

not an evil consequence of organizations, as some authors contend;[7] it is just a logical requirement.

The best way to manage the essential, latent conflict between an organization and its members is to dissolve the overall interests of that organization into the particular interests of its members. Usually, a good working environment, high wages, and fringe benefits encourage institutional loyalty. However, these are often not enough. In many cases, there must be a synthesis of interests—institutional and private—so that members are convinced it is their duty to promote organizational interests that are in harmony with values held sacred by that organization and society. This gives meaning to their lives.

Accepting organizational "sacred values" also promotes identity and solidarity in the organization. When members link their own identity to that of their organization, it produces "group consciousness" and distinctiveness, which are strong team motivators but which can also end up in social castes or elitism.

The Case of the Military

I cannot overemphasize the importance of ethical issues in the military. Its members are guardians of a nation's power and therefore hold a social position that can be diverse in different societies but always relevant to ethics. Because of its very nature, the military is prone to display a strong group consciousness, and in many countries it can become a true caste. This is not the case in the United States or in Brazil. Even though Brazil's segregated military education promotes some military ideological homogeneity, there is little social differentiation. In fact, throughout Brazilian history, the military has been an important factor in social mobility.[8]

Even though there is some altruism on the part of the military, which is essential for society's security, it is also legitimate for the military to have certain interests that promote its existence and development—just as individual members also have their specific interests related to their own lives. So it is only natural that conduct in the military be conditioned by rules whose aim is to (1) accomplish the military functions required by society, (2) promote the existence and development of the military, (3) accommodate appropriate interests of individual members so they feel they are part of an organization that cares about them individually, and (4) interpret for its members the more relevant societal values.

All around the world, the military cultivates a very rich and colorful complex of rites and symbols intended to promote some values it holds sacred. Such rites and symbols help to create a sense of psychological differentiation for the military. In countries where the military is a true caste-like stratum, such psychological differentiation helps provide a consciousness of belonging to a distinctive (and privileged) social group. In countries where the actual social differentiation does not exist or is not strong—like Brazil or the United States—such consciousness helps locate the individual in his or her social (professional) group and foster the kind of solidarity typical of the military.

The Military Conditioning of Conduct

From an external perspective, how the military conducts itself ethically and morally is a reflection of what the military means to society. Reciprocal expectations exist between the military and the society at large regarding duties and rights, and this is the foundation of many societal features as, for example, the degrees of independence with respect to the military's employment of power. This is an important issue regarding the modern definition of democracy.[9]

Because such an issue reflects a nation's political organization and culture—its global structure and its people's way of life—it is not surprising that there is much diversity in different countries due to cultural and political differences. For instance, in the United States, civilian control of the military is an ethically relevant, explicit condition of political life. There is no doubt that the military knows and practices this tenet of American democracy, and it is crucial as a military mem-

ber to know where to draw the line (e.g., between the right to free speech and the duty of noninterference in politics).

In the United States, both civilian thinkers and retired military members write on defense matters. In Brazil, even though the law and actual political practice do not allow for military interference in political life, it is still difficult to find civilian thinkers, much less competent ones, interested in discussing military issues. So, naturally, common opinion is that military issues are "reserved" for military opinions, which causes a greater degree of military involvement in the making of military policies. Such involvement by the military could seem excessive to the American way of thinking. Perhaps it is fair to stress that this state of affairs does not imply any undue involvement of the military in politics in Brazil, and there is no concern regarding the country's democratic stability. Moreover, a rather recent interest in strategic and defense studies has surfaced in the universities and research institutes, initiating some civilian thought on defense and military affairs—with no complaint from the military.

From an internal perspective, how the military conducts itself has more to do with the individual member and his or her conduct with respect to accepted standards of behavior from a military point of view. Of course, this is not exclusive of the external factors mentioned above—society's expected "image" of its individual military members.

So, in this internal respect, ethical issues in the military encompass *both* society's requirements of loyalty and effectiveness from its military *and* the institutional loyalty each individual member owes to the military at large, as well as to his or her own specific military unit. Again, this is not a phenomenon restricted to the military; it is typical of any organization important enough to deserve its own identity as a social actor.

Some Concepts "Held Sacred" in the Military

It is a feature of any organizational culture to favor societal values that most contribute to the organization's existence and development. So any values that promote the organization and its effectiveness are particularly cherished.

The military's conservative nature and rather rigid hierarchical structure promote its effectiveness and survival as an organization. This does not mean that most of the military necessarily supports conservative political parties but that, for the most part, the military is prone to be against sudden, deep, unexpected changes in a society's way of life. Because they value hierarchy—as discussed later—most people in the military would prefer an organized, stable world in which power positions are clearly defined and do not change—or only change following well-established, enduring rules.

A world of black-and-white, absolute, and unchangeable "rights" and "wrongs" is very comfortable for people like military members, who are supposed to make swift, dramatic, sometimes life-and-death decisions. Shades of gray can make things confusing and disturbingly complex for the decision maker.

Since risking life is intrinsic to military activities, it is hardly surprising that values connected with fearlessness and solidarity, mainly *interna corporis*, are so highly esteemed among the military. So courage, loyalty, truthfulness, and all the other qualities that make conduct predictable—encompassed in the concept of integrity—are among the core virtues in any armed force. What becomes an ethical issue is not the statement of these values but how to make them operational. I will come back to this issue later.

Among the military's core values are hierarchy and discipline, which together promote an attitude of holding obedience sacred. Let's dwell a bit on this.

The requirement for obedience is integral to discipline. Why discipline (and obedience) is essential to the armed forces is evident. The military must be always ready to face situations in which it could be mandatory to (1) accomplish actions coordinated in time, space, intensity, and mode in a way that makes them appear as a whole—a collective,

very complex, purposeful action performed preferably with the maximum economy of effort; (2) risk their own lives; and (3) perform actions potentially so destructive that under normal conditions they would cause a guilty conscience in the performer. Therefore, it is essential to submit the military to the physical, psychological, and moral training suitable to make it able to, under certain circumstances, perform actions effectively while suspending, if only for a while, the paralyzing effects of the perplexity that such actions would normally cause in rational, ethical people. Briefly stated, it is essential that the military be trained to obey orders effectively.

However, it is not easy to systematically block personal judgment regarding one's own actions while being fully aware of them.[10] So holding obedience sacred is the way to accomplish that aim because the agent becomes convinced that obeying is more important, better, or more righteous than following the inner imperative of one's personal judgment. In order for one to do this without a personal inner conflict, he or she has to believe that the person in charge is in some sense "superior" to the person who obeys. This is the root of hierarchy.

Hierarchy—in the military or elsewhere—involves *functions*. In the military, the commanding officer must be certain that his or her command will be strictly followed. This allows the commander to manipulate his or her subordinates—the people who will actually perform the effective actions—collectively, exerting control over them to the extent needed for very great operational precision. Such is the logical justification for hierarchy. However, this is just a view on the grounds of organizational necessity; it is not immediately apparent to people who lack abstract vision. On the other hand, it is not appealing enough to motivate one to renounce the supremacy of personal judgment. Thus, another element must be added to make it easier to hold obedience sacred—people must believe that information is not evenly disseminated. The person who obeys lacks information known exclusively by the commander—who is better informed, more experienced, and *knows better*. When there is an honest, intelligent, selective procedure for appointing military leaders, this is true. However, it is not always the case, and even the best selection process cannot guarantee good results. Usually the commander-subordinate hierarchy never changes during military members' careers. So there is psychological acceptance—an act of faith—of the superior's actual superiority. The hierarchy of functions becomes a hierarchy of *people*. So the captain comes to think the colonel is somehow superior, forgetting that it is the functional hierarchy rather than the personal one that involves superiority. In essence, the military hierarchy is raised to the category of a metaphysical proposition!

Such ideas simply serve to illuminate at least two aspects of the ethical problem in the military. The first is that since military hierarchy is acknowledged as a metaphysical proposition, obedience to the superior becomes a good in itself, regardless of its concrete results—or, at least, it justifies a claim against accountability on grounds of what is called "the principle of due obedience." Second, the metaphysical vision of hierarchy lurks into the military culture to "infiltrate" possible worldviews in such a way that most individual members of the military would be prone to accept the notion of a world that displays (or should display) a hierarchical organization based on essential, absolute criteria rather than on efficiency criteria to achieve desired ends through acceptable means. Obviously (1) it is not true that every military necessarily shares such a metaphysical concept of the world, and (2) such a metaphysical concept of the world is not exclusive to the military. It is not our purpose here to further speculate on metaphysical views of the world. Our only aim is to point out that there can be a link between people's belief in a metaphysical view of hierarchy and a Weltanschauung that is relevant to the discussion of ethical issues they face.

The Ethical Problem in Military Conduct

The ethical problem in military conduct is shaped by two expectations: those of society

and those of the military. The most puzzling issue today about military ethics involves determining how to reconcile the military's standards for acceptable conduct with those of society. Take, for example, the controversies about the involvement of women in typical military activities, especially as combatants, or the compatibility between the display of specific sexual choices and service in the military.[11]

Even when there are undisputed values, an occasional conflict could still arise. For instance, nobody disputes that courage is a virtue (in the military and elsewhere). However, in some societies (or parts of them) it could be deemed "courageous" to blindly obey orders that would put an individual member of the military at risk—physically, morally, or legally. For other societies, "courage" could entail resisting illegal or illegitimate orders and risking one's career, if not survival. Of course, these are complex problems, and most of the time, in the event of a controversial action, it is extremely difficult to determine the factual truth and the real aim of the actions at stake.

Take, for example, the "ethics of conviction." Dr. Toner employs such an ethical view when he states that "*human beings generally know right from wrong, honor from shame, virtue from vice*" (italics in original).[12] People know what is right and submit to a Kantian categorical imperative[13]—you have to do what you know is right. Under such an imperative, the concept of good is not open to debate; people must simply do what their convictions tell them to do without dwelling on the consequences. When prescribing a teleological adherence to righteousness, however, the ethics of conviction can lose sight of any ethical criticism of the means and ways to reach the proposed end.

Another example is the "ethics of responsibility," promoted by Max Weber, involving a greater concern about the intermediate states, which occur before reaching the ultimate end. Thus, the ethics of responsibility stresses the ethical concern about means as well as about unexpected or undesired collateral results.

In many situations involving ethics of conviction and ethics of responsibility, it is not that easy to determine which would be the uncontroversial "right." This, then, is the core of the ethical problem of conduct. Difficulties could arise at different levels: it could be difficult for one to establish his or her own convictions about right or wrong from initial perception, to deliberate about the situation, and finally to choose a course of action.

The Ethical Problem and the "Mistakes" Pointed Out by Dr. Toner

The point so far is that to teach ethics in the military, we must first determine a minimum core of values that can be made operational and that is not controversial, both to the society at large and to the military. If such core values are found, the second problem is how to teach them effectively.

Several relevant questions deal with this issue: are there any values that society has forgotten but which are still important for the military? If so, is it possible to teach them without creating a conflict with the standard behavior cherished, accepted, or tolerated by society? If such a conflict is unavoidable, are the armed forces (ethically) entitled to persist in urging the practice of such values? On the other hand, should it be the (ethical) duty of the armed forces to insist on such values? Or should the armed forces reformulate their views of reality to adjust themselves to the values that effectively belong to society?

These questions need answers before going further into how to teach ethics in the military. By examining Dr. Toner's insightful series of "mistakes," we can hopefully narrow in on a line of reasoning toward some answers.

Mistake Number Zero

"Some people argue that, in a multicultural country, we are hard pressed to delineate *one* understanding of ethics. . . . None of these points makes any negative impact on this fun-

damental truth: *human beings generally know right from wrong, honor from shame, virtue from vice*" (italics in original).[14] The core issue in this quotation is how to understand such a thing as "*one* understanding of ethics." I certainly agree with Dr. Toner on the general willingness of people to support ethical behaviors and to criticize unethical ones—in the military or in any other professional group. However, as mentioned before, problems do not arise when people are supposed to declare themselves for or against ethics—or even when they are invited to voice what they deem to be ethical behavior. Difficulties come when such good intentions must be made operational.

So I would agree that there is a problem with looseness of customs and consequent conduct. This is a real problem today in some societies in which people in power appear to be above the law or their stated ethical standards hypocritically conflict with their actual behavior.

Because, however, the cherished, accepted, or tolerated behaviors effectively change in time, in many circumstances people find it difficult to form their own convictions about what is right or wrong. People's convictions are as much determined by the influence of others as by a personal sense of ethics.

This is why controversies about abortion, alternative sexual orientation, legal protection against discrimination, legalization of certain drugs, legal status of infidelity, and so forth rage today on the agendas of the Western nations and give birth to passionate debates about which everyone—no matter which side he or she takes—is quite sure, in good faith, that his or her side is the defender of civilization. Contrast this to questions like the existence of angels or of the devil, the true meaning of the Eucharist (whose discussion in the Middle Ages gave origin to the physical concept of mass),[15] or believing or not believing in God. In the past, a "mistake" about them was serious enough to be punishable by death. Yet, today such questions—outside specialized forums of discussion—only cause condescending smiles or an impotent gesture of dismay.

Regarding the armed forces of primarily Judeo-Christian nations, if people had no difficulty reconciling the categorical "*Thou shalt not kill*" with perfecting the art of war, any ethical concept would likely become strengthened or bypassed through the enunciation of adequate sophisms. The only requirement is ideological homogeneity. When such ideological homogeneity is deemed helpful to the society's preservation and development, it will eventually become a rational truth with the blessings of the accepted religion. However, our present situation is not so simple. Because ideological homogeneity is not a feature of contemporary times, our present "ethical bewilderment" is not a result of ignorance or malice; it is just reality in a pluralistic world.

Mistake Number One

"*We sometimes suppose, as teachers of military ethics, that, despairing of today's youth, we must 'build from the bottom up.' . . . People entering our forces today already have the power of ethical judgment. We do not have to reinvent the ethical wheel*" (italics in original).[16] Dr. Toner is quite right: *we do not have to reinvent the ethical wheel.* First of all, that "minimum core of values that can be made operational and that is not controversial, both to the society at large and to the military," which I mentioned before, does exist; the only difficulty lies in articulating its axiological content. But the mere living together of people without continuous serious conflicts shows that they share some values, which they make operational in similar ways.

It is essential, I believe, that all citizens and professionals (military members included) be humble enough to acknowledge the truth of two statements: (1) there are shared values that operate in people's lives, and (2) such values do not depend on our own understanding or our own acceptance; it is a social fact.[17] What we must do is build upon such a "shared foundation"—through sound arguments and, most of all, through good examples—to help

people improve according to what we think, in good faith, is possible and necessary.

Mistake Number Two

"Just as it is a mistake to assume that people have no ethical judgment, so is it *a mistake to assume that they have superior ethical judgment . . . . Our task as teachers of military ethics is to impart some sense of order, some overarching scheme of discipline, to the ethical sense and awareness that already exist"* (italics in original).[18] Again, I agree with Dr. Toner. Everybody is endowed with the ability to make ethical judgments. It is immaterial to discuss here whether people can have a universal intuition of good through some natural ability or share the sense of what is vital for the society in which they all live. What matters is people's capacity to factually make ethical judgments. And such capacity operates inherently in the person who is unable to get rid of it, even when acting under orders and when told not to judge his or her superior's motives or choices.[19]

However, when Dr. Toner says that not everybody has "superior ethical judgment," he seems to acknowledge that when several people exert their ability to make an ethical judgment about the same subject, the conclusions they reach can be diverse, which seems inconsistent with the statement that they "generally know right from wrong." In fact, there is no contradiction at all—people generally know right from wrong, but the notion of right and wrong they have is not the same for everybody.

Nevertheless, when speaking of *superior* ethical judgment, Dr. Toner seems to suggest that there is a "right" that is better than other "rights." It seems to me that it is ethically relevant to decide *who* determines such an absolute "right" (or, at least, the preferred "right") because a mistake on this important issue can give rise to many kinds of disastrous consequences for society. A member of the Roman Catholic Church could say that decisions regarding faith or morals are up to the Pope, speaking ex cathedra under the inspiration of the Holy Ghost and thus infallibly. This answer might seem right to me except that, contrary to what happened in the Middle Ages, not everybody has to be a member of the Roman Catholic Church. We could consider creating a deliberative body, like a parliament, specifically to decide about the preferred "right." However, since Socrates' discussion of virtue, the difference between the coercive capacity of a formal authority and the cogency of arguments capable of being based on judgments of value is clear. In short, when there is a meaningful split regarding the rightness or wrongness of certain conduct in a pluralistic society, I cannot see how it is possible to determine, in an ethical way, the *superior* "right."

However, I gladly agree with Dr. Toner that the only function of a teacher—who teaches ethics or something else, in civilian or military schools—is always *to impart some sense of order, some overarching scheme of discipline to the . . . sense and awareness.* In highly objective matters, a teacher imparts to his or her students information that will lead them to immediately acknowledge certain laws or truths of nature. In fact, this is what defines the degree of objectivity of an academic subject—not any professional *lobby* to Congress or to an educational board. However, when an educational program deals with strong opinionative content and a low degree of objectivity, teachers can offer their students only an improvement in their ability to exert criticism and organize thought. Such is the teacher's business. It is doubtful whether intending anything else could be deemed ethical behavior for a teacher.

Mistake Number Three

"The fact that the boss is ethical does not mean that the organization will be a moral exemplar; and the fact that the boss is corrupt does not mean that everyone in the unit will be infected with ethical disease. But isn't there some common sense here? If people desire an ethical organization, they should choose ethical leaders. It is not a guarantee of ethical success, but it is a much better bet than choosing ethical slackers as leaders" (italics in original).[20] Beginning his discussion of this "mistake," Dr.

Toner refers en passant to whether or not teaching ethics should be left to chaplains; he then elaborates on the relevance of the commanding officer to ethical education.

I share Dr. Toner's opinion about how helpful good advice from chaplains could be, mainly if associated with good examples. On the other hand, contrary to commandants and teachers, chaplains have the *right* to indoctrinate their audience without failing to be ethical. It is normal and appropriate for them to preach their religion if their audience is free to choose the religion in which they want to be indoctrinated. However, chaplains should make sure that their teachings are not given in a way that could break military solidarity or fail to show respect to any citizen on the grounds of his or her beliefs—something the citizenry morally deserves and can legally demand.

It is essential to my point that the state be a secular institution. I do not deny the great importance for many individuals—if not for all—of faith as the ultimate support of the truth. This is a very important issue in the *private* lives of people. However, no religious way of thinking can be imposed by the secular state without offending the legally protected freedom of conscience. On the other hand, secular criteria exist for finding and supporting truth—logic-mathematic demonstration and empirical proof with all the procedures loosely defined as "the scientific method." For instance, someone who smokes could dislike hearing a doctor sponsored by the state declare the high probability of smokers to develop lung cancer or a heart condition. However, much scientific evidence buttresses the doctor's statement. So it is not appropriate to block the spreading of the doctor's information on grounds of offensive behavior. But it is unacceptable for a state-sponsored minister to tell another church's follower (or someone who refrains from following any church at all) that he or she is going to hell for not being a follower of the minister's religion, regardless of whether or not this person believes in hell. The point is that there is no incompatibility between religious thinking and the secular state only if the state does not discriminate among religions and religious ministers.

Apart from chaplains, I do not deem it ethical behavior for a teacher or a commanding officer to indoctrinate the people he or she teaches or commands in his or her own specific religious beliefs. Regarding commanders, they can offer no better teaching than their good example in everyday life, mainly when doing little things. Because they think everybody pays attention to greater things, people are usually very careful when doing them.

Teachers and theoreticians of ethics can and should repeat to their students and to everybody else the difference between the coercive capacity of authority and the cogency of sound ethical judgment. The obedience owed to a military leader, restricted to the very limits of his or her legal authority and intended to guarantee the effectiveness of his or her performance in command, does not make that leader's decisions wise, right, or ethically sound; it only makes them mandatory for their subordinates. Dr. Toner is quite right when he says that the commander's example is a powerful input, but, at the same time, a corrupt boss cannot infect an entire organization when it is ethically healthy.

Mistake Number Four

"Not every word and not every action are deeply troubling moral quandaries. We simply cannot have commanders who become catatonic at the prospect of making an ethical misjudgment" (italics in original).[21] This is true for everyone who must make swift decisions that can be consequential to someone else's life—whether he or she is a commanding officer at war or a brain surgeon performing surgery. Even though all decisions are likely to inspire ethical concerns, not all of them imply an ethical puzzle because they are not equally relevant.

The ethics of responsibility sheds light on another aspect of the decision's relevance: if we are responsible for the consequences of our actions, no matter the intended ends, we should strive to be aware of all the possible results of our actions—*and many times we don't*.

Hence, the question, Why is it so? In many cases, it is perfectly possible to forecast disastrous consequences from a not-so-relevant action, but we do not pay attention to them; is this incompetence or an ethical fault? That leads to another question: is it ethical for us to accept power and authority in areas above our level of technical or emotional competence? And in a hierarchical structure where obedience is held sacred, is it ethical to grant commanding power to someone whose competence is questionable just because he or she has enough seniority and was once a loyal, cooperative member of our own staff?[22]

Mistake Number Five

"*The idea that every commander is an ethics teacher is absolutely correct; the idea that every teacher is thereby a competent classroom instructor is absolutely wrong. . . . In teaching courses on military ethics, I want students to read good sources about military ethics and not to assume, necessarily, that the commander is an expert in the field of teaching military ethics*" (italics in original).[23] Here, Dr. Toner addresses the sensitive issue of factual competence versus official competence. There is widespread understanding among the military that *mission is more important than specialization*, which means that whoever is tasked with a mission must and *can* accomplish it, whether or not he or she is competent enough to do so.

It is useful to establish the difference between "official competence" and "factual competence." In the military, the former is declared authoritatively by the unit or organization due to official position or rank, and the latter is demonstrated by the person himself or herself.

A commander who was never trained to present a lecture can still be a gifted speaker; however, this should not be expected. If he or she is not factually competent to address a large audience, no matter if he or she is a person of admirable integrity, his or her speech will produce only a feeling of respectful pity. Such a person should not be put (or put himself or herself) in such a situation. He or she must teach through his or her example, which usually would be more convincing than the brightest lecture. It is sad to see a great man or woman, able to perform great things, stumbling on minor difficulties.

Mistake Number Six

"At so many levels in the Air Force, we make the mistake of thinking that *curricula make teachers. . . . Get out of the way and let teachers teach*" (italics in original).[24] Dr. Toner is quite right again, and his comment reaches farther out than perhaps intended.

Formal rules are not a guarantee, per se, of high-level results. The formal rules intended for state control, for example, are not enough to ensure that all politicians will always act as true statesmen; they do not even ensure honesty among them. The formal mechanisms for professions, which exist in countries like Brazil, do not guarantee good practice; rather, they can be a hindrance when it comes to prosecuting and punishing malpractice. So *curricula* do not make teachers.

However, we must understand that restrictive, controlling, and impersonal mechanisms planned for the "improvement" of activities—which keep competent people from doing their jobs, as Dr. Toner rightly points out—are but a process of spreading out egalitarian opportunities, typical in democracies. The idea behind them is very simple: replacing individual decisions with a more or less complex rule, which would be self-applied, to make everybody's performance *equal*. So all people would be eligible to perform a task, regardless of individual attributes.

Apparently, such uniformity has its advantages. However, it generates several mistakes and drawbacks as well.

Fundamental Mistake. No matter how automatic a process becomes, the human element still exists. Personal idiosyncrasies are still present and acting, albeit in an indirect mode. Thus, it is even more difficult to detect or perhaps correct them because they are disguised and shielded behind the apparent impersonality of the process.

Weakening of Accountability. The more individual judgment is excluded from a pro-

cess, the less accountable people are for their actions. Of course, commanders can always be accountable for everything that happens under their watch. However, such legal fiction cannot long survive the pressures of reality: nobody can be held accountable for something he or she did not actually do and knew nothing of.

A special kind of weakening of accountability happens when a technical document has to be produced by experts from a lower hierarchical level or by contributors external to the institutional hierarchy. The bureaucratic path followed by such a document toward the higher authorities can be full of "improvements" from intermediate-level authorities whose official competence grows along the path while their factual competence may decline proportionately. The changes inserted in such documents are not usually discussed with the lower levels that worked on it, both because they already contributed and because it would violate the hierarchical principle. When things happen this way—and they do—what reaches the higher authority is a "Frankenstein" built "with everybody's cooperation," sometimes bringing an incredible array of silliness before the final authority. In the armed forces, when the subject is typically a military issue, such a procedure carries low risk because authorities with higher official competence usually have higher factual competence. But when the issues at stake are not typically military, then such problems can exist.

Devaluation of Competence. Imposing regulations and guidelines might be intended to allow people with poor competence to perform tasks at the same level of excellence as people with a high competence level. Yet, most often this is not so. Competent people can always further improve their performance by using some support intended to help less competent people, but formal restrictions usually impose lower performances as a "least common denominator" standard.

Favoring Form Rather Than Content. This is a consequence of the equalizing process that contaminates all educational activities, if not all organizational activities. As rules, norms, manuals, and the like multiply, providing more and more detailed instruction, people end up feeling that their duties were accomplished when they acted by the book, regardless of the result accomplished. If the goals were not fulfilled, someone else should be guilty because "I just followed the book."

We can easily generalize Dr. Toner's very sensible comment: in all organizations, factual competence should be consequential for the accomplishment of the organization's purposes. It should be mandatory for things to be done by people who know how to do them—teachers or any other professionals. If a higher-level authority does not agree with some conclusion in a work, such a person should, at the very least, ask who did it and ask for the reasons underlying the conclusion—and such reasons should also be brought to the decision maker. By doing so, the decision maker would be better informed because there is no guarantee that the intermediate-level authority's criticism is always factually right.

Conclusion

Because contemporary Western societies—here called pluralistic societies—shelter a large ideological heterogeneity, they have lost commonality in appreciating key ethical values. The ethical problem is not that people promote antiethical conduct or that people experience difficulty in voicing their ethical opinions. The problem arises when such values must be made operational in everyday life. People can agree on the ethical values, but they can also disagree, in good faith, on what practical behavior would match such values.

This axiological perplexity affects all organizations in society—including the military. Despite this, the armed forces are always a very important organization to society. Therefore, ethical problems in the military are important to the military and to society at large.

The ethical problem of military conduct involves value judgments by individual mili-

tary members regarding their actions. Such judgments should take into account the specific rules that bind the individual to the military; these rules reflect society's expectations toward its armed forces and the internal administration of interests, both of the military at large and of individual members as well. As in all organizations, the armed forces are selectively sensitive to society's values as a whole, and are prone to hold sacred those values particularly compatible with the military's purpose and how well it performs. The ethical problem in the military includes making sure that individual behavior is in line with societal values and military values.

The ethical bewilderment that permeates contemporary, pluralistic societies is also found in their armed forces as well as in all other important organizations. Because the ethical problem in the military is of utmost importance, it is natural for the armed forces to become more aware of the ethical problem and more sensitive to the urgency in settling it for the benefit of good performance. However, what "ethical behavior" means in the military is not inherently different from what it means elsewhere in society. The overall ethical problem is a social issue. No organization or specific social group is entitled to take over as a guardian of social values.

The academic teaching of ethics meets two kinds of difficulties. First, that teaching should articulate some axiological core capable of being put into practice without great controversy. The second difficulty entails how to accomplish such teaching in view of specific restrictions that affect the armed forces and military education.

This article has shown that formal difficulties affecting the teaching of ethics in the military just reflect wider difficulties for a hierarchical organization like the armed forces in managing the relationship between official competence and factual competence. Such difficulties are not exclusive to the armed forces, but they are emphasized by the military's strong belief in hierarchy.

So, inspired by the practical concerns of Dr. Toner, who analyzed the teaching of ethics from his extensive experience with the United States Air Force, this article has tried to view the problem in a broader scope, pointing out that

- there is a global crisis underlying the ethical problem, which is sometimes called "Western crisis," "values' crisis," or "modernity's crisis" and that
- some aspects of the ethical problem are rooted in or are affected by the very nature of organizations as social actors. This is not exclusive to the armed forces, but specific features of the military color the problem with special shades.

Further criticism should be developed regarding ethical aspects of performance criteria, relations between work and its aim, and relations between actors and the final consequence of their actions. These, however, are issues for another day. □

Notes

1. Dr. James H. Toner, "Mistakes in Teaching Ethics," *Airpower Journal* 12, no. 2 (Summer 1998): 45–51.

2. By "single actor" is meant the individual as the acting person. A collective actor consists of many people (agents) who act in a coordinate way to fulfill an end that was not established by the individual agents but is determined by a different commanding level, which could be embodied in a collective board or in an individual decision maker.

3. As used in political science, *ideology* is defined as a set of ideas—true or false—promoted by a political group as a tool for taking over and maintaining political power.

4. Toner, 46–50.

5. For the concept of "symbolic universe," see P. L. Berger and T. Luckmann, *A Construção Social da Realidade* (Petrópolis: Vozes, 1985).

6. One should be cautious in applying such descriptive qualifications to people. For example, philosopher Jürgen Habermas, whose work offers many inputs to support the "circumstantialist" standing, believes in the universal intuition of the good, as he himself told the author in private conversation.

7. See, for instance, E. Enriquez, "Os desafios éticos nas organizaçãoes modernas," *Revista de Administração de Empresas* 37, no. 2 (April–June 1998): 6–17.

8. Once, while representing Brazil at the Inter-American Defense College, Washington, D.C., the author was explaining to an American diplomat how the Brazilian selective process to the military academies works, pointing out that it is objective and free from political pressures. A Latin-American navy officer intruded upon the conversation and asked for the mechanisms that would allow for the undercover manipulation of the process, mentioning some possible examples. As I assured him that none of them existed in the Brazilian case, he almost provoked a diplomatic incident by declaring emphatically, "I do not believe!" When he made it clear that he was serious, I explained to him that his behavior was inappropriate. Regardless of his lack of good manners in this case, such a comment clearly indicated that in his country, it would be unthinkable that "everyone" could reach the status of a military officer just by having the intellectual merits and the physical fitness required by regulation. He simply could not believe that there was no hidden manipulation to preserve the social homogeneity of the caste-like military stratum. He confessed this later when apologizing to me for his rudeness. Regardless of his impulsiveness, he turned out to be a nice person.

9. If readers wish to conduct a comparative analysis, they should check, for example, the constitutions of Brazil, Chile, and Honduras.

10. This is the dilemma of administration: restraining information to make the agents follow orders blindly is sometimes the choice of linear (hierarchical) organizations. However, such a limitation could greatly diminish the overall efficacy of the collective actor, mainly when the intended goals cannot be reached through mere routine. Many recent articles in the United States defend the need to expand the horizon of the views held by the individual members of the US military—even though, for cultural reasons, members of the American military already enjoy a broader or freer view of their profession than that allowed their counterparts in other countries. The author's personal experience in dealing with general officers in the Brazilian military in the 12 years he served the government led to the following conjecture: commandants who have confidence in their own intellectual capacity are more likely to show their subordinates or associates the "bigger picture." They understand that they can receive better advice from better informed people. Other commandants feel challenged if somebody presents them some idea different from the ones they prefer or have already formulated and that fit the boundaries of their understanding.

11. Berger and Luckmann note that, for the ancient Greeks, homosexuality was a military *virtue.* Today, many Western armed forces can be very reticent about the concept that homosexuality and the capacity for combat or command are not incompatible.

12. Toner, 45–46.

13. For Kant, the categorical imperative is an absolute imposition to practical reason.

14. Toner, 45–46.

15. See Max Jammer, *Concepts of Mass, in Classical and Modern Physics* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1961).

16. Toner, 46.

17. This does not mean any moral laissez-faire or laissez-passer. Nevertheless, the moral tutelage of the society by a military or civilian elite implies great ethical problems. I understand that any citizen has the right—if not the duty—to promote the values that his or her conscience tells him or her are in the best interest of civilization. He or she would do so through social interchange, legitimate participation in political life, and all the processes of informal teaching and learning that occur during people's lives. However, to assign an ethical priority to a professional category, social class, or any other collectivistic abstraction seems to me a dangerous absurdity.

18. Toner, 46–47.

19. It is true that some people believe so fervently in the sacredness of the military hierarchy and in obedience that they refuse to judge any act of a "superior" authority. However, such an attitude—which approaches religious bigotry—is not usual and could be deemed pathological. It is possible to produce such an attitude through mind-control techniques, individually or collectively. Obviously, such techniques are inhumane and antiethical. The essence of military discipline lies not in obeying superiors because they are always right. It lies in obeying them *even though* they could be wrong because they need such a degree of obedience to manipulate the collective actor under their command and to evaluate the results of their orders. Without discipline, this would be impossible.

20. Toner, 47.

21. Ibid., 48.

22. The relationship between ethical deficiency and incompetence is interesting and deserves elaboration. Incompetent people need to rely on someone else's advice to practice acts that such advisors are not allowed to perform because they have not been deemed officially competent. This is a sham because the advisors become the real decision makers (because their bosses cannot make their own evaluations), but such advisors do not bear any responsibility for their decisions (because making decisions is not part of their official competence). Another possible consequence of such incompetence is that some commanders hire staffers less competent than themselves because they are fearful of losing any of their power or because their egos cannot tolerate the presence of an intellectual superior. Because armed forces are always very important, no matter how peaceful a nation, such a situation could cause incalculable damage to that nation's interests.

23. Toner, 49.

24. Ibid., 49–50.