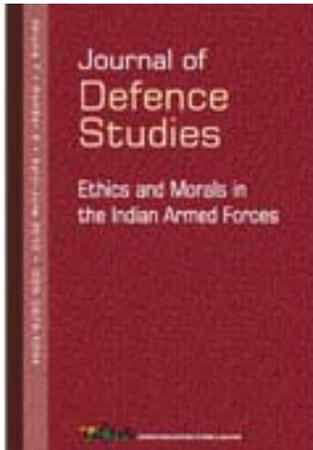


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Ethics and Morals in the Armed Forces A Framework for Positive Action

*Dhruv C. Katoch**

Value systems form the spine of modern society, religion and every individual's conscience with moral codes defining 'appropriate' and 'expected' activity. Ethics refer to an individual's actions that are consistent with such value systems. While the former constitutes a basic human marker of right behaviour and conduct, the latter are a set of guidelines that define acceptable behaviour and practices for a certain group of individuals or society. Within this construct, this article traces the origin and growth of Indian and Western ideas on the subject and probes similarities between the two. The article thereafter dwells on the perceived decline in moral values in India—a widespread belief—even though no empirical study exists to substantiate this claim. The author then suggests that the focus needs to shift from a perceived 'ethics crisis' to how ethical leadership can be strengthened within the armed forces.

MORALITY AND ETHICS

Morals are values which we attribute to a system of beliefs. These could be religious, political or some other set of beliefs but need to be differentiated from religious, or fanatic or political perception. An assimilation of those beliefs leads to morality. It is believed that all of us, throughout our lives, act from a developing moral core. Morals form the spine of modern society, religion and every individual's conscience, with moral codes defining 'appropriate' and 'expected' activity. These beliefs get their authority from something outside the individual—for example, they could be societal

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impositions. We could thus categorize values such as honesty and integrity as moral values—being as it were derived from a higher authority. We could also term values as utilitarian or related to one's profession.¹ In the military, these could relate to values such as courage, excellence, team spirit, service and the like, which define what is good and proper for promoting an ethos within the military. The same could be applied to all other professions.

Ethics is about actions and decisions. When one acts in ways which are consistent with our beliefs, whether secular or derived from a religious authority, the same could be characterised as acting ethically.² The term 'ethics' also refers to understanding and adopting moral values within the home or workplace. Ethical behaviour thus emanates from generally accepted norms of personal and social ethics and finds reflection in ideals to which the state subscribes. This is the crux of principles of governance wherein the society sets standards reflective of the general moral conscience or principles of social ethics which are then incorporated into laws for the state to implement and dispense justice, and thus obtain legitimacy and allegiance of the body politic.³ Defining what is ethical is consequently not an individual exercise.

If society is dominated by a single cultural or religious belief system, then what is ethical and what is moral may be defined as the same thing. However, in open societies there could be very wide difference in opinion as to whether a given action is ethical or otherwise. Ongoing debates on abortion and homosexuality are ready examples. We see how values are defined in the cultural context too. Nepotism has negative connotations in some societies. In others, it is not viewed with the same degree of concern as the cultural obligation to look after one's family forms a stronger input. To that extent, ethics, while not being situational has a situational content. While we may agree on values, we may disagree as to which values apply or which actions best satisfy those values.

There are different types of ethics and the application of each differs from one situation to another. In the case of normative ethics, the notion behind what declares an action as 'right' or 'wrong' is derived and defined. In meta-ethics, judgmental properties within a situation are investigated. Issues relating to the sensitivity of ontology, semantics and epistemology are explored in this stream of ethics.

While morals define our character, ethics point towards the application of morality. Morals constitute a basic human marker of right behaviour and conduct, whereas ethics are more like a set of guidelines that define acceptable behaviour and practices for a certain group of individuals or society. In the wake of this understanding, national, social and workplace ethics are based

on the abstract moral codes adopted and adhered to by each member of the group. Ethics lay down a set of codes that people must follow. Ethics are relative to peers, profession, community, society and nation. Morals are dependent on an individual's choice, or beliefs or religion and can mean doing the right or wrong thing.

CONCEPTUAL AND CULTURAL FRAMEWORK

Concepts of ethics and morality have received considerable attention from the great thinkers and philosophers since earliest times. In ancient Greece, the thoughts of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, the Cynics, Cyrenaic hedonism, Epicurus, the Stoics and Pyrrhonian scepticism impacted greatly on Western civilization and continue to do so till date. In their moral theories, the ancient philosophers delved on three aspects: virtue and the virtues, happiness and the soul. Virtue was also spoken of as excellence. Conceptions of human excellence include such disparate figures as the Homeric warrior chieftain and the Athenian statesman of the period of its imperial expansion. According to Plato, excellence for a man is managing the business of the city so that he benefits his friends, harms his enemies and comes to no harm himself. From this description, we can see that some versions of human excellence have a problematic relation to the moral virtues. Courage, moderation and justice were prime species of moral virtue. How the ancient philosophers enmeshed the virtues with the concept of happiness and soul make for interesting study. These thoughts, permeated down the ages, interacted later with Christian and Islamic teachings. In the Renaissance, these ideas were once again propagated and today, along with philosophical ideas of Kant and others, form the basis of ethics, in conjunction with religious thought.⁴

Reflections on the works of Socrates and others give one the view that their theories were centred on the moral agent—the emphasis being on a just person. While the West has drawn heavily from the thoughts of the ancient masters, the modern moral theory is *action centred*, explaining morality in terms of actions and their circumstances, and the ways in which actions are moral or immoral. To the modern thinker, 'just' actions are logically prior to just persons and must be specifiable in advance of any account of what it is to be a just person. These thinkers can roughly be divided into two groups. Those who judge the morality of an action on the basis of its known or expected consequences are consequentialist; and those who judge the morality of an action on the basis of its conformity to certain kinds of laws, prohibitions or positive commandments are deontologists. The former view an action as

moral if it provides the greatest good for the greatest number. Deontologists say an action is moral if it conforms to a moral principle. While these thinkers are not uninterested in the moral disposition to produce such actions, their focus is on actions, their consequences and the rules or other principles to which they conform. This focus explains the contemporary fascination with such questions of casuistry as, say, 'the conditions under which an action like abortion is morally permitted or immoral'.

In India, the defining concept has been dharma. In almost all post-Vedic uses of the word dharma, morality, ethics and virtue always seem to be implicated. The debate is about what constitutes ethical or moral behaviour and not about a choice between a way of acting that is conclusively moral or immoral.

In his work, *Hindu Ethics: A Philosophical Study*, Roy Perrett offers a simple definition of ethics. Ethics, he says, is fundamentally concerned with two questions: 'What ought we to do?' and 'Why ought we to do it?'⁵ An ethical theory, in turn, 'typically involves two components: a theory of the Right and a theory of the Good'.⁶ Theories of the good in Hinduism, of the high values of the tradition, have been explicated at great length by scholars in every generation of Indological scholarship. Texts such as the Mahabharata, schools such as Samkhya and Yoga and the different strands of Vedanta are in agreement about what constitutes the good. However, Hindu literature as a whole rarely provides a straightforward answer to any question, and this is specifically so when we deal with theories of what is right. Thus, certain actions may be provisionally in accordance with ethical standards that are cognitively available to the individual (given the limitations of his/her spiritual understanding), but they may be ultimately ill-advised, given the highest ethical ideals. Ethical thinking is thus founded on two levels. The first is directed at the sophisticated intellects oriented towards the eternal, moksha; the other is directed at the less-evolved majority oriented towards the temporal, samsara.

Patanjali's Yogasutra prescribes a common code of conduct for all aspiring towards freedom in its '*yamas*' and '*nyamas*'. But in its implementation, it is premised on a certain degree of self-awareness in the individual. A person is thus required to be at a stage of spiritual development where all-embracing precepts can be recognized as being superior to and superseding the narrower ones of class, caste, sex, and so on. While this universalist dharma is hailed as being both the primary and the most crucial ethic, it is dependent upon the spiritual insight and wisdom of the individual. Ethics and self-cultivation then are not separate acts but are, in fact, the same thing. In refining one's

moral acts, one is cultivating oneself, and in cultivating oneself, one refines one's moral acts. In the Hindu view, it would seem that altruistic acts are a spontaneous and unprompted expression of one's mental and spiritual self-refinement. This is reminiscent of the genre of virtue ethics developed in the West.⁷

The concept of dharma is also specific to types of people. We have '*Stri* Dharma' which advises on how to conduct ourselves as women; '*Varna* Dharma' based on occupational or vocational conduct; and others such as '*Asrama* Dharma', '*Kula* Dharma' and the like. To identify the right course of action for any particular time is to engage in an act of moral judgement. This is the dilemma that Arjuna famously faces at the beginning of the Bhagavad Gita. Arjuna is sometimes mistakenly interpreted as being called to choose between the ethics of violence and non-violence, but that is, in fact, a misunderstanding of the scenario. Arjuna's choice is between two subsets of his particular dharma, his '*Kula* Dharma' and his '*Varna* Dharma'. His '*Kula* Dharma', dictates that one does not injure one's family. His '*Varna* Dharma' however, requires him to kill whoever may be his foe in battle. Which dharma is the more pressing? Whatever decision he makes, he must violate one or the other duty. His challenge is to determine the most compelling dharma for his situation.

For the masses, there is the common dharma called '*Sadbarana*' or '*Samanya* Dharma'. As detailed in the Mahabharata, it cherishes nine ideals. Similar postulates exist in the Vamana Purana, the Arthashastra and other texts as also in the Ten Commandments of the Old Testament. Here, of course, we come up with a serious contradiction. If we have a minimum standard of behaviour that we claim is universally applicable at all times to all people regardless of difference and then we also have particular dharmas that directly contradict the common standard—a Kshatriya's duty to kill versus one's common duty to uphold ahimsa—then do we have a common standard of behaviour at all? The dilemma is real but the contradiction gets resolved when one understands that the Dharmasastras are legalist texts rather than moral ones, as they are sometimes mistaken to be. Their purpose was to set the guidelines for how individuals in society should function in relation to each other, so as to minimize disputes. To that extent, they were less concerned with ethics and more with the regulation of society. So, where do we look for a common and authoritative code of ethics?⁸

Here, we come to the idea that Hindu beliefs about common dharma are more subtly adumbrated: they are encoded into the behaviours of idealized epic characters of the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. All cultures feed their

young on morsels of the culture's foundational myths, but this is perhaps more true of Hindu culture than many others. Hindu children are raised on the bounty of nutriment gained from their epics, and it is from these that they first learn how to orient themselves morally to their world. This is the reason for the continuing currency and relevance of the Hindu epics, which have survived and thrived through the millennia, even where their cognates in other cultures have succumbed to historical erosion and retain only liminal cultural value. These epics form the core vocabulary of every artistic arena in Hinduism, and indeed, of the larger cultural landscape of South and Southeast Asia. Moral instruction is gleaned through constant exposure to them in various idioms. Ultimately, one aspires not simply to emulation of epic characters, but to an active re-creation or grafting of the epic narrative onto one's own individual life. In the epics, we find that there is a common dharma of sorts developed, but it never in fact stops being relational; rather, a vocabulary for general ethics is extracted, retrieved from the lexicon of the relational. Perhaps paradoxically, one is taught how to behave towards all human beings by learning how to behave as a particular person in particular relationships.⁹

In the reverse of what one is conditioned to do in ordinary Western-style modern life, where one places high importance on individualistic goals, according to the ideals of Ramayana, one should sacrifice one's own interests for the sake of one's nuclear family. One should sacrifice the interests of one's nuclear family for the sake of a more extended notion of family. Finally, one should sacrifice the interests of all narrow notions of family for the sake of broader notions of family, for dharma. The Indian Military Academy (IMA) credo fits in beautifully with this concept. But what is the practised reality?

THE REALITY OF INDIA

The defining moments of the last few years related not so much to positive developments within the country but rather to a series of exposes of wrongdoing within the government vividly brought home to the public by the print and visual media. The spotlight was focused on people in high positions in the political establishment, bureaucracy, industrial houses, and even the media who misused their position for personal gain which shook the confidence of the nation. Inevitably, some of the glare also fell on misdemeanors by some in the armed forces. Despite transgressions by Service personnel being mundane, they were viewed more seriously by a discerning public which rightly expects more from its men and women in uniform. They are expected to have a higher moral and ethical calibre due to their

training, motivation, discipline and regimental ethos despite coming from the same social milieu. Transgressions by the armed forces will thus rightly be subjected to high media scrutiny which consequently compels the Services to revisit the issue. Along with a lot of self-flagellation, there is the endless lament that the ethical leadership standards of the Indian Army are declining. Discussions on the subject, though animated, are based on opinions limited by one's own experiences and more often on hearsay, and lack the focus of analytical thought and detailed scrutiny.

Transgressions within the armed forces are not a new phenomenon and have been taking place earlier also. Then, as in the present, swift action has been taken against those found guilty of misconduct. While there is no cause for alarm, we cannot afford to be complacent. It is true that the armed forces have acquitted themselves with honour on all core issues, and nothing in today's environment indicates that on the issue of its core values and roles, there is any degradation from yesteryears. But that does not take away from the fact that the subject needs constant attention and must lie on the forefront of our consciousness. However, the focus needs to shift from what some perceive to be an 'ethics crisis' to how ethical leadership can be strengthened within the Services.

A FRAMEWORK FOR ETHICAL LEADERSHIP

What exactly is ethical leadership? To confine the term to good character and having 'the right values' is limiting as the reality of ethical leadership is far more complex and the stakes are much higher. As such, it must embody the purpose, vision and values both of the organization and of the rank and file, within an understanding of ethical ideals. These ideals give rise to viewing ethical leadership in terms of certain defining aspects or characteristics of ethical leaders. This broader concept empowers leaders to offer a way to understand ethical leadership that is more complex and more useful than just a matter of 'good character and values'. This empowerment can come about through creating an environment where ethical leadership can flourish and, in turn, set the standard for the rest of the country.¹⁰ Some thoughts on these issues are enumerated as follows.

Create the Culture

An ethical culture cannot be created by having a laminated 'values card' in the front pocket or a purely compliance approach to ethics to solve the 'ethics problem'. There is a need for a live conversation about ethics and values, where people hold each other responsible and accountable about whether

they are really living the values. And if such live conversations become a part of unit life, the rank and file would expect their officers to live by that culture too. Bringing such a culture to life means that people must have knowledge of alternatives, but still choose to stay within the bounds of ethical behaviour because it is important and inspires them. Making a strong commitment to bring such a culture to life is an essential part of ethical leadership. As an example, at the unit level, it could imply creating a culture where resorting to unfair means to win a competition is anathema. Where resorting to illegal means to create funds is abhorred even if such funds are ostensibly meant to be used for a good cause. The list of 'doable's' can be expanded, with the sum total constituting that unit's culture. In operations, such a culture could translate into honest reporting and not fudging records to make the unit look better than what it actually is. In short, it implies doing the right things and not just doing things right. Creating such a culture would also require appropriate dissent mechanisms. In the Army, subordinates will obey what they perceive to be legitimate authority even if there is no cost for disobedience. To avoid this 'authority trap' would require established and explicit ways for subordinates to 'push back' if a person thinks that something is ethically wrong and the values of the organization are being eroded. Indeed, many of the current scandals could have been prevented if only there were more creative ways for subordinates to express their dissatisfaction with the actions of their superior officers. The process of developing these mechanisms of dissent will vary in each unit and headquarter, but it is a crucial leadership task. And this must be a focal point for development in our training establishments.

Walk the Talk

It is important for leaders to tell a compelling and morally rich story, but ethical leaders must also embody and live the story. Lieutenant General S.K. Sinha, who served under General Cariappa when the latter was the Western Army Commander, recounts an incident which highlights this aspect. Returning from a tour, General Cariappa saw his two children coming out of his other staff car. They had missed the school bus and the aide-de-camp (ADC) had sent the staff car to fetch them. Cariappa was furious at the misuse of government transport and directed disciplinary action be taken against his aide. Next morning, he was told that the ADC had been admonished. 'What about the loss of petrol to the government,' queried the General? He was informed that the amount had been deposited in the treasury at the prescribed rate. 'Have it debited to my personal account,' was Cariappa's

cryptic comment. While the given incident relates to financial probity, the principle applies to all aspects of command functioning. The fig leaf of Service privileges cannot be applied to personal matters and certainly cannot be used as a justification for flouting Service norms. When breaches occur between what is preached and what is practised, the hierarchical structure of the Army may still elicit compliance but the leader stands exposed and his moral authority weakens. And successive dents at moral authority soon erode the leader's and the organization's credibility, for the leader is the ethical role model for his command.

The Selection Dilemma

The steeply hierarchical structure which exists in the armed forces results in the phenomenon of too many people chasing too few promotions. As in the economics model, here, too, the result is inflation in the assessment pattern and, at times, attempts by subordinates to ingratiate themselves with their superiors in the hope of getting a better chit. It is imperative that only the best in a batch rise to higher ranks and the onus for this lies on the shoulders of assessing officers. Ethical leaders pay special attention to this aspect. That this determination is, for the most part, subjective makes it a moral imperative for the assessing officers to be judicious in their appraisal, which should be free from bias due to regimental and other affiliations. Judging a person's integrity is far more important than evaluating their experience and skills. When primacy is given to this aspect, we can expect higher standards of ethical behaviour to pervade the organization.

The Organization Comes First

Ethical leaders view their role as promoting the effectiveness of their command and achieving organizational goals rather than being focused on personal advancement. They recognize that the value is in the success and well-being of their command. They thus identify and act on levers, such as troop loyalty, that drive organizational success. This also implies accepting responsibility and taking responsibility for the decisions that affect one's command. Ethical leadership demands that failures not be laid at the doorstep of subordinates and success not be appropriated as the personal handiwork of the leader.

Make Tough Calls

Ethical leaders do not hesitate to make difficult decisions. Many young officers have complained that if they 'took a stand', they would in all likelihood get sacked. That may be true, for the very act of taking a 'stand'

denotes risk. Without that risk, there can be no stand—no passion in what we believe in. Whether it is taking a stand in classical military terms as taken by Major Shaitan Singh and his company on the icy heights of Rezang La in 1962, or taking a stand to uphold one's values, the underlying principle is the same. Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw, as the Army Chief, stood his ground and resisted all attempts by the Prime Minister and her Cabinet who, due to political compulsions, wished to commence operations against East Pakistan in the summer of 1971. He put his career as the Army Chief at stake and stood by his professional opinion. By insisting on operations being shifted to winter, he ensured that the Army was well prepared, and the subsequent victory was a result of that decision. Many instances abound, both in peacetime and in war, of leaders taking tough decisions even at the risk of their career. This will remain a defining aspect of ethical leadership.

The Limits of Values

All values have limits in relation to the context or the audience in which they are being used. Ethical officers have an acute sense of the limits of the values they live by and are prepared, with solid reasons, to defend their chosen course of action. As an example, regimental or unit loyalty is often invoked to hide unit shortcomings. What happens then if an officer is asked to lie or perhaps just turn a blind eye to cover up his unit's misdemeanors? Is the unit's honour more important than the officer's? Or is the 'unit honour' story being used to preserve the reputation of the commanding officer? What happens if a staff officer is asked to lie about the conduct of the General he is serving? Whose honour is to be preserved? Ethics is no different from any other part of our lives: there is no substitute for good judgement, sound advice, practical sense, and conversations with those affected by our actions. In any case, how can the honour of a unit be maintained if an officer was to lose his own?

The Five-star Culture Myth

A lot of talk takes place about the prevalence of a five-star culture within the Army which is perceived to be largely the causative factor of much of the ills that plague the force. This is certainly not an all-pervasive practice despite the fact that some people do go overboard in making arrangements for the visit of senior officers. While there is a need for shunning ostentation, there is also a matter of elegance and élan which cannot be overlooked. While financial probity is an important constituent of ethical leadership, it cannot by itself imply good leadership. If that were to be the case, ascetics would make the best commanders! Our prizing of self-denial and austerity in the Army's

leadership could hence do with a bit of challenge, frankly, before it becomes so set in stone that conspicuous lack of consumption becomes a substitute for genuine leadership virtues. While ethical leadership is about ‘raising the bar’, there must be room for mistakes, for humour, and for a humanity that is sometimes missing in our senior leadership. Ultimately, ethical leaders are ordinary people who are living their lives as examples to their commands—and in the process, they become role models for others to follow.

DEVELOPING ETHICAL LEADERS

Becoming an ethical leader is relatively simple. It requires a commitment to examining one’s own behaviour and values, and the willingness and strength to accept responsibility for the effects of our actions on others, as well as on ourself. An honest answer to the following questions would be an appropriate check to determine the ethical content of one’s leadership:

1. What are my most important values and principles? Does my behaviour reflect those values? What would my subordinates and peers say my values are?
2. What mechanisms and processes have I designed to be sure that the people under my command can ‘push back’ against my authority?
3. What could the Army ask me to do that would cause me to resign for ethical reasons?
4. What do I want people to say about my leadership when I am gone?
5. At the end of the day, can I use my day’s work as an appropriate lesson to teach my children ethical behaviour?

To develop ethical leaders in the Army, we need to engage in some of these questions. The process would require each unit, establishment and headquarter to chart its own course in the general line of what has been suggested based on its working ethos. There can be no fixed format. It would also be useful to engage in a conversation with subordinates about what they see as ‘ethical leadership’.

Within the Army, many a mistake is made due to ignorance of rules and procedures. Administrative aspects need to be given greater emphasis during training. Perhaps cadets at our training academies need to be taught accounting procedures while still in the academy. On commissioning, all officers could be taught works procedures and other administrative details so that ethical oversight is not caused by ignorance. We also need to figure out how authority can be challenged while, at the same time, ensuring that the stability and strength of the command structure is not compromised.

Knowledge of rules and insisting on adherence could be one step in this process.

It is important for the ethics codes to be clear. It would be important to ensure that persons who do not live by the code do not attain higher ranks as that will vitiate the very *raison d'être* of ethical development. Finally, the content must be based on self-example and the pitfalls of preaching must be scrupulously avoided. Wives have an important role to play too. They must form part of the ethical narrative. A strong backing at home makes it easier to live by the code. Ultimately, how our value systems can be integrated into our working ethos is the test of the day. Professional ethics comprise of what a professional should or should not do in the workplace but its impact permeates the individual's life. For men in uniform, this is especially so, and remains the defining challenge for the Indian military.

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