

MORAL OBLIGATION VERSUS "BEEPER ETHICS"

A Review Essay by

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Foundations of Moral Obligation: The Stockdale Course

by Joseph Gerard Brennan

Novato, California: Presidio Press, 1994.

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True Faith and Allegiance: The Burden of Military Ethics

by James H. Toner

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202 pp. \$25.00

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Two recent books on military ethics approach their theme from the standpoint of providing both students of ethics and members of the Armed Forces with a broader context of intellectual tradition, social mores, and educated values. *Foundations of Moral Obligation: The Stockdale Course* by Joseph Gerard Brennan, emeritus professor of philosophy at Barnard College, consists of lectures presented at the Naval War College. *True Faith and Allegiance: The Burden of Military Ethics* by James H. Toner, who teaches at the Air War College, provides the views of a political theorist on the special situation of soldiers, sailors, marines, and airmen as servicemembers and as citizens of a wider society. While neither volume is a detailed ethics text nor an investigation of a category of particular problems in military ethics, both instruct the inquirer into military ethics and offer means of revalidating one's ethical moorings.

Cynicism about the incompatibility of a particular walk of life or profession with ethics is hard to ward off. Military ethics faces a similar challenge. At the outset it must be understood that military ethics or other special ethics does not stand in isolation from the rest of philosophy and is not fundamentally *sui generis*. Even moral philosophy itself does not stand in isolation from the rest of philosophy nor from the lofty concerns which preoccupy moral theologians.

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Conscience for an individual soldier is a dimension of mind and heart and cannot by nature be a dedicated instrument of duty or professional motives. Conscience is inherently a judgment not only about a given action or policy, but also about what kind of person one intends to be, about the quality of character one actually intends to possess. Ethics in the last analysis serve that choice of character and, at their best, reinforce it in outstanding and difficult cases as well as amidst what may be the everyday welter of conflicting demands.

Although neither book represents a course in specific applied ethics, Toner offers some brief illustrative cases; and while neither author details the intricacies of particularly pressing ethical problems, Toner's general theme is the question of the sometimes conflicting loyalties of the conscientious warrior and conscientious citizen. But an important factor is that both books provide an important corrective to a growing trend in works on ethics to circumscribe the discussion of ethics to the management of conduct or to the establishment of conventional rules within a profession or sector in terms of which its members can agree to interpret ethical questions.

This bias threatens to make right and wrong, good and evil, and values themselves simply artifacts of a proprietary internal debate in varied professions or fields of endeavor. In the military, the trend could be exemplified by setting values in light of the debate over the proximate causes of a war or conduct of a campaign. The problem might be seen in a crude analogy: in order to be a good driver a mastery of traffic ordinances—such as speed limits, turning on red, etc.—is not adequate if one does not know the route to a destination. For philosophers, who since the fourth century B.C. have taken the dominant role in the ethical education of society from the poets and dramatists, questions of ultimate ends or ultimate meaning cannot be evaded.

Both Brennan and Toner address ethical education as an undertaking of great importance. Education in ethics, of course, is crucial wherever teaching takes place. Any form of education communicates values for learners to either accept or react against. Ethical education of members of the Armed Forces is an especially important concern in our society.

Such education is a matter of moral meaning. Meaning is profoundly linked with context. Not only is it impossible to find such meaning solely through specialized courses in ethics—outside the

general context of moral thought—but it cannot be adequately approached beyond broader contexts of the nature of reality, the good, and truth and knowledge. This also includes large segments of intellectual tradition. Without such well-rooted orientation, moral or ethical education may dwell primarily on the failings and evils of contemporary society. That may create an attitude that over time becomes an antithesis to secular ideas and practice; in effect, a self-endowed sense of purity amid decline.

Footfalls of History

Foundations of Moral Obligation is a survey of moral philosophy inspired by the ordeal of Admiral James Stockdale as a POW in Vietnam. Later, when president of the Naval War College, Stockdale collaborated with Brennan in developing a course based on that experience. The book's chapters are lessons, lectures, and major themes from the course. Of special note is the manner in which biographical details are woven into the presentations. Intellectual history and philosophical theories are seen as derived from and inspired by the lives and times of great persons.

Initially, historical examples are given to show the profound effect of prison isolation on individuals. In these situations, those capable of profound reflection decide on fundamental options for living. A transformation of soul can emerge providing ultimate meaning for one's future. The conviction that it is better to suffer evil than to commit it becomes essential. Brennan begins by exploring the resolution that can emerge to forsake dark ignorance, as in the example of Plato's cave.

Basic to the background of a moral education is the question: what does one say or think about evil? Brennan then poses the timeless problem of how to understand the existence of an all-knowing, all-powerful, all-gracious God as creator and Father of a world awash in hideous evils, including deliberate moral depravity—which frequently victimizes the most innocent and helpless of mankind. One confronts a decision between the gnostic view that there is a dualism of good and evil powers governing reality, or the Augustinian view that evil is not a positive force but rather an absence of or distance from the moral order and the goodness of God. Ultimately the answer to this problem is seen to lie in significant measure in the extirpating of self as primary in the world and in seeing the interrelatedness of all of our sufferings.

What does one say or think of love? This is another fundamental question in

the background of moral thought. Is love to be *eros*, an attraction to beauty in the classical Greek sense, or is it to be *agape*, the selfless love of Christ in his sufferings and teachings? There is both a difference and a tension between these two aspects and ultimately, in the richness of medieval theology, religious traditions are shown to have presented the more powerful selfless love as the driving force of the universe.

Happiness is next explored as the end for which everything else is sought or done. Aristotle's formal teleological view is explored as the basis for his doctrine of virtue and character formation. Character is a key to happiness, through both the moral and intellectual virtues. Thus understood it is the development of the soul, the full realization of a human. This profound sense of fulfillment is not mere self-actualization or feeling good about oneself, but the actualization of the fullness of human nature. Both practical wisdom and intellect are introduced as the faculty of human moral knowing and development. Virtue in this way is personal and also social.

Moving to the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, Brennan explores the crucial concept of duty. Kant, a man of the Enlightenment, saw freedom as the essence of the moral self. Therefore duty for its own sake, rather than simply for the results achieved, is what is morally meaningful. Acts of moral worth are the acts of a rational being with a motive of duty. Moral decisions are made, moral acts are done, not because it is good policy but simply because it is right. Moral worth arises directly from the will seeking good. Ethics is sovereign and self-justifying because it is not an aspect of psychology or sociology. Ultimately, ethical decisions are made on categorically universal principles such that one never makes an exception for oneself nor for the case at hand and never treats oneself or another person purely as a means instead of an end.

The principles of utilitarianism follow through a critique of the life of John Stuart Mill. Brennan is remarkably effective in presenting utilitarianism in regard to issues that matter the most. He offers a refreshingly humane and well-drawn view of this strain of philosophy which stresses Mill's focus on the social well-being of all. In addition to analyzing the concepts of pleasure and pain, benefit and harm, he emphasizes the central importance of freedom and liberty and the great worth, value, and beauty of the common good.



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Subsequent chapters in the course explore special dimensions of philosophical insight into key issues relevant to a moral orientation. The existentialism of Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus with its emphasis on individualism and freedom are examined. Sartre proclaims the fundamental irrationality of moral choices because such choices are those for which no true determining right reason can be provided. There are—in the case of the rugged and free individual—no excuses or extenuating circumstances. The most important thing is, as in Stockdale's imprisonment, what a man has done with what was done to him. Like Camus' absurd man, one "fights back" and in some sense succeeds by cramming as much living as possible into whatever life one has.

Leninism and Soviet thought are explored in their materialistic and dialectical foundations and their strictly protective anti-relativism. Evolutionary theory is also seen to provide insights of a foundational nature, coming from Charles Darwin, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, the Leakeys, etc. One's stance on evolution depends upon an ultimate belief either that all is the result of mindless chance in a complicated physical set of systems, or that all is a process of directed teleological change. Finally, the life and work of Ludwig Wittgenstein are reviewed by focusing on the crucial silence underlying aspects of the intellectual roots of making choices. Whereof one cannot speak one must keep silent. Some things, in effect, cannot be said but only shown.

As these lectures unfold there are points where Brennan's explanations (but not Stockdale's inspiring ideas) are too tangential for an introduction to moral philosophy. But Brennan's style is replete with anecdotes as well as literary, scientific, and historical allusions. Therefore some philosophical extravagance is excusable. Also, one might regard the course as a scattered version of an introduction to moral philosophy rather than a closely ordered system. But his generally historical order is still a palpable structure overall. The cumulative effect, in any case, is a number of memorable high points. They inspire reflection and give a sense of the depth to the study of ethics, especially for those beginning a study of moral philosophy.

General and Specific

True Faith and Allegiance aims to link an understanding of the military profession with the general field of ethics. Toner proceeds from his conviction that soldiers *can* be moral and therefore *must* be moral. Hence, he seeks to present foundational ideas and a sourcebook on military ethics. His approach is to chart a course between two popularly if carelessly subscribed extreme notions: that the military is not and cannot be ethical by the very nature of its activity and commitment, and that anything the military may do is always ethical because all is fair in war. Toner sees his work as a corrective to the skeptical aspect of modern ethical texts which, in addition to their

confusing language, fail to instill a sense that there is such a thing as moral turpitude to be strictly avoided.

Military ethics rests upon a triad: evil indeed exists and should be resisted by force; there are such things as human duty, obligation, and responsibility; and appreciation of virtue is vitally important and must be inculcated by both word and deed. Summarily, military ethics is the study of what is honorable and what is shameful conduct in military service. To undertake such a study one must attack the moral nihilism seen throughout society and adhere to examples of good individuals who stand out. It is the clarification call of a crusade.

In the opening chapter Toner outlines his approach to ethical study: ethics is a standard of right and wrong conduct focusing on our behavior as well as that of others. Ethics is not only descriptive but prescriptive and so is not relativistic. He iterates a theme which is repeated later that contemporary American society fails in many areas of values and accomplishment: mores, art, education, popular culture, film, et al. However there are sources of ethics which can be tapped in studying what is right and wrong for the military: customs, rules, goals or outcomes (teleological sources), and circumstances (situationism). The development of character involves the struggle to do what should be done. The reader is to conclude that truly right-thinking people will do better at ethical understanding and character development than will society at large.

In the discussion of military subordination to constitutional sovereignty, the soldier is seen as accepting responsibility for the safety of the body politic whereas the rest of society generally does not. The distinct and unique task of the military involves being trained to kill for a committed cause. This is correlated to the requirement of being prepared to die for that same cause. Hence, the safety of the lives of one's troops or one's own life is not a first priority in war. While this has not been strictly observed in some cases, it remains a sacred measure of loyalty in the military.

This is a fidelity beset by certain dilemmas. It involves obeying constitutional precepts. But whose interpretation? Generally one is responsible to a higher authority, though not always. Conscience dictates and duty demands that wrong orders, either illegal or clearly immoral, should not be followed. *Respondet superior* is not an absolutely universal principle. Some things are too shameful for debate and should not be done

under a guise of obedience. Loyalty to the Nation is crucial, but not to an individual concept of national interest. Loyalty depends on a well formed conscience, not upon strength of will or conviction alone.

Military Education

In this discussion, the distinction is made between professional military education (PME), which is focused on values and deals with people, and military training, which is about skills and concerned with things. But training must never be divorced from education on values. There is an obligation for the Armed Forces to provide rigorous training to the level of true competence—not only in warfighting but, especially for officers, in judgment and intellectual acuity.

PME, as distinct from training, appropriately involves fidelity to purpose as its principal orientation to values. This speaks to the tension between obeying legal orders without hesitation but not obeying illegal ones. Toner examines ten cases, eight recorded instances and two fictional. They deal with conflicts centering on mistreatment of prisoners and killing prisoners or hostages, atrocities in war, and hazards to military trainees or troops in actual combat. The cases all question whether to follow or not to follow orders.

The general schema is to see responsibility or loyalty arranged hierarchically: first, loyalty to principles; second, loyalty to purpose (the mission, rationale, or objective); and third, loyalty to persons, individuals, groups, or masses. In this context one must realize that persons are often the substance of the principle which governs or the purpose at hand. Clarity remains important.

Cautions are sounded about extremes in military culture, the evils of egoism—personal and professional—and the entrepreneurial ethic. Moreover, six tests of right and wrong are proposed: shame, community, legal, situation, consequences, and God. These tests proposed by Toner, however, usually are seen as elements of reflection, the moment of ethical deliberation before the fact of decision. They raise red flags prior to a decision rather than acting as a litmus for rightness or wrongness, honor or shame. The text concludes with useful recommendations on teaching ethics in the military.

Codes of Ethics

The primary challenge to contemporary ethics in America is said to be an excessive desire for status and wealth. One is encouraged to deduce that opposing cupidity succeeds programmatically in the world and gives the military an ethical edge. In any case, the current state of values in this country reveals the need for the traditional cardinal virtues of prudence, temperance, fortitude, and justice. This is important because much evil is actually within the individual's disposition, not just in the external world of actions. Society is morally autistic, and its values are massively at variance with those required by military culture, an account that makes soldiers appear somewhat messianic.

In applying the thesis of faith and allegiance to issues affecting the military, Toner provides an ethical analysis of certain key questions. Should women serve in combat? The answer is yes, but not in the infantry or on submarines. Should homosexuals serve in the military? The answer is no to flagrant homosexuals because the military exists in a society which generally disapproves of homosexuality as a way of life. About fraternization, warnings are given in terms of general ethics and special military aspects. About resignation, the judgment is that it should be exercised rarely and with careful consideration.

Military education is a general theme in both books under review. Ethics and morality are always essentially about the good life, and they prompt us to contemplate on what the good life is. Such reflection is important for the things which one fights to defend anyway. Moral education or values education is not simply inculcation nor is it some sort of psychology of values. At its best and when most fitting, it is a rational foundation provided through an exploration and critique of values in the context of a philosophical course.

The Reactive School

Ethics is always about truth at the level of the meaning of life. To propose, as is the vogue, that one can approach ethics simply as a dimension of management, as setting out the rules while claiming little more than that certain things work well in getting the job done without ignominy or complication, is insufficient. When examining any profession or field of endeavor we can learn an important point: if its ethics are simply about that activity, then it is not an autonomous study or concern and it makes

the sense of right and wrong an internal element or creature of that group and enterprise. Ethics of “[fill in the blank]” is a factitious conception. The study or discipline of such an ethics, among other difficulties, would tend to develop largely in response to the characteristics of emerging conflicts and have priorities determined by the typical malefactor or violator. Ethics, to be rational, must be in a significant degree autonomously grounded.

Deficiencies in education on moral values leave us open to networks of rationalizations on conscience. Some of the most bothersome of these come from the teleopathic (excessively devoted to a cause or purpose) bent of mind which inclines people to extremes in pursuit of corporate goals or profits by any promising strategy. Personally, teleopathy—as expounded by Kenneth Goodpaster—becomes excessive devotion to career, to advancement through gradations of goals during a professional life. For the sake of corporate goals or career, no amount of overtime, supererogation, or neglect of personal concerns or duties can be thought to be utterly blameworthy. Being a team player or getting ahead overrides all.

Loyalties can have bad as well as good properties. They can be mature as well as immature in focus and degree of dedication. In ethical reasoning such failings can lead to rigorous or quasi-legalistic elaboration of technicalities and rules divorced from fuller human reality and substituted in place of a well-grounded ethics and morality. Just as ethics cannot be ultimately subordinated to any other system or purpose neither can ethical or moral education be a subordinate part of some system of courses. Often moral theory is relegated to one or two chapters in a book on the ethics of “[fill in the blank].”

Beeper Ethics

The phenomenon sometimes called “beeper ethics” (a term introduced by Arthur L. Caplan) is a manifestation of another systematic difficulty. To illustrate this point, think of ethicists jumping into the midst of conflicts or doubt. Ethicists on the staffs of hospitals and mental institutions frequently find the on-the-spot aspect of decisions taxing. Medical professionals often regard analytical approaches and reflective considerations to be impractical and unhelpful. Policies with the most impact on actual ethical performance in such situations are frequently handed down as decisions by

medical committees or senior practitioners and deal with procedures for emergencies, triage, referral to courts, termination of treatment, etc.

In the business world, even where codes of ethics are enshrined and ethicists are engaged through the medium of a vice president for corporate ethics and values, major policies with some of the greatest ethical impact on employees or customers are often decided directly by the most senior managers and top level executives. Such decisions usually involve personnel administration as well as customer relations and advertizing. Decisions on downsizing, plant closures, and technological change also arise under special circumstances. Operative values too frequently flow directly from the highly situated principle of maximizing profits.

Some of the most useful contributions of ethicists in the professional or business world are likely to be in advancing national policies and legislation which incorporate an ethical orientation at a general level and focus on the common good and overall quality of life. Questions of ethics or morality at base have to do with wisdom and virtue and are not only concerned with the best way of doing something but with what is worth doing. When wisdom and virtuous principle are well understood, our most important and efficacious institutions and activities can be related to these.

A person needs to be “about something” at his or her core and feel deeply why some things are worthwhile and others are worth everything. Whether a person resolves this well or poorly, rightly or wrongly, the effort is crucial to being fully human. It is especially important in the case of members of the Armed Forces as well as others for whom honor is quintessential. Conscience, duty, orders, leadership, professionalism, loyalty, courage, and judgment—and their evil opposite qualities—all derive from the inner development of a person. This progress may be advanced in silence and solitude, through reflection, or amidst a profusion of difficult, even stressful activities.

The works reviewed provide important foundational material for ethical education. People of honor will search for outstanding persons as models. They will seek principles as ideals for forming conscience and understanding their personal dedication to duty and the need to do the right thing. In the course of ethical education it is of utmost importance that a dialogue continues among special ethicists, philosophers generally, and intellec-

tuals more generally. Toner’s work seeks to foster values by a rigorous education. He warns soldiers that even great professional competency without education in values can lead to a My Lai massacre.

This concern is, of course, estimable. Training and technical skills do demand education in values at a foundational level. But it is the particular intentionality that needs careful consideration. Toner’s education in values is a determined course toward getting students to believe those specific things which he feels they must. This set of beliefs is auditioned for us in his jeremiad describing the squalid state of common American values and, to a degree, our culture.

Because ethical education must be profoundly based on a commitment to values, so must values be intellectually grounded in some ultimate conviction about a worldview, a profound sense of the meaning of life and human consciousness and knowledge. Values are not to be engineered to fit an agenda established at the level of these values themselves. We cannot assume the bases of values at the start of education in values. Toner has designated training as appropriate to skills and education as appropriate to values. But without the initial intellectual exploration as a propaedeutic, the result would be “values training.”

Values are most appropriate when they appeal to our reason as the bases of our will and emotion. Insight into truth and meaning are integral to a commitment to values, for well-founded dedication and allegiance. The depth and breadth of Brennan’s intellectual offerings, as well as Stockdale’s reflection on his detention and conversion, provide both excellent conceptual underpinnings and substantial motivation for values education. The search for meaning at depth characterizes their approach. One should start here before exploring faith and allegiance. JFQ

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