SMALL WARS JOURNAL

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Moral Intuition and the Professional Military Ethic

by Michael C. Sevcik

Torturing prisoners should never be our policy…but it's madness to declare that there can never be exceptions. Ask yourself; "IF" torturing a knowing terrorist would save the life of the person you love most in the world, would you approve of it? "IF" your answer is no, you're not a moral paragon, you're an abomination. -Ralph Peters, 2007 [1]

Figure One. Emotions are tough to control in the heat of battle. [2,3]

In September 2010 Military Review published a special edition featuring articles concerning the Army Ethic and a host of papers regarding morality, war crimes and Army Values. In the lead article for this edition "Owning our Army Ethic," [4] the author's stated purpose is "to provide a general organizing framework….in order to guide future dialog." The purpose of this paper is to add to that dialog.

Why do parents at a youth soccer game sometimes go to fists regarding a perceived bad call by a referee? Why do politicians shamefully revert to punching, name calling and profanity? Why do women often cry at a wedding and men cry at a change of command? Why do fans of opposing NFL teams support or malign the same referee? Recall in your mind's eye, the story of Helen of Troy and exactly why 1000 ships were launched? Emotion, it is the one

[1] Ralph Peters, *Why Iraq's so Hard*, New York Times, May 14, 2007.

[2] Http://www.google.com/imgres?imgurl=http://www.resiliencei.com/data/media/images/Compassion%2520in%2520combat%2520for%2520web.jpg&imgrefurl=http://www resiliencei.com/Training Workshops.aspx&usg= OtgrBPWZg8ttenXWbWWSoeMRezQ=&h=400&w=600&sz=40&hl=en&start=15&zoom=1&tbnid=9t7erRoPGMwrsM:&tbnh=124&tbnw=170&ei=UqswTarKHMH_lger24WrCg&prev=/images%3Fq%3Demotional%2Bpictures%26um%3D1%26hl%3Den%26biw%3D1024%26bih%3D587%26tbs%3Disch:10%2C570&um=1&itbs=1&iact=hc&vpx=243&vpy=166&dur=1930&hovh=183&hovw=275&tx=178&ty=62&oei=TKswTZLBPIO78gaDruDECA&esq=2&page=2&ndsp=17&ved=1t:429,r:7,s:15&biw=1024&bih=587

[3] http://www.google.com/imgres?imgurl=http://www.blogcdn.com/www.pixcetera.com/blog/media/2008/08/vietnam-shooting- Accessed by author on: 9 MAR 2010.

[4] Case, Underwood and Hannah, *Owning our Army Ethic*, (MILITARY Review, September 2010)

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Report Documentation Page

Form Approved
OMB No. 0704-0188

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1. REPORT DATE **14 MAR 2011**	2. REPORT TYPE	3. DATES COVERED **00-00-2011 to 00-00-2011**
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE **Moral Intuition and the Professional Military Ethic**		5a. CONTRACT NUMBER
		5b. GRANT NUMBER
		5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER
6. AUTHOR(S)		5d. PROJECT NUMBER
		5e. TASK NUMBER
		5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) **Army Command & General Staff College,School for Command Preparation,Fort Leavenworth,KS,66027**		8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)		10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)
		11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT **Approved for public release; distribution unlimited**		
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES		
14. ABSTRACT		
15. SUBJECT TERMS		

16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT **unclassified**	b. ABSTRACT **unclassified**	c. THIS PAGE **unclassified**	**Same as Report (SAR)**	**10**	

Standard Form 298 (Rev. 8-98)
Prescribed by ANSI Std Z39-18

critical denominator in all peoples and every culture since before the dawn of civilization. Emotion is primary in human culture and it"s in influence is unquestionable – it absolutely dominates the human sense of morality.

The Army"s approach to morality and ethics, like many in behavioral psychology, wrongly assumes that changing our Soldier"s ability to *reason* morally and ethically is a credible approach building moral character and integrity. Why – the short answer "emotion." This article reveals insights into emotion, why emotion subtly controls the ability to make moral and ethical judgments and finally sheds light on why our Army"s institutional and unit training approach to morality, ethics and values has had such miserable success.

The Dictator of Morality -- Emotion

When it comes to morality and decision making, our Soldiers simply do not conform to traditional rationalist models that emphasize morale judgment gained from reflection and reasoning. Andrew Carnegie recognized this over 70 years when he said, "always remember when developing relationships that you are dealing with creatures of emotion rather than creatures of logic."[5] Many in contemporary psychology see feelings occurring after cognition i.e., preferences are formed after cognitive activity such as reflection or reasoning. The thought goes something like, "before one can have an opinion on a matter, they must be aware of it and make some critical assessments."

According to psychologist R.B. Zajonc[6] affect (emotion) always precedes cognition. This is why you can be afraid of something even before you are aware of its presence. Feelings (emotions/affect) are primary in the brain function. Evolutionary biologists say this is from millions of years of development, creationists might very well say, this is a gift from God. Why is really beyond the scope of this paper however it is important to understand that emotion *always* and often subtlety comes before cognition and reasoning.

Emotions are inherent in all human beings. In the heat of battle, Soldiers often lose control of their emotions. How do we better control our emotions? We start with an understanding of how central emotions are to the human being and with this understanding, we can better approach training and educating our Soldiers as they face moral dilemmas and ethical situations. Emotional evaluations occur so quickly, automatically and pervasively that in psychology it is generally thought to be an integral part of perception. R.B. Zajonc points out several important characteristics of our emotions: note – in his original paper Zajonc uses the term affect rather than emotion.[7]

- Emotions are <u>primary</u> in the human beings – in the blink of an eye; emotions govern our first response to any situation or threat. Often we fool ourselves into thinking that we or our subordinate Soldiers have arrived at a decision in a rational manner. Regardless of how much we deny them, emotions always prove to be primary.
- Emotions are <u>basic</u> in that they are universal among all cultures and all human beings and in fact, all animal species. Emotions know no culture or language and existed long before language or reason. Emotions are primordial.

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[5] Dale Carnegie, *How to Win Friends and Influence People*,(New York, NY: Simon & Schuster Inc., 1936.)
[6] Zajonc, R.B., *Feeling and Thinking: Preferences Need no Inferences*. American Psychologist, 1980, 35, 151-175
[7] Ibid.

- Emotions are inescapable in that they occur regardless of how much we feel they may be controlled. Zajonc notes that we may control to expression of emotion but we can never escape the experience itself. Of course some of us are better at this than others.
- Emotions are mostly irrevocable in that once an emotional evaluation is formed it is not easily changed. Affective judgments are deemed irrevocable because they feel valid and we believe them to be true. Truth is, sometimes your judgments reflect the truth and sometimes not.
- Emotions are difficult to verbalize in that most communication of emotions relies on nonverbal channels. Basic emotional expressions of anger, fear, love and serenity are very similar across all cultures.
- Emotions may become separated from content and still remain a strong influence in that a book, a movie or an experience in combat may cause intense feelings even though the content of the relationship is long forgotten.

The key point is that emotional reactions do not depend on cognition or any rational thought process. As noted earlier by R.B. Zajonc, "there are practically no social phenomena that do not implicate affect in some important way. Affect dominates social interaction and it is the major currency in which all social intercourse is transacted." If emotions precede morale reasoning as demonstrated in this paper, then the classic approach to morality, judgment and ethics, then our Army ought to be spending more time, money and effort getting after training and education regarding the "emotional" aspect of morality and ethics.

"You take the high road and I'll take the low road."[8]

To demonstrate the six emotional characteristics, note the simplified illustration below which describes the working of emotion in the human brain. One reason why emotions are primary and basic is because they are fast. From the chart below, roughly twice as fast as the mind"s cognitive ability because all brain stimuli go first from your senses directly to the thalamus portion of the brain. Sensory perceptions that you see, hear, feel, etc., goes to the "central controlling/switching" thalamus region of the brain. With normal cognition the thalamus sends out neural impulses to myriad sensory processing regions in the frontal cortex and here your brain frames, processes, mostly ignores but in general makes sense of the billions and billions of sensory inputs received every second of the day "even while you are fast asleep." Social Psychologist Jenifer Learner of Harvard University"s School of Decision Science, illustrates the slow cognitive "high road" path through the sensory cortex takes. It much longer for perception to take the "high road" path and if we added the additional time it takes for most of us to apply judgment, experience and reflect, it would be much longer than 24 milliseconds. For example, this high road path happens *after* you feel the airplane hit a pocket of turbulence get that feeling of "holy Toledo" in your gut. Several moments later after you take time to reflect you logically reason that, your seat belt is on, the pilot has everything under control and the captain said 15 minutes ago to expect some bumpy air during the flight.

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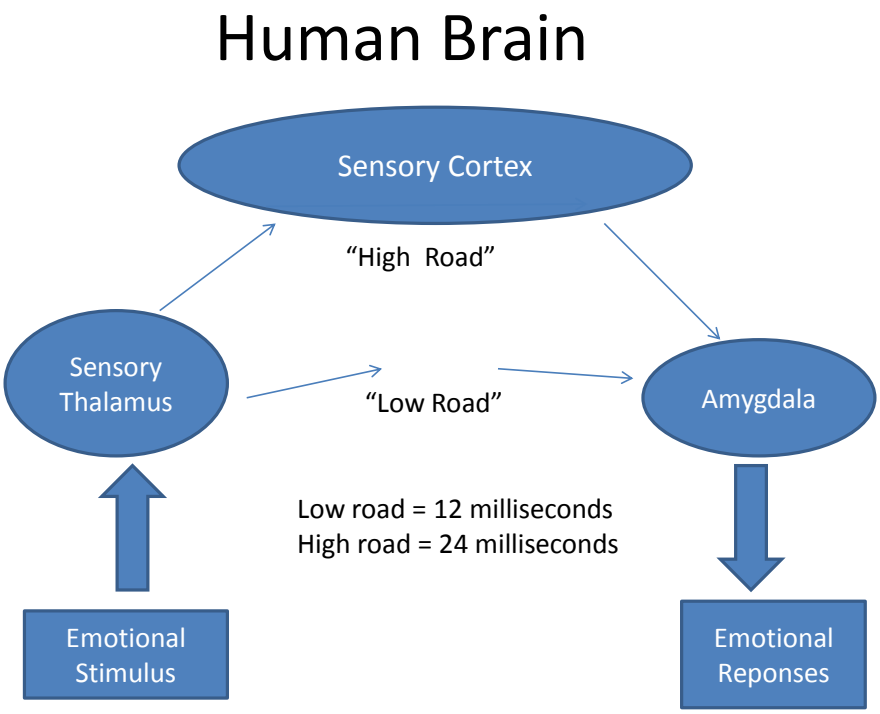
[8] "**The Bonnie Banks o' Loch Lomond**", or simply "**Loch Lomond**" for short, is a well-known traditional Scottish song. It was first published in 1841in *Vocal Melodies of Scotland*.

It should be easy to see how a shortcut would have lots of advantages in life. Fight or flight is largely from this shortcut called the "low road" by Professor Learner. The "low road" shortcut allows for quick response to dangerous situations and of course the brain has such a short cut: the amygdala. Sitting just beneath the thalamus, the amygdala grabs information from the flood of information in the thalamus and reacts. Sensory patterns which in the past have been dangerous or produced strong emotional responses such as fear and anger is sensed by the amygdala. The amygdala low road immediately sets into motion the release of hormones, increased heartbeat and so on without going through the sensory cortex portion of the brain. MRI studies indicate that the thalamus-amygdala link functions roughly twice as fast as the thalamus-cortex link. [9] The amygdala is the principle source of emotions -- it is primal, fast and often you have no idea just how much it influences everything in your life – especially your own sense of morality.



Source: **Source: Jennifer Learner, Decision Science Lab, Harvard University** [10]

The University of Virginia professor of social psychology Jonathan Haidt, developed the "rationalist model for moral judgment" found in figure 1 below.

[9] Stephen P. Rosen, *Decisions Without Calculations Emotion Based and Expert Pattern Recognition and Political Decision-Making,* Olin Institute for Strategic Studies, Harvard University, January 1999.
[10] From social psychologist Jenifer Learner"s presentation the emotional response to stimulus takes place in half the time it take for the higher level "cognition" to process the stimulus. Harvard Business School, 19 NOV 2010.

Traditional Rational Model [11]

This rational model dominates most of traditional moral psychology as well as the Army‟s current approach to the training and education of ethics and morality. The rationalist model indicates that moral reasoning is a sequential step process as we make ethical decisions. The model in figure 1 indicates that human beings possess the "power of an a priori reason to grasp substantial truths about the world." According to Professor Haidt, the rationalist approach to moral decision making is "moral knowledge and moral judgment are reached primarily by a process of reasoning." This traditional view in figure 1, maintains that moral emotions such as sympathy may sometime be inputs to the reasoning process but emotions are not the basis for moral judgments. In the traditional rationalist view, one briefly becomes a judge weighing issues of harm, rights, justice, and fairness before passing judgment on ethical issues."[12] In simple terms, the traditional approach assumes that an individual is a rationalist (a judge) and that moral judgments come from a reasoning process. Importantly, Professor Haidt demonstrates that this approach is flawed as it does not represent how the human brain works. If our Army continues to approach morality and ethical issues from this flawed framework, we can be assured of getting it wrong.

Emotional Dog & its Rational Tail [13]

Moral intuition is a type of cognition but it is not reasoning. And example of this can be found in the declaration of independence whereby Thomas Jefferson declares that certain truths are "self-evident" i.e., life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. In his Gettysburg address, President Lincoln used moral intuition in his opening line discussing our forefathers as they "brought forth, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." Martin Luther King "had a dream," not a business strategy for race relations. According to Professor Haidt, "intuitionist approaches in moral psychology declares that moral intuition (including moral emotions) come first and directly causes moral judgments. Moral intuition is a kind of cognition but it is not a kind of reasoning." This logical premise is supported by Professor Learner‟s "low road" model.

This Social Intuitionist Model[14] by Professor Haidt is shown in figure 2. This model accurately reflects the reality of how we make moral judgments. Haidt demonstrates that human

[11] Jonathan Haidt, T*he emotional dog and it's rational tail: A Social Intuitionist Approach to Moral Judgment, (*Psychological Review, 2001, Vol. 108, No. 4, 814-834)
[12] Haidt, ibid, page 1.
[13] Ibid – title of Haidt‟s seminal article in Psychological Review which demonstrates how moral judgments are made.

beings are not like judge but rather like lawyers who are trained to effectively support any position which they are paid to defend. Moral reasoning is an ex post facto process which is directed at your moral judgments from intuition. Because the powerful influence of emotion on moral intuition, human beings do not and indeed cannot convince themselves by force of reason to change their mind about moral judgments. Rather in similar fashion to a lawyer, we unconsciously self-justify our own moral intuition. Importantly, biased judgments from intuition are often reinforced and influenced by others. Don‟t believe me? A few moments ago when you read the short Ralph Peter‟s "TORTURE" quote in the introduction, what was your reaction? Of course you had an emotion response which in many cases was: hell yes, torture is OK and to save my battle buddy it‟s good to go! [15] Or perhaps your response was "it‟s never right for the Army to be involved in torture." Think of the damage by Abu Ghraib, think of our Soldiers who will be POWs someday or you may have thought torture is ineffective and just plain wrong! Regardless of which moral position you "think" you reasoned, the way you make ethical / moral choices always comes from your intuition and emotions. This happens before the moral decision making process in your sensory cortex even started the justification with moral reasoning and reflection. You are a lawyer, not a judge and from Professor Haidt‟s important work on morality and judgment, you now understand why.

Social Intuitionist Model [16]

[14] Ibid

[15] Thomas E. Ricks, *Washington Post Staff Writer*, May 11, 2007. http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/05/10/AR2007051001963 html Note: Over half of the Soldiers serving in OIF, 2006 agreed that torture is OK in certain situations i.e., to save their battle buddy in combat. Polls consistently show the American public split on this moral issue choosing security rather than morality. See: http://pewforum.org/ accessed 9 MAR 2011.

[16] Ibid page 2

Definitions:

Moral intuition: "the sudden appearance in consciousness of a moral judgment including an affective (emotional) valence without having gone though steps of searching, weighing evidence or inferring a conclusion.

Moral judgment: "evaluation (good vs. bad) of actions or character of a person that are made with respect to a set of virtues [and behaviors] held to be obligatory by members of a culture or sub-culture.

Moral reasoning: "the conscious mental activity that consists of transforming given information about people in order to reach a moral judgment. This reasoning is a conscious process, i.e., intentional, effortful, controllable during which the reasoner is aware that the conscious process is on-going.

From Professor Haidt"s important research regarding moral judgment, "this model is comprised of four principle links or processes, shown as solid arrows. Each link is well established by prior research in some domain of judgment, although not necessarily in the domain of moral judgment."

The **intuitive judgment link** which happens before moral judgment is well established in psychology.[17] Intuition, like emotion occurs in the brain before conscious, effortful thinking from the higher level brain functions. This emotional judgment was evident to you as you read the opening lines of this paper. Concepts such as torture, incest, homosexuality and bestiality, to name a few, usually conjure up a significant "affective" and intuitive response. All are moral intuitions, rather than moral judgments.

The **post hoc reasoning link** takes place after your emotions in a "blink," have already taken a stand. This effortful moral reasoning occurs over time as we consciously search for arguments that support our biased moral judgments. Post hoc reasoning for causal explanations is substantiated in a number of psychological studies. [18]

The **reasoned persuasion link** is the justification of your position to others and is often no more than a pathetic appeal of rhetoric in a vain attempt to justify your biased and emotional moral judgment to others. Although this type of reasoning influence can change others, it is exceptionally rare that others will be morally or ethically influenced.

The **social persuasion link** -- according to Professor Haidt, "because people are highly attuned the emergence of group norms, the model proposes that the mere fact that friends, allies and acquaintances have made a moral judgment exerts a direct influence on others." [19] This tribal bias is perhaps more common in our Army than most other institutions. The social influence of respected Commanders, leaders and especially peers, directly shapes privately held moral judgments. Social forces elicit outward conformity and we have all seen how in a great unit, the personality of the Commander and leaders directly shape the judgments of subordinates.

The **reasoned judgment link:** When it comes to moral judgments, our emotions *always* rule. According to Professor Haidt, it is extremely rare for people to override their initial emotional intuition.

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[17] See Zajonc (1980), Bargh & Chartrand, (1999), Greenwald & Banaji, 1995) as quoted in Haidt, ibid page 818.
[18] See Nisbett and Wilson (1977), Kuhn (1991), Kunda (1990) and Perkins, Farady and Bushey (1991) as quoted in Haidt, ibid.
[19] Haidt, ibid, page 819

The **private reflection link** happens over time as a person reflects about the situation which activates a new intuit which contradicts the initial intuitive judgment. Perhaps best known as "putting yourself in someone else‟s shoes" whereby you feel sympathy or pain or other emotional response that brings about a change of heart.

Importantly, our Army‟s rationalist approach to training and education of morality and ethics tend to center their attention predominately on link 5 and 6. Generally speaking according to professor Haidt, the science of psychology takes a similar flawed approach. Why? This is a very intuitive approach and it appeals to the emotion, but it‟s wrong. A Soldier or any human being cannot possible know whether their feeling of certainty regarding any moral issue is erroneous. As human beings we simply do not have the "intuitive" ability to determine whether our thoughts are free of unsuspected biases, perceptional illusions and moral partiality.[20] The social intuitionalist model insists that moral judgments consist primarily of links 1 – 4 and this model more accurately reflects how we think.

There is no question that in the heat of battle, stress induced emotion disrupts moral reasoning. Anyone who has deployed and experienced the sheer emotional high of a mortar attack or near miss of a sniper or IED explosion can attest to this. The approach of leadership is almost universal: keep your head, control your emotions, and never let them see you sweat. Your passions must always be kept subordinate to logic and control. This attitude contributes to the myth that emotions can be subordinate to our mental abilities. While there is seductive lure to this logic but it is simply not the way we are wired.

Aristotle, Kant, John Stuart Mill and rest of the bums

Aristotle is often synonymous with ethics and morality. As such he might well be referred to as the father of "virtue" ethics and stoic philosophy which develops virtue in the person‟s character. Kant followers who are known as deontologists focus mostly on their obligations and duties to themselves, fellow man, family, etc. Bentham is the father of utilitarianism which holds that the ethical goal of all decisions and actions should be the maximum benefit …who receives the benefits is of little concern. John S. Mill held that the morality of any action or decision ultimately determined by its consequences rather than the nature of the action itself. Finally Joseph Fletcher held that the there are no moral absolutes and morality of all actions and decisions are determined by the quality of one‟s motives unique to the situation. His law of love made it such that any ethical principle may be right dependent on the situation. There are a host of other ethicists moral – yes a veritable army of them.

Over the past 3000 years the many philosophical approaches to morality and ethics have made an enormous contribution to the well-being of all peoples while many have been laughable. In recent times the focus of several of the most common ethical conventions, particularly in the US Army, have focused on case studies which emphasize decision making, quandaries and how to resolve ethical dilemmas. This process approach to ethical decision making is what Edmund Pinchoffs [21] describes as "quandary" ethics. The focus on decision making and case studies

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[20] Williams, Blair S, *Heuristics and Biases in Military Decision Making*, Military Review, Sept/OCT 2010. Major Williams discusses the work Kahneman and Tversky on bias and heuristics with an excellent application to the profession of arms. See also: Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, "Judgment under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases*" Science* 185 (1974): 1124-31.

[21] Edmund L. Pinchoffs, *Quandaries and virtues: Against reductivism in Ethics.* Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas, 1986.

rather than building moral character of our Soldiers is not in the best interests of our Army. We are out of balance in our focus on training, learning and education with this "quandary" approach to ethics. The out of balance focus lies in both our institutional and unit level approach to training and education of the professional military ethic. Our flawed approach is in no small part because of the faulty logic in the rationalist approach rather than an intuitive moral approach discussed above. Our Soldiers" do not need help with more "case studies" about ethical decision making which focus on balancing values, duties, consequences and the situational aspects of a multitude of ethical dilemmas. The focus on decision making and case studies in situational ethics involves a "judgmental" trade off of some type and a choice. This thin slicing of morality by a situation is not realistically how Soldiers in combat face challenges of character.

Here"s why. Our Soldiers with hours of case studies, ethical video games and discussions by their unit leadership with examples from other Soldiers who made the right or wrong choices often learn how to think about decision making but not what to think about morality. When the "quandary ethics" classes are over and the video game approach to ethical situations is ended, the Soldier is still a creature of his emotion, not logic. Soldiers still face unique and tough ethical and moral issues in the years ahead. As they face each new situation they will inevitably approach morality and ethics the same way human beings have always made them – with an intuitive moral judgment that happens in the blink of an eye.

Importantly, as demonstrated above, moral intuitions are full of bias, prejudice and often damaging to the Soldier, their unit and our Army. Moral judgments from reasoning and reflection will always take a slow and second place to moral intuition. Soldiers will reason morally only *after* they have made intuitive moral decision and as seen earlier, their moral judgments will be little more than justification of what emotions and the amygdala have unconsciously mandated. There is a striking analogy here with the "process" infatuation that exists with our Army"s approach to the military decision making process (MDMP). A seven step MDMP process-oriented effort which does not achieve the commander"s intent, does not reach the endstate or does not accomplish the mission is a failure. Focusing on the ethical decision making processes found in quandary ethics and not teaching Soldiers morality, values and ethics is a failure. With the over emphasis on case studies, gaming and ethical decision making processes involved with our Army"s focus on "quandary" ethics, we are doing little more than making Soldiers more efficient as "lawyers" in order to feel good about tough moral choices. What we desperately need them to be is men and women of honor and good moral character.

Conclusion

As our Army faces the professional ethics challenges of ten years at war, we would do well to realize how central emotion is to morality. We should shift our training, education and Army learning programs to focus mainly on developing men and women of character and integrity. Our Army should place less emphasis on the moral reasoning and ethical decision making processes when it comes to training in both the institutional school house and operational units. This quandary ethics approach not only falls short in providing a process that does not work when the bullets are flying but this thin slicing is a formula for postmodern relativism. When it comes to morality and ethics, the "how to" decision-making process is never as important as what our Soldier"s think morally, demonstrate in character and live by the example of uncompromising integrity. Three thousand years ago, Aristotle focused on the „character" of the individual. His focus regarding Stoic moral philosophy and approach to ethics was to build

character in men based on courage, justice, temperance and wisdom. Only after we develop men and women of character, can we hope to get our Soldier"s to the proper "intuitive" moral response to the tough ethical challenges they face in both combat and garrison operations. With the understanding of how central the role of emotions is to morality, our commanders and leaders will able to better train their Soldiers and importantly, establish a command climate based on character, values and honor.

When it comes to morality and character, the human species has changed little during the past three millennia. Our approach as a professional organization ought to turn back from the quandaries of case studies and ethical decision making processes which lead moral relativism. Aristotle had it right -- let"s get after the inculcation of morality, character and values in our Soldiers.

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