

# Keeping Your Eye on The Big Picture - The Dilemmas Faced vs. The Teacher of Military Ethics Or: Why Do We Teach Ethics in The Military? (2005)

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## 1 Introduction

What is ethics? And, why do we teach it in the military? These are the lofty, but I will claim necessary question to be answered by the instructor in military ethics.

I must admit that I raise these questions with a feeling of uncertainty. This conference is directed towards the ethics teacher, teaching ethics in the military. What is lectured here should be useful and applicable for the instruction in military ethics. How useful are the fundamental questions I have asked? *You* will have to decide that in the end, yourself. *My position* is that without asking these questions, and in a sense living with them, you can not instruct ethics at all, at least not ethically. In my preparation, during my teaching and afterwards, it is necessary to ask: „*Why* am I doing it?“

But, let me say before I continue: It is a great honour for me to be able to speak to you here at Bad Boll. Meeting in this way means at least two things: Firstly, it means making experience, expertise and knowledge accessible across borders that usually

excludes us from its reach. Secondly, it means that we get new perspectives on what we already know and do, on what we ordinarily is busy with without asking questions. These two aspects of a conference like this; taken together, make it more than worthwhile to take part in it. It also makes me humble in the sense that I have a distinct feeling that I am receiving more than I can give. But this, being in a state where you receive more than you give, might in the end be the ultimate secret of the doctrine of creation - where humility turns to gratitude.

I will continue this lecture with a quotation. It is taken from an article by the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, whose philosophy constitutes the main influence on what I am going to say here, and I will come back to him. This quotation, in many ways, sums up what I am going to talk to you about:

*It is not unimportant to know - and this is perhaps the European experience of the twentieth century - whether the egalitarian and just State in which the European realises himself - and that is to be instituted and preserved - proceeds from a war of all against all - or from the irreducible responsibility of one for the other,*

*and whether it ignores the uniqueness of the lace and of love. It is not unimportant to know this, so that war does not become the institution of a war with good conscience in the name of historical necessities ... The foundation of consciousness is justice, and not vice-versa. Objectivity rests on justice.<sup>1</sup>*

Before we start teaching ethics, we have to know if it is possible at all in our times. And, to find out if it is possible, we have to learn something about what ethics is.

My preliminary assumption will be *that ethics comes from the outside, that the legitimacy of teaching ethics in the military resides outside the military itself, outside the political and every system, including a philosophical or theological system.* This means that this claim also is valid for chaplains. We have maybe responded too easily to these challenges, saying that the legitimacy of what we are doing *now* lies in the Armed Forces and *now* in the Church. This way we are able to juggle with the problems without really finding satisfactory answers to them. Ethics comes from the outside of every system, not to break it down, but to shake it continually, to create cracks in the structure where goodness can grow.

The answers given here will only be provisional. This is partly due to the length of time that I have been given, but not only and not most importantly. The provisional character of the answers to these questions is in a sense a necessary feature. We have to live with them, fight them, continuously.

## 2 Personal Entrance

Why am I asking these questions of the possibility and meaning of ethics?

As the leader of the Ethics and Theology Section at the Chief Chaplains Office in Oslo, Norway, my *daily responsibilities* lie in leadership, administration and research. Being responsible for the development and implementation of a new ethics programme for the conscripts, however, I have during the last two years been involved in actual teaching as well. It was impossible to take seriously the responsibility for developing this programme without having experienced the concrete challenges of teaching military ethics.

Last year, in the beginning of May, I stayed one week at RAP Cosford to attend a training course in the ethics programme of the British Royal Air Force, called the „Beliefs and Values Programme.“ I even had classes there, but I have to admit that the diverse English, Welsh and Scottish dialects were a serious obstacle to attain the basic requirement of dialogue.

There, in Cosford, I learned how important it is that the programmes we develop are well worked through. It is essential that we match the increasing professionalism in the armed forces of today. In the same way that military training has to meet the demands made by modern society concerning for example technology and management, we have to be up to date concerning pedagogy, anthropology, cultural and religious diversity and so on. We will have to take count of these factors to be counted in and counted on.

But while I was in Cosford another concern also started to grow: Are we, in search of legitimacy and acceptance, slowly becoming an integral part of the military system? And, is this a development we have chosen deliberately? Are we being swallowed up by the values and aims of our armed forces in such a way that there is nothing separating what we could call an „ethics proper“ on the one hand from „personal development“, „character building“ or „leadership training“ on the other?

## 3 Levinas

Let us, for now, keep on to this track: Why should it be questionable that ethics, as well as the instruction of it, is an integrated part of a system? Is not that a part of the European heritage from Plato to the political order of our own age? Ethics, in the grand European tradition, is a *branch* of metaphysics or ontology. The True, the Beautiful and the Good stays in an integral relationship to the overarching One. Epistemology, aesthetics, logic and ethics are all parts of metaphysics or ontology. This means that according to our Greek heritage, that it is essential for ethics to be a *part* of the system.

And, this is also reflected in the *political* system of our time. Before we can grant ourselves the luxury to decide what is right and what is wrong, the outer frames of political stability has to be ascertained. The

ethical has to take place inside frames that are already stabilised. I will come back to this soon.

These conceptions, as fundamental, are the ones that Emmanuel Levinas, in his philosophy, is most eager to contest. Here, the words 'as fundamental' has to be underlined, because this distinction is central to my message here today.

According to Levinas ethics is *first philosophy*. Prior, or as Levinas would say, pre-original, to any established order or system, is the order, going out from the other, to do good - to take care of, to love. This order goes out from the nakedness, the poverty, the vulnerability of the other human. And, it is *absolute* in its literally sense: It is absolved because the otherness or the alterity of the naked and vulnerable face of the other can not be reduced to the order of the same, to the order of the system.

Therefore, the order of the other is of an entirely different order than the order of the same. The order of the other is an irreducible and absolute claim on me, and no-one else, to do good. The other is not reducible to the same. The commandment going out from the naked face of the other, the „Thou shalt not kill“ is prior, pre-original, to the determination of the face as an object of the world, as form and matter.

Here I would like to add a comment, referring to the reports from the workgroups yesterday, namely on torture. The ethics I am discussing here is a form of deontological ethics, what also can be called duty ethics or absolute ethics. Crushing the face of another or burning it with a cigarette glow, is wrong in itself, it is wrong because it in the same moment destroys the origin and source of meaning as such. Levinas sometimes refers to the sanctity of the face. A consequential and utilitarian ethics, counting on logic and calculations is only possible when this meaning already is established, and would not, in itself, be able to treat this dilemma ethically.

The commandment not to kill, but to protect and take care of, coming out from the vulnerable face of the other, is older than the order of things. *The foundation of consciousness is justice, and not vice-versa. Objectivity rests on justice.*

This means that, quite the opposite to the current and accepted political view, ethics, what I am here calling „ethics proper“ lies at the foundation of justice

and law, which in its turn are the building blocks of the political order. In the teaching of Levinas the absolute claim made by the other is all consuming and is itself the original constitution of the „I“ as me, as the „Here I am“ of the prophets.

The subject, the I, is born as responsible. *The only limit to this absolute and all consuming claim is the appearance of the third.* The appearance of the third person, just as vulnerable and all demanding, is a shock to the responsible I. How to compare the incomparable, how to weigh the absolute, how to limit the limitless? This is the never ending task of the human in its infinity and impossibility, defining the human as human. This is the birth of justice, of law, and yes, even the birth of violence and war, but war is to be avoided and is never fought with a good conscience.

Ethics, ethics proper, is never part of the system. It is grounding it while continually disturbing it - demanding more than it can achieve.

If there is something to this way of thinking, as I think it is, then, it stands in a certain opposition to the normal and accepted way of thinking.

As I already have said, in our tradition, ethics is very easily thought of as a part, as a branch or as a tool, of the system. This is also how it came to the forefront during the 1990' s. You had ethics for business, corporations, schools, the public services and for the military forces. Inside each system you would have an ethics for the treatment of personnel, an ethics for leadership and at the bottom of it a value-document that would secure the position of your organisation inside the total system of society. Parallel to the interest in and revival of ethics, I can, in recent years, sense a suspicion towards such an ethics. What is it? Other than another tool in the hands of the powerful?

The ethics of Levinas does not lend itself to such a suspicion, or to such a popularisation. It does not take the war of all against all, the perseverance in self, the *conatus essendi*, the will to be or the will to power as the basic and characteristic feature of the human. Beyond these features, pre-original to them, and always judging them, is the call, issuing from the vulnerability of the other, to do good.

## 4 The Order of Europe: Freedom Within The Limits of Restraint

How are we doing then, regarding our initial questions: What is ethics? And: Why are we teaching it in the military? To some of you, at least, the relevance of these questions is getting clearer.

These questions have, through our own tradition, been answered in different and opposing ways. We can see a development, though. And I will take you through it as quickly as I can:

From the middle Ages on, we can see nation states developing as strong and hierarchical systems, monopolising power in the hands of the Sovereign and demanding more or less blind discipline from its citizens, especially from its military personnel, who constituted the ultimate defence of the system.

These nation states and the international system of states came to rest on *certain conceptions* of man and society. Man is a fallen creature. Let alone man will do evil. Therefore man needs to be governed by a strong and sometimes ruthless sovereign who will castigate him and protect him from the evil he will commit towards himself and others. It is upon this anthropology, where man left to himself is seen as evil, that the philosophies of Machiavelli and Hobbes is built, as is the political thinking of their heirs, all the way up to the political realism of today. This anthropology was confirmed by the church doctrine of original sin.

The important point for us is that this applies especially in the military forces. If it is anywhere man has to be castigated it is there. He represents, as I have said, the ultimate defence of the system, and, when he goes out to fight he is exposed and put to the hardest trials a human being can face; the chaotic forces of war. Here, if anywhere, what is needed is discipline, loyalty, obedience and steadfastness. This order, from the treaty of Westphalia and onwards, constitutes, at least ideally, a coherent system, whose values are supported by the ruling anthropology, philosophy, political thinking and even theology. The need for the values is intensified when the system, the nation state is threatened. Military ethics, if it can be named that, is all about unit morale, comradeship, loyalty and obedience.

Here I am trying to make a long and complex story short, and I feel embarrassed for oversimplifying, but, anyway: What happens, and what complicates the issue at hand, is that *inside* these boundaries of the state, secured by military force, grows a society based on what can be seen as *directly opposite values*. Democracy and secularisation mean the coming of age of modern man. The basic conception of this new society is that man is good, and not evil. Castigation is now seen as the great evil and all kinds of emancipation is the name of the game. This development reaches one of its peaks in the French Revolution and the philosophy of Immanuel Kant: Freedom, rationality and the dignity and rights of man are the basic values.

The liberalism of the 19th century is a great attempt to try to extend these values to be valid also on the international arena. At bottom, man is good, and if he is educated and enlightened, freed from the superstitions of the past, he is capable of taking care of himself and society. There is no fundamental opposition between the interest of society and the individual. There are, of course, some underdeveloped cultures that need to go through the same phases we have gone through, but all in all, the development is going the right way.

It took two world wars, and a depression and the failure of The League of Nations in-between to make this optimistic world view crash-land. The post world war international order is in this sense a step backwards compared to the optimism of the 19th century. The UN treaty is a codification of the monopolising of power at the state level. The principle of world order is that international peace and security, as well as the rights of men, is to be protected through the agency of the inviolable state, whose right and duty it is to protect its geographical borders with armed force. Concerning the basic values of this world order we are left with a combination. Inside the democratic states, freedom and rights of man are the basic values, but the Hobbesian contention of the war of all against all still serves as basic, the ultimate defence of the system is still armed force. Goodness and freedom exists within these limits.

In a few moments, I will say something on the current situation in world politics, but let me stop for a moment to say something on the schizophrenic

effect this order has for the teaching of military ethics: What *are* the basic values of our teaching? What are the virtues we want to communicate? Are they loyalty, obedience, unit morale and comradeship *or* freedom, creativity and free initiative? Should we prepare the soldier and the officer for a career that could also be in the civil society or just for fighting a war? Should we do both? And, is that possible?

## 5 The Current Situation – The Bellum Americana

I will now say a few words on the current political situation, to try to place it in relation to the context I have just tried to describe. I will try not to be too critical, although I find that a bit hard. Both geographically and politically I am situated on this side of the English Channel.

11 th September 2001 marks, among many things, the awareness of the fact that the stability secured as just described is threatened by forces that are not and does not want to be included in the international order. The fears of yesterday are seen to have become the realities of today: The combination of hostility and ill intent on the one hand and on the other the capacity to make use of weapons of mass destruction, whether they are civilian planes or atomic bombs.

This understanding of the situation has given new pace to a development that was under way long before the terrorist attacks. The attacks submitted the occasion for the US to play out its role as the only remaining superpower. The response had to come, of course, and it had to include the use of force. The US policies of the first couple of months, when looking back, were quite calmly and wisely conducted. The time was taken to do intelligence work, to build up a broad international coalition and to make sure that the counter-attacks could be founded on the right to self-defence. This was, one can suspect, when the doves still reigned in the White House and before the hawks set their eyes to the situation, seeing it as the long sought after occasion to get rid of regimes hostile to the USA and suspected of supporting terrorists.

We all know how the story goes, it is happening now: The self-fulfilling proclamation of rogue states

and the axis of evil, the rising of tension in the Middle East and now in East Asia, the building up to war. The question we have to ask ourselves is why this is happening. What motives and values lie at the bottom of this development? Is it the continuation of the war of self defence after the terrorist attacks? Is it a war for the freedom of the oppressed people of the world, a war for liberation, democracy and prosperity? Is it a good and strong hand stretched out to humanity to root out evil, once and for all? Or, maybe it is nothing of this kind. Maybe this is just all about finishing the job that was left unfinished 13 years ago. Or, is it just about trying to establish stability in this region, so that the West can have a stabile oil supply?

I am not first and foremost saying that what is going on is wrong. I think very strongly that the following up after the initial phase of war in Afghanistan could have been conducted more coherently and with the support of the international community, but that is not my main point here. What is of interest to us is that the ethics of it all, the values and motives, the ethics of it all is not at all clear. What we see is the worlds only superpower leading a campaign while picking values, partly contradictory ones, where they are to be found. We are beginning to see a pattern, though, but it is too incredible to be taken seriously. That pattern says something about a restructuring of the world order from the order of states that are equally sovereign inside their own territory, to an order where this sovereignty is relative to the power of the United States, who sees itself as appointed to the task of promoting its values to the world, democracy, freedom and economical liberalism, and who sees itself as having the responsibility to interfere, even with the use of armed force, when these values are attacked and held down.

Although this thought might have gone through the minds of the present US administration, we are not there yet. What remains is a confusion of motives and values. Sometimes what is signalled is a clear-cut unilateralism informed by political realism, saying that the US has the right to do what it has the power to do. Sometimes we can hear idealism, where the main message is the promotion of human rights and democracy. Sometimes we even see traces of the long American tradition of isolationism, saying something like we will just root out the threats against our

society, build our missile shield and then withdraw to our happiness at the other side of every ocean. And, sometimes we hear multilateralism and collective security, assessing the importance of cooperation, the allies and international community.

Here I am pointing to a confusion, to an inability at the present of the US to exert coherent moral leadership. I am not alluding to anything else. In my conclusions I will return to what this means for a Europe that at present sees itself as too weak to do anything else than either to balance or bandwagon, and who, with a few notable exceptions, have chosen the latter, bandwagoning.

Here, however, it will be important to note that what one during this conference has been at pain to separate, the *ius ad bellum* and the *ius in bello*, the big political picture and the ethical standards needed to fulfil the mission that is politically decided and ordered, this distinction here falls apart. These two aspects of military ethics are closely linked together. The result of this confusion and mixture of values and motives, is that we will probably send soldiers to Iraq without being able to tell them why they are going there.

However highly in respect we hold obedience, loyalty, unite morale and comradeship, and whatever values we think we can provide in leadership training and character building, there is nothing more destructive, in the long run at least, to these values as the uncertainty of the *why at all* am I to kill others and in that putting my own life to risk.

The big picture and the concern for and fate of the individual soldier and officer can not be separated. That would be too easy and would be to fool oneself.

## 6 Implications and Conclusion - Ethics Proper and Ethics Applied

So, what are my conclusions then, concerning my initial questions. What is ethics? And, why do we teach it in the military? They are threefold. The first is principal. The second concerns the practical teaching of military ethics. The third is long term and concerns the place of Europe in the international

order of the future.

Included in the first part of my conclusions there will also be a brief summary of what I have been saying here:

I have stressed the necessity of being professionally up to date in our ethics teaching and in the development of ethics programmes. In the light of a quotation by the philosopher Emanuel Levinas I have also pointed to a growing concern of mine that ethics and the teaching of it, in the way it has become popular from the nineties and onwards, is being swallowed up as a part and tool of the system. To start the development of an alternative approach, I have, again following Levinas, stated that ethics, as an „ethics proper“, in essence never can be reduced to being a part of the system. Ethics is first philosophy. Ethics, in this sense, is ultimate reality, in that it is the constituting moment of the subject, the birth of the subject as responsible.

Ethics proper, I have said, in its essence, comes from the outside, at the same time to found and continually disturb the system. This ultimate event, what I am here calling „ethics proper“, does not reside in an imagined or real heaven above, and not in some lofty metaphysical sphere. This, what is not reducible to the same, and in that meaning always and essentially is met as coming from outside, is the demand to protect, to take care of and respect issuing from the vulnerability of the other human being.

As I said, the only limit to this fundamental responsibility is the appearance of the third, the fourth, and so on. Since there for some time now have been more than two people in the world, this comparing of the incomparable, the limiting of the limitless, this weighing of the absolute is unavoidable and necessary. It *will lead to*, and even demand, justice, rationality, a political system, including the use of military force; either it is the decision *ad bellum* or the actual use of force in *bello*. The case in point is that all these systems, including their use of force, will curve in to themselves, searching self-sufficiency and losing sight of the good, if they are not continuously corrected by the call to do good, as their constant reference or centre of gravity. Even democracy, the finest product of European civilisation, will turn into a tyranny of the majority if it closes its eye to the ultimate event of the call of the vulnerable other to do good.

I hope that at least some of you will follow me on this. Even if you are not prepared to conclude concerning the framework that Levinas provides, I think that you would agree on; if there is to be an applied ethics, there has to be something like an „ethics proper“. Because, if there is not, ethics will not be ethics.

What, then, are the practical consequences of this for the teaching of military ethics? That would, of course, be a lecture in itself, or for that sake entire conferences, and I will ask for your understanding for not treating this comprehensively. The main point, however, is exactly what was stated at the beginning of this conference, and I will strengthen it by saying that there are no value-free zones. If ethics is first philosophy there are no non-ethical hiding places. Ethics is indivisible and is in this sense vigilance, staying awake and aware. This is valid for correcting cantina culture, for the treatment of personnel, for the use and misuse of the positions in an hierarchical structure, for the acceptance or non-acceptance of differences in gender, faiths and beliefs, sexual orientation, culture and ethnic belonging.

Someone here, in one of our breaks, said that the problem of ethics is that people do *not take the consequences and do* what is right, and not that they do not know what is right, because they do. I agree with that. The lack of ethics is not mainly due to the fact that it is difficult or impossible to develop a character as an inner sense of what is right, but it is due to moral laziness and half-sleep. This laziness can even lead to a lot of work, creating theories and systems to establish neutral zones where one can live self-content with ones eyes half shut. If we, when we are teaching ethics, taking part in leadership training and character building, if we do not stay awake to see the radicalism and sometimes the hardship of the ethical demand, being prepared to shake the system, if we are content just to be counted in, we stand in danger of falling asleep.

I therefore also agree to the German approach we heard yesterday, to the question on the necessity of the coinciding of the political motives and the motives of the soldiers. But, of course, this necessity is of an ideal type, as something to be actively approached. It is from this perspective the duty of the ethics teacher, inside a democracy, to awaken the responsibility of officers, airmen, sailors and soldiers

to see themselves as *privileged participants* in the living debates on these questions. To go in strongly in the public debate to say that these are the possibilities and these are the limits of using military force. That these actions and operations are based upon the fundamental values of the society that we are defending, and these operations are not. Only in this way, even if the formal decision does not turn out to be what I voted for, only thus can they say to themselves that they have done what they can to make the decisions on these issues as informed as possible. There is where their loyalty and obedience starts. It can not, in a democratic society start with blind discipline and obedience.

The last part of the conclusion is about Europe, and I shall be short. Although we still communicate well and take pleasure in one another's company, there is a growing distance, some even call it a gap, between Europe and the United States. This distance does not primarily consist in the different levels of defence spending and technological develop merit. It is primarily moral and cultural: The reasons for this happening are not in themselves dramatic. They have to do with the fact that both Europe and the US slowly but steadily find that they do not share the same priorities in world politics.

In this picture, I do not think that the choice of Europe is between balancing or bandwagoning. I think there is a third choice. However things are, Europe will in the nearest future have to build up its own foreign and defence policy. To do that, to reach an agreement on the form and content of such a policy, we will have to work with the big questions, the big „whys“ of our international engagements. If we do not do that, we will still be confused concerning our basic values and we will not be able to tell the soldiers why we are sending them off to war.

It has been said here that Europe is a combination of Greek and Judeo-Christian tradition. I think that is a correct description. The Greek part of that tradition is essential to our way of life and has been predominant during the last centuries. The achievements coming out from that are incredible, inside technology, medicine, logic, philosophy and political thinking. In many ways this one-sided use of our tradition has come to a dead end. I think, in the reorientation of Europe, in the search for an

answer to the question on who we are, we now have to look the biblical strain of our tradition. In the ethical part of that tradition we will find a theme going through both the old and the new testament. That theme is care for the stranger, for the widow and the orphan. It is the ethical demand going out from the one lying wounded in the ditch in the parable of the Good Samaritan, it is our Lord being born as a defenceless child, his going to the outcasts of his time and his suffering and death on the cross, showing us both the depth of love and the truth of the human situation. Through all that there is a call to do good, coming from the vulnerable other. In the future, as we do now, we will have to distribute justice, we will have to compare the incomparable and get our hands dirty in making impossible choices, we will even have to go to war. In all this we will not do the right thing if we do not heed to that call.

I am not at all sure if what I have said lived up to your expectations. But, if my dictionary has told me right, 'Bad Boll' could in English mean 'a poor container of seeds'. Maybe that is not such a bad idea after all, being Bad Bolls. A perfectly safe, acceptable and invulnerable message might not let the seeds get out of its container to find the soil in which they can grow. Thank you for listening!

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## Fußnoten

- <sup>1</sup> «Peace and Proximity» in *Alterity and Transcendence* (Columbia University Press, 1999), page 144. It was originally published as «Paix et proximité» in *Les Cahiers de la nuit surveillée*, No. 3, (Paris, Verdier, 1984)

