

# Reply to: "Are Military Professionals Bound by a 'Higher' Moral Standard?"

by Michael P Vriesenga

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Dr. Ficarrota's article made some good points, but it tried to take the logic train to where common sense quantum leaped. It justified holding military professionals to a higher standard based on their function, and to a lesser extent on group image, but it was unable to justify holding military professionals to a higher standard outside their professional environment. The argument rested on false assumptions. First, similarly situated, any moral person will behave as a military person should behave. Second, the situation rather than character determine how a person will behave. The most important point the article missed, ironically, is that ethics don't just happen. Rather, leaders teach, demonstrate and nurture ethics so their followers will behave ethically.

The article recognized that many professions hold themselves to higher standards. It then negated all these moral systems by asserting their standards would apply to "anyone who happened to find himself similarly situated." This peculiar argument negates any special moral system with one assertion, not only for the military, but for other professions as well. The "strength" of this argument lies in erasing the distinction between people and professions, simply because people in these professions "are far more likely actually to find themselves in these situations than other people."

On the contrary, the professional skills which set professionals apart hold them to a "higher" moral standard. If a man were having a heart attack in an aircraft at 37,000 feet, I would expect different behavior from the pilot, a doctor, a lawyer, a police officer, and a clerk. The impetus forcing the physician to act is moral, a higher moral standard in this situation. Everyone on that plane is similarly situated, but only the physician has the moral duty to help. Gatekeepers in these professions, recognizing the peril the professions and society are under when their people fail ethically, teach and try to uphold a higher moral standard. In these cases, the ethical standards have evolved of necessity.

Assume moral systems exist to guide inter-personal relationships and protect society's integrity, and assume moral systems evolved to appropriately meet the needs of the societies they serve. We can then derive some thoughts from observation.

Imagine disparate moral systems laid on a spectrum from lesser to higher. A hermit does not need a moral system. A loosely knit, individualistic, frontier society needs a lesser moral system because interpersonal relations are infrequent and low pressure. A tightly knit, compact society (Japan?) needs a higher moral system because interpersonal interaction is more frequent and higher pressure. Without a sufficient moral system, society will tear itself apart.

Major cities provide a related analogy. Cities with higher moral systems, like Singapore, function more effectively than cities with lesser moral systems, like Lagos.

Similarly the military, a tightly knit, intense subgroup within the larger society, requires and maintains a higher moral standard. Because military life is higher pressure than civilian life, and because interactions between military personnel are more intense, military society requires a higher moral standard to maintain its integrity. Military societies which fail to maintain those standards become bandits or defeated.

The article correctly confirms the functional need for military professionals to behave morally within their calling, but it says "the functional line does not establish that the military professional must be 'good' through and through." The basis of this assertion is that "perfectly ordinary human beings are capable of forming extremely complicated dispositions." Basically the article asserts that a person may maintain different moral standards in different situations.

Although some individuals can follow contrary ethical guidance, most can not. Although a person may tailor their behavior to the situation, character usually shines through regardless of the situation. Generally a person who honors oaths will try to honor all oaths, and one who doesn't honor oaths can not be predicted. Moreover, the more stressful the situation the more likely fundamental character will show through. Because military situations are especially stressful, we can expect that true character rather than situational role-playing will come out in the military context.

Character is like a river. The longer it remains in a particular channel the deeper it cuts and the less likely it will leave that channel. Rivers that frequently leave their banks to explore other routes pick up enormous amounts of mud and silt, clog their original channels, and sometimes wind up permanently in other channels. Most rivers remain within their channels indefinitely.

People may occasionally slip out of their channel, but most will remain true to their character indefinitely. A person may for a short time behave morally among military peers and immorally otherwise, but over time, and perhaps in the most stressful situation, they will likely fail to maintain the false persona.

Even if a person successfully maintains different moral standards in their military and private lives, the purpose of ensuring military professionals maintain high moral standards is to foster trust, teamwork and cohesiveness. The article avoids this important point. Dr. Ficarrota may believe character is divisible, but most people disagree. Consequently, a perfectly functioning soldier may undermine his unit's integrity and effectiveness because he is known to be unfaithful, undependable, or dishonest outside the military sphere. I would be more likely to expect sexual harassment from someone who cheated on their spouse. I would think twice about sending them remote or extended TDY with a member of the opposite sex. A commander would be guilty of poor judgment if he entrusted the squadron finances with someone convicted of cheating on her taxes. Common sense says, a military professional must be "good through and through" because they are unlikely to maintain a split personality or to be accepted as split personalities. Perhaps in theoretical ivory towers a person can be an honest military professional and a despicable human being. Fill my stone ramparts with people who are the same in or out of uniform.

The article contends that because some great military leaders were immoral people, there is not necessarily a connection between a person being "'good' through and through" and military effectiveness. Logical? Yes, but as my kindergarten teacher or mother would say, "What if everybody did it?" Take Patton for example, a great military leader who cheated on his wife. In light of his entire career, this is an instance of the river flowing out of its channel. However, if everybody in the Army cheated on their spouses, the Army would be hamstrung by venereal disease, lawsuits and camp followers. In a system which groups soldiers as buddies, why should a soldier think his buddy will be any more faithful to him than he was to his spouse?

The article ignores the need to connect moral necessity and moral behavior. It assumes that morality is there; some will conform and some will not. Morality, perhaps more than nature, is subject to the second law of thermodynamics. Without an input of moral energy, society enters a downward cycle of moral behavior. Many societies have gone through cycles of moral degradation and re-awakening. Moral necessity exists at all times and in all situations; however, moral behavior does not necessarily follow. Moral encouragement from family, church, school, media, and community works to promote moral behavior. Military professionals are likely to find themselves in situations which pressure them to lower their standards. If the military expects moral behavior from military professionals, it must consistently inject moral energy, clear moral channels and build moral levees. No soldier would be inspired to attain "ordinary" moral standards. Hence leaders exhort military professionals to maintain "higher" moral standards.

As Dr. Ficarrota proves, military function requires a higher moral standard. This is true not only of the individual's function, but of the functioning of the larger military organization. Military professionals must maintain moral standard consistently in their lives. Military leaders must continue to inject moral energy into military society if they expect their followers to behave morally. Yes, military professionals are bound by a higher moral standard.