Exegeting the Army Ethic:

The Two Questions Army Professionals Should Ask Themselves

CHAPLAIN (MAJ) JARED L. VINEYARD

Exegesis. While this may not be a word that is often or ever used in everyday conversations, it is a very important word. A very basic definition of exegesis is "a critical explanation or interpretation of a text or portion of a text."[1] This term is familiar to most pastors and chaplains who regularly look at and wrestle with sacred scriptures. The purpose in doing so, for many, is to uncover the meaning of the particular verse or passage in order to first understand and then to apply what is written. While deep thought on religious doctrine is absolutely appropriate, what about deep thought on Army doctrine? The word doctrine, coming "from (the) Latin doctrina, generally means the body of teachings presented to a group for acceptance."[2] The Army defines doctrine as "fundamental principles, with supporting tactics, techniques, procedures, and terms and symbols, used for the conduct of operations and as a guide for actions of operating forces, and elements of the institutional force that directly support operations in support of national objectives."[3] And while Army doctrine covers almost every conceivable aspect of Soldiering, at its heart is a desire for the American Soldier at echelon to "do the right thing for the right reasons."[4] While a noble goal, one might ask if Army doctrine provides a guide to help leaders and Soldiers make the right decisions? Fortunately, the answer is yes. The purpose of this article is to exegete and explain how the Army ethic answers this question while demonstrating that every Army professional regardless of position or rank should always ask themselves (and be able to answer) two basic questions: "**Can I?**" and "**Should I?**"

These two questions, while not explicit in doctrine, are yet deeply rooted in the ethos of the American Soldier. This idea is foundational when one understands the purpose of the Army ethic. The Army ethic is the set of enduring moral principles, values, beliefs, and laws that guide the Army profession and create the culture of trust essential to Army professionals in the conduct of missions, performance of duty, and all aspects of life.[5]

According to doctrine, this ethic is "the basis of the Army's shared professional identify… guides institutional policy and practice… and unites all Army professionals to live by and uphold."[6] And while the Army ethic is discussed at length in doctrine, one might be challenged to hear a conversation about it in the operational force. This lack of discussion may occur for many reasons, one of which could simply be a misunderstanding of what it means. If the ethic is

Soldiers discuss mission plans during training at Pohakuloa Training Area, HI, on 18 October 2021.
Photo by SPC Rachel Christensen

misunderstood, it will likely be misapplied in the operational environment. Or as in many cases, the Army ethic is simply unknown and not thought about by Soldiers and leaders. If this is the case, it will therefore never be applied, at least intentionally. Both of these scenarios are unsatisfactory.

But before continuing, a brief defining of terminology is appropriate. The Army often uses terms such as morals and ethics loosely and interchangeably. And while these terms are most definitely related, they are not exactly the same. A recent publication, Department of the Army (DA) Pamphlet (PAM) 165-19, *Moral Leadership*, helps explain the differences between these two terms. The definitions include:

Morals: A sense of right and wrong in principles, values, and conduct. Federal law recognizes the moral responsibility of every Army leader...

Ethics: A system of moral principles, or rules of conduct recognized in respect to a class of human actions, a particular group or culture. Ethics reflects upon how morality is practically applied to a decision made in contexts and communities.[7]

Additionally, the word "ethic" itself needs defining. A definition for an ethic is "a set of moral principles guiding decisions and actions."[8] Thus, for Army leaders, it might be helpful to understand that the difference between morals and ethics and specifically the Army ethic is similar to the difference between the tactical and the strategic levels of war. Morals can be viewed as tactical, that is on a lower level or more personally focused, while ethics and the Army ethic specifically are more strategic or big picture. What this means is that every Soldier has his or her own set of moral beliefs. These are formed over time from a variety of sources such as family, faith, education, experiences, and so on. These beliefs are cemented in the conscience of each person, which directly impacts leadership. Leadership doctrine tells us that "a leader's character consists of their true nature guided by their conscience, which affects their moral attitudes and actions."[9] And while high personal morals are encouraged in Army leaders, all leaders must also remember that they are charged to live under the Army ethic as well. Therefore, Soldiers must look to both personal (tactical) values as well as Army (strategic) values to make decisions. When ethical issues arise, Army leadership doctrine affirms, "Soldiers make the best judgement possible based on their understanding of the Army ethic and their conscience, as applied to the immediate situation."[10] The individual conscience along with the Army ethic assists personnel in making tough decisions. And while the individual moral compass may vary from person to person, the Army ethic frames all Soldiers within the force. The Army ethic gives each and every Soldier that broad understanding of what is right and wrong. But how should it be understood? This brings us back to the Army ethic itself.

While it may be true that after a quick reading of the Army ethic, one may walk away confused at what is truly being conveyed, a closer look will reveal much with regards to depth and guidance. The first half of the Army ethic's definition focuses on "what it is," while the second half focuses on "what it does." Let's take the second part first, that is the "what it does" part. This part states that the ethic helps to "guide the Army profession and create the culture of trust essential to Army professionals in the conduct of missions, performance of duty, and all aspects of life."[11] The two verbs in this section highlight what the ethic does for the organization which are to guide and create. The Army ethic guides the profession and creates a culture of trust for professionals. And while much could be said about the profession in general, it is enough for now to simply define it. The Army profession is "a trusted vocation of Soldiers and Army civilians whose collective expertise is the ethical design, generation, support, and application of landpower; serving under civilian authority; and entrusted to defend the Constitution and the rights and interests of the American people."[12] This is the context of the Army ethic. And when the ethic is applied well, it both guides and creates within this context and within its people.

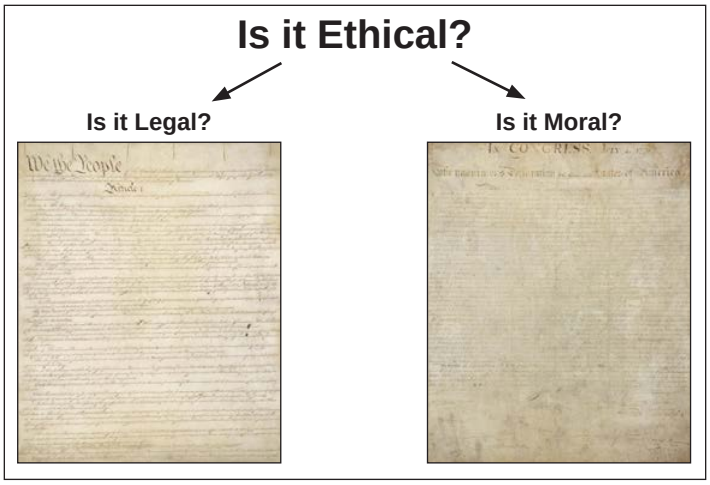

Figure 1[14]

But one cannot expect to reap the benefits of what the ethic does if one does not first understand what the ethic is, which is often and unfortunately missed by many Army leaders. This hypothesis can be easily tested by asking a group of leaders to define or describe the Army ethic. The standard answer is typically no answer. If leaders hope to reap the benefits of the Army ethic, then they must first understand what the Army ethic is. So, what is it specifically? It is "the set of enduring moral principles, values, beliefs and laws…"[13] While it may seem that this is a list of separate and unrelated ideas, the conjunction breaks the definition into two distinct categories, the first being "moral principles, values, beliefs" while the second is "laws." With this distinction one can see the two general categories that emerge to create the ethic. The first is moral (which includes principles, values, and beliefs) and the second is legal. Again, "an ethic" represents a strategic or big picture concept while "moral" represents a more tactical or individually oriented idea. This means that if an Army professional is going to live the Army ethic, he or she must take into consideration both moral and legal principles. Thus, to answer the question "is it ethical or

does it comply with the Army ethic?," one must first ask the questions: "Is it legal?" and "Is it moral?" A graphical way to depict this concept can be see in Figure 1.

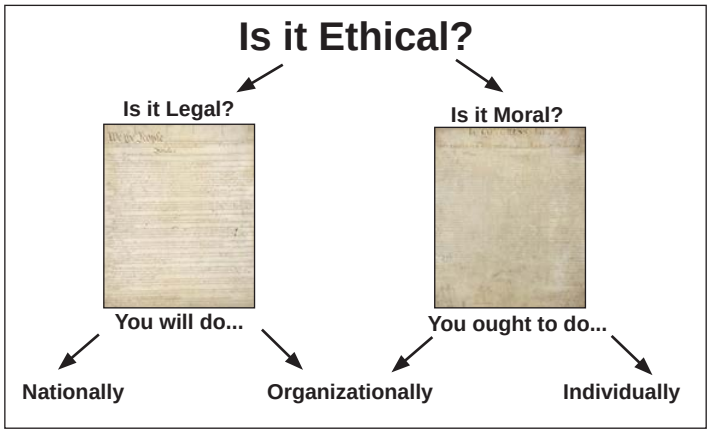

Figure 2

While legal and moral are very broad categories, they give the Army professional two areas to begin to think deeply about. All Army professionals must follow the law, which means to do what is right legally. This large category could be further subdivided into two categories which include national laws (including state and local laws) as well as organizational laws (including directives, policies, and Uniformed Code of Military Justice [UCMJ]). When talking about national laws, it is a given that all citizens of a nation must follow the laws of the land, no matter what their occupation or profession. But when it comes to a profession, all professionals must also follow the rules and codes of their organization or profession. These rules and protocols help "members of a profession share a sense of organic unity and consciousness of themselves as a group apart… (which) has its origins in the lengthy discipline and training necessary for professional competence…"[15] Therefore, for an Army professional, doing what is legal implies both categories, national as well as organizational. To neglect either of those would imply punishment or punitive action.

While the legal side of the ethic is focused on law, the moral side of the ethic is focused on conscience. These moral principles, values, (and) beliefs, while learned over a lifetime, are implemented daily by Soldiers and leaders through their conscience. The White Paper entitled "The Army's Framework for Character Development" was very explicit about this idea when it defined the conscience as "beliefs about right and wrong."[16] When put together, legal is what a professional will do (or not do), while moral is what a professional ought to do (or ought not to do). The moral category, just like legal, could also be broken into two subcategories; this time the first is organizational while the second is individual. Organizational conscience is not an area that Army leaders talk about much, at least not in those terms, but this is exactly what they mean every time a leader mentions Army Values or the Warrior Ethos. Every time these ideals are spoken, leaders unknowingly point to the "conscience of the Army," which again are moral principles, values, (and) beliefs that Army professionals ought to know and believe in.

And while the "conscience of the Army," as seen through Army Values and other principles, is absolutely necessary, the individual Army professionals do not simply leave their beliefs and values at the door when they join the profession. Army leaders are called to have a high set of personal moral beliefs which they must personally rely on. These morals help leaders as they make hard decisions in harder circumstances with little help and in little time. Army doctrine has a strong sense that a leader's moral compass is at the heart of every ethical decision that he or she makes. This is easily shown from the sentence quoted earlier: "Soldiers make the best judgement possible based on their understanding of the Army ethic and their conscience, as applied to the immediate situation."[17] This sentence states that while the conscience of the Army must be taken into consideration (in the Army ethic) so must the conscience of the Army professional. Only when both are consulted and agreed upon does a decision carry full moral weight. Graphically, what has been described above might look something like Figure 2.

Now coming back to the two larger categories of moral and legal, the Army ethic demands that all Army professionals take both areas into consideration in order to make a proper decision. And while this is fairly understandable, a leader may still look at those two categories as very nebulous and broad. This is true due to the fact that they must cover a range of decisions that a leader will make. And while giving guidance, it is impossible for doctrine to fully guide every

Figure 3[18]

Foundations of the Army Ethic		
Applicable to:	***Legal Motivation of Compliance***	***Moral Motivation of Aspiration***
Army profession *Trust* *Honorable service* *Military expertise* *Stewardship* *Esprit de corps*	United States Constitution United States Code Uniform Code of Military Justice Executive Orders Treaties, Law of Land Warfare	Declaration of Independence Universal Declaration of Human Rights Just War Tradition (Jus ad Bellum) Army culture of trust Professional organizational climate
Trusted Army professionals *Honorable servants* *Army experts* *Stewards*	Oaths of Service Standards of conduct Directives and policies The Soldier's Rules Rules of engagement	Natural moral reason – Golden Rule Army Values Soldier's and Army Civilian Corps creeds Justice in War (Jus in Bello)
The *Army ethic*, our professional ethic, is the set of enduring moral principles, values, beliefs, and applicable laws embedded within the Army c*ulture of trust* that motivates and guides the Army profession and *trusted Army professionals* in conduct of the mission, performance of duty, and all aspects of life.		

individual in every ethical decision or circumstance that he or she may face. But in order to help, doctrine does present a matrix which forms the foundation of the Army ethic and creates a baseline for proper ethical decision making. This matrix (see Figure 3) presents 22 specific ideas, documents, or principles, depending on how one counts them, which set the standard for leaders in the fulfillment of the ethic.

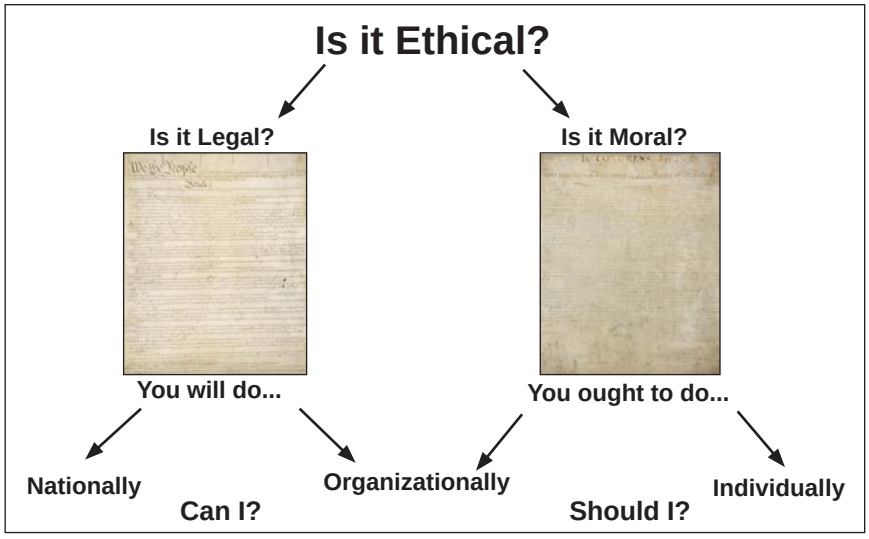

Figure 4

A brief description and explanation of this matrix is now appropriate. At the bottom (or foundation) of the matrix is the Army ethic itself. The audience of the ethic, that is who it is applicable to, is annotated on the left-hand side, which is the Army profession at large (top left) and Army professionals specifically (bottom left) along with the corresponding attributes. The two other general columns give Army professionals specific guiding ideals and principles that they will comply with legally along with ideals and principles that they ought to aspire to morally. One could say that these are what a professional "will do" and what a professional "ought to do." These principles are more specifically depicted in four quadrants which are graphically portrayed. The top two boxes focusing on the legal and moral principles that give overarching guidance to the profession at large while the bottom two boxes present principles for individual professionals to apply in their specific situations. For instance, a Soldier must not legally violate the Law of Land Warfare (top legal box), which can be applied by following the Soldier's Rules or theater-specific rules of engagement (ROE) (lower legal box). The general legal principle is the Law of Land Warfare, which is specifically lived out by the Army professional knowing and following the Soldier's Rules or ROE. Another example, this one on the moral side, is that all Army professionals are charged with creating a culture of trust within their organization (top moral box). One way that an Army professional may choose to accomplish this is by personally living and teaching the Army Values (lower moral box). The general moral principle is the Army culture of trust, which might be specifically lived out by the Army professional knowing and living Army Values. The bottom line is that this matrix is foundational to the Army ethic as it instructs Soldiers and leaders "what they will do" and "what they ought to do."

One final point on "what the ethic is" needs to focus on the word enduring. Enduring can be defined as "existing for a long time," with synonyms that include imperishable, durable, lasting, and even permanent.[19] What does this added word convey to the Army professional? At a minimum, it implies that decisions must not be made on whims nor made from hastily created norms. The ethical decisions made by Army professionals must be thoughtful and thought out. It demonstrates that the ethos of the Soldier is rooted in a long heritage of tradition and honor. In fact, doctrine itself states this very point. The four strains of thought that have come together to create the Army ethic include "the philosophical heritage, theological, and cultural traditions, and the historical legacy that frame our Nation."[20] These durable streams of ideas running into the mighty river of the Army ethic form the enduring ideals that the ethic represents. It is the moral and the legal principles of the Army ethic that Army professionals must consult to guide them in their decision making. These principles are time-tested and enduring.

This brings us full circle back to the two questions that every Army professional must ask themselves: "Can I?" and "Should I?"

These two questions encompass the fullness of the Army ethic in that they represent the two components in question form. "Can I?" is a legal question. Can I do this or can I do that? The response would be to ask: "Are there any laws, policies, directives, etc., preventing you from doing (or not doing) something?" "Should I?" on the other hand is a moral question. Should I do this or should I say that? This is the question of "ought" as opposed to "will or must" and points back to the conscience of both the organization and individual. Graphically, the questions can be added to the previous illustration, seen in Figure 4.

Therefore, to know what the Army ethic would say in a specific situation, a Soldier would ask "can I... ?" and "should I... ?" before making a decision.

Thus, assuming the Army ethic is what it says it is, which is "the basis of the Army's shared professional identify… (that) guides institutional policy and practice… and unites all Army professionals to live by and uphold."[21] And assuming that the Army ethic is made up of both moral and legal ideals and principles, what happens when an Army professional is faced with complying with an illegal order? Or, to change the scenario, what happens when an Army professional is faced with executing an immoral order? What is a leader to do? While it may seem intuitive that both of these would go directly against the words and spirit of the Army ethic, doctrine

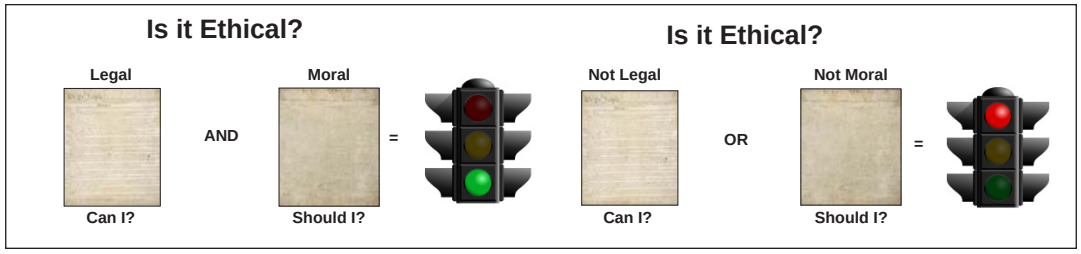

Figure 5[23]

is also very clear on what a leader or any Army professional must to do in those cases. The bottom line is that "Army forces reject and report illegal, unethical, or immoral orders or actions… Soldiers are bound to obey the legal and moral orders of their superiors; but they must disobey an unlawful or immoral order."[22] Quite simply, Army leaders do not follow illegal or immoral orders. The difference is with conjunctions or connecting words, and specifically the conjunctions "and" vs "or." For an order to be ethical, it must be legal AND moral. While an order could be unethical if it is illegal OR immoral. Graphically, using the red light/green light concept, it might be portrayed like Figure 5.

Living the Army ethic demands that leaders know and do what is both morally and legally allowable and reject what is not. Compromise on these issues is nonnegotiable because it is not merely a compromise of one decision or a compromise by one individual; it represents a compromise for the entire profession.

And this profession by its very nature, above most others, must be rooted in an ethic. The reason for this statement is that the Army profession deals with violence. This was viewed earlier in the definition of the profession. The Army's ultimate role involves the "application of landpower."[24] Applying landpower involves many things, one of which is violence. But it is not simply violence because it is not simply the "application of landpower" that the Army is responsible for conducting — it is the "ethical... application of landpower."[25] The Army must be ethical when it is lethal. This principle is powerfully illustrated in a quote by Carl von Clausewitz: "The soldier trade, if it is to mean anything at all, has to be anchored to an unshakable code of honor. Otherwise, those of us who follow the drums become nothing more than a bunch of hired assassins walking around in gaudy clothes… a disgrace to God and mankind."[26] While explicitly extolling the need for a code of honor, Clausewitz implicitly appeals to the ethos or the ethic of the Soldier. Therefore, at some level every Soldier is an ethicist, and all who think about lethality must also think about ethicality. A more modern affirmation of this idea comes from GEN (Retired) Stanley McChrystal, who wrote, "Maintaining our force's moral compass was not a difficult concept to understand. Armies without discipline are mobs; killing without legal and moral grounds is murder."[27] Army professionals must be ethical, or bad things will happen in already bad situations, which includes combat. The Army must know and train in the area of ethics.

Fortunately, Army doctrine has not left leaders or Soldiers on their own to "figure it out" for themselves. Army professionals have the Army ethic to assist them in doing "the right thing for the right reasons."[28] Exegeting or looking critically at the Army ethic allows Soldiers to ask themselves "can I?" and "should I?" It is only after answering these two questions that Soldiers can truly make ethical decisions and thereby live out the calling as Army professionals that they are legally and morally obligated to fulfill.

Notes

[1] "Exegesis," Dictionary.com, 3 May 2021, accessed from https://www.dictionary.com/browse/exegesis.
[2] Army Doctrinal Publication (ADP) 1-01, *Doctrine Primer*, July 2019, 1-1.
[3] Ibid, 1-2.
[4] ADP 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession*, July 2019, 2-6.
[5] Ibid, 1-6.
[6] Ibid, 1-7.
[7] Department of the Army (DA) Pamphlet (PAM) 165-19, *Moral Leadership*, 27 November 2020, 2.
[8] "The Army's Framework for Character Development," Army White Paper, Center for the Army Profession and Ethic, 2017, 17.
[9] ADP 6-22, 2-1.
[10] Ibid, 1-4.
[11] Ibid, 1-6.
[12] Ibid, 1-2.
[13] Ibid, 1-6.
[14] "United States Constitution" and "Declaration of Independence," accessed from archives.gov on 30 April 2021, https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs. According to ADP 6-22, 1-7, these are the foundational legal (Constitution) and moral (Declaration) documents of our nation and Army.
[15] Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State*, (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1957), 10.
[16] "The Army's Framework for Character Development," 17.
[17] ADP 6-22, 1-4.
[18] Ibid, 1-7.
[19] "Enduring," Cambridge.org, 30 April 2021, accessed from https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/enduring.
[20] ADP 6-22, 1-7.
[21] Ibid, 1-7.
[22] Ibid, 1-4.
[23] Traffic light clip art was taken from www.all-free-download.com, 30 April 2021.
[24] ADP 6-22, 1-2.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Shannon French, *The Code of the Warrior* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2003), 6.
[27] GEN (Retired) Stanley McChrystal, *My Share of the Task* (NY: Penguin Group, 2013), 135.
[28] ADP 6-22, 1-6.

Chaplain (MAJ) Jared Vineyard currently serves as the Ethics Instructor and Writer at the Maneuver Center of Excellence at Fort Benning, GA. He has served as a chaplain for the past 12 years. Prior to that, Chaplain Vineyard served as a Field Artillery officer. He has been deployed as both a Field Artillery officer (Iraq, 2003-2004) and as a chaplain (Afghanistan, 2010-2011). He graduated from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, NY, in 2002 and has earned two graduate degrees, a Master of Divinity from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in 2008 and a Master of Sacred Theology from Yale Divinity School in 2019.