



HMCS *Fredericton*'s Padre delivers a committal of ashes to sea ceremony on the ship's quarter deck during Operation *Reassurance*, 25 March 2015.

Humanism and the Military Conscience: A Reply to Pichette and Marshall¹

by Stephen Hare

Introduction

In their article entitled, “Is There a Role for Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) Chaplains in Ethics?” Padres Yvon Pichette and Jon Derrick Marshall suggest the case for an expanded role of the Chaplaincy to “... model, teach and implement ethics at the tactical and operational level” in the CAF.² Their rationale, at least in part, seems to be their belief that the current approach to a CAF ethics support function (as provided by the Defence Ethics Programme) is necessarily a dubious one to address ethics in its fullness: it is “a public ethics program” which is “necessarily reductionist” in that it cannot fully address “questions of spirituality, religion and the human person.”³

This argument inevitably raises time-honoured questions about the nature of ethics and its relationship to religious faith. In this reply, I will briefly challenge what appears to be the authors’ belief that secular ethics in general is inadequate to human ethical needs. Equally important, however, I will suggest we can answer

the question posed by the title of their article in the affirmative. Both the Programme and the Chaplaincy have the same aim in some sense (seeking to support the ethical well-being of individual CAF personnel, and thereby helping the organization as a whole to be ethically sound). In all likelihood, these different programmatic approaches bring to bear differing but complementary skills to the task. If both programs worked in a more complementary fashion, they could well be more effective in pursuit of the common goal, provided there is an adequate understanding of each by the other before premature decisions are made.

Discussion

The old philosophical argument against religious faith as the proper foundation of ethical belief goes something like this: faith is inherently not reducible to reasoned argument; since people demonstrably arrive at different faiths (and many profess no faith at all), it is a futile exercise trying to argue one faith over another by rational means. In one of the major institutions of a formally secular society like Canada,

this means that an institutional approach to ethics ultimately must be grounded in secular reasoning, not religious faith. There is certainly room for individuals to practice their faith within the CAF, and where faith influences one's ethical beliefs, inter-faith chaplains are presumably well schooled in ways to be receptive and supportive of the reflective concerns of such individuals.

If secular ethics were by its very nature unable to address the most important ethical problems faced by the institution, whereas religion were able to do so, then we might have a compelling argument for focusing all programmatic ethics in the Chaplaincy. However, my reply argues that secular ethics has sufficient power to guide the professional identity, attitudes, and behaviours of

CAF personnel as these relate to some profound ethical challenges confronted on duty.

Pichette and Marshall seem to want to use the existence of various private faiths that can flourish in a secular society as a basis for delineating what they call "public ethics" from "private" or "personal" ethics," where the "deeper" sense of ethics resides in a private, spiritual realm, leaving "administrative" matters such as conflict of interest, in the public, secular realm. Ethics, however, has never worked like this. By its very nature, as a discipline, ethics has always sought to answer questions such as: How should human beings live well? What really matters in life? What is the ultimate foundation of right and wrong, good and bad? What are the foundations of any knowledge? Such questions themselves obviously touch upon both public and private life, and the way

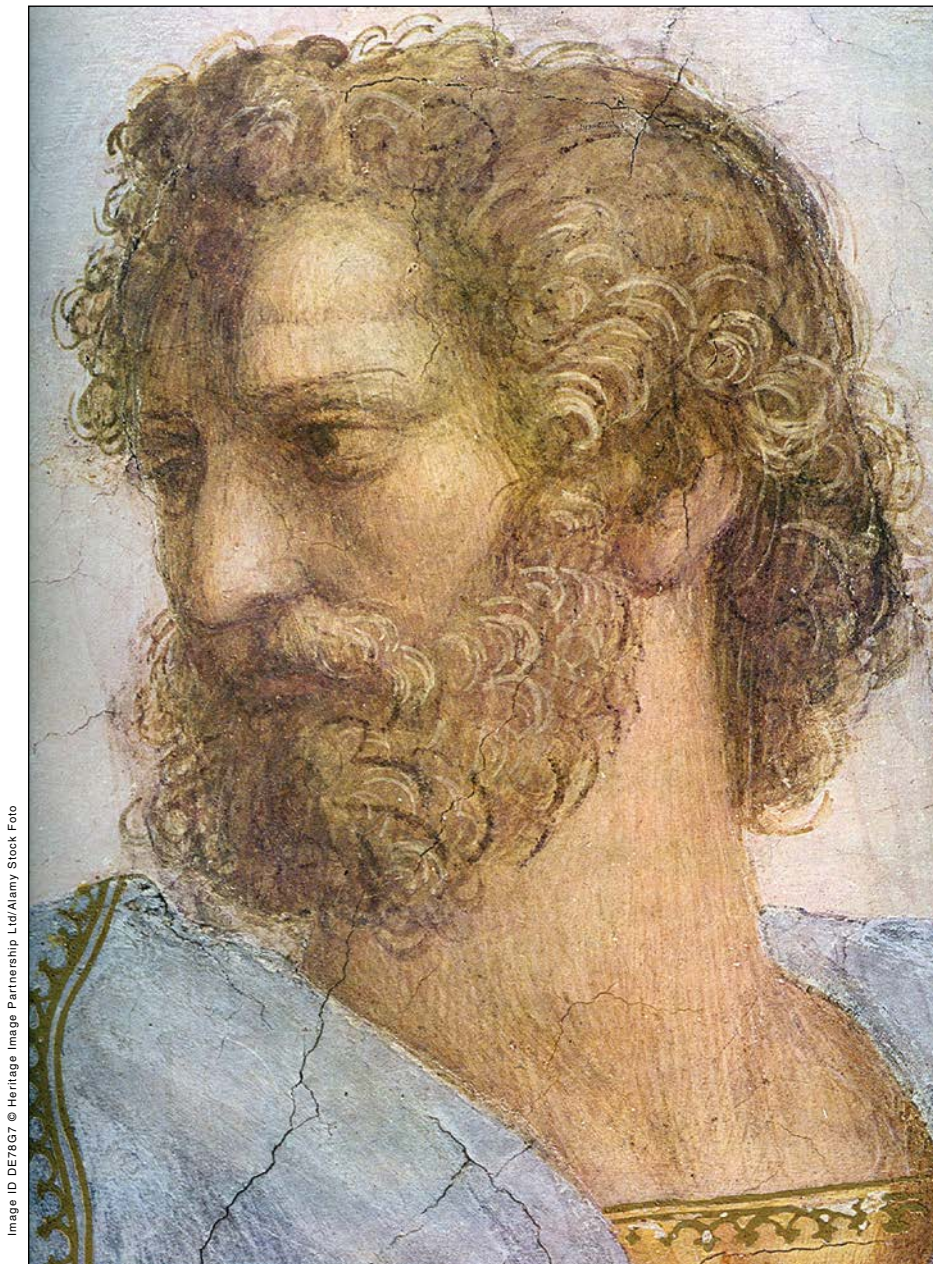


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Aristotle, by Raphael (1483-1520).



Portrait of German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804).

in which one answers the questions will have implications for both, although these implications may be very different between private and public life, and yet in accordance with a common framework. Generally speaking, theories of ethics assume an underlying universality of application. It is the differing nature of public and private realms which explain the differences in implications for each.

Conflict of interest is a useful example because it is at *the intersection of private and public life*. Ethics makes the assumption that personnel as human beings will continue to have private interests in their professional roles, and sometimes, due to the possible influence of those interests, their professional impartiality may be compromised, or at least it may appear so. Conflict of interest policy is a risk-management measure designed to

reduce the likelihood of loss of professional impartiality. It is, in fact, a relatively recent concept,⁴ unlike ethics. In terms of its understanding of the content of ethics itself, conflict of interest policy only needs to assume that the ethical viewpoint and the self-interested one are often in tension with each other. Beyond impartiality and its appearance, the exact nature and foundations of ethics need not be elucidated for conflict of interest to be coherent as an idea and manageable as a risk. More fundamental ethical concerns in CAF cannot be handled in this way, because they will engage deeper passions, often ones that are justifiably pulling in conflicting directions.

One sometimes hears it said in everyday conversation that, now that religion has less and less influence over conduct in our society, we are losing our ethical compass. This contrasts curiously

with some recent writings of public intellectuals, who have argued that the influence of religion is at the least unnecessary, and in some views, even pernicious, to the ethical health of society.⁵ It is not necessary to assent to this view to observe that, for at least a few millennia since ethical speculations were first recorded in writing, those thinkers who prized reason as the foremost basis of knowledge were acutely conscious of the sometimes- major influence of religion in popular moral thinking. Many seminal moral philosophers have explicitly chosen to question and ultimately reject this influence, on the grounds such as those already described. These writers did not conclude their speculations empty-handed, but argued for and against a variety of ingenious theories to explain ethics and guide morality, even if none of those theories considered in isolation is entirely convincing.

The legacy of this historical dialogue is modern secular ethics. We can go back to one of the pre-Christian giants of ethics, Aristotle, to argue that there is an ancient tradition in moral philosophy of separation between human ethics and the transcendent realm. The dominant interpretation of Aristotle's view of religion is that the first principle (the eternal "unmoved mover")⁶ would have no interest whatsoever in the adventures and travails of people, in contrast to the anthropomorphic, pagan gods, as popularly celebrated in his cultural milieu.⁷ Aristotle developed a rich theory of human nature and needs that was elaborated into an argument, not only about what it means to be a good person in one's private life, but what are better and worse political foundations for a good society. Aristotle is probably the most important source of modern thinking about personal character traits (or virtues), which continue to play a pivotal role in institutional discussions of excellence (reflected today, for example, in the popularity of aspirational codes of institutional values).⁸

Nor is Aristotle an anomaly in the history of major contributors to modern thinking on ethics. Immanuel Kant is probably the most influential Western philosopher in shaping the secular approach to the idea of human dignity. Kant himself acknowledges that ethical knowledge accessible via reason alone as he sees it is fully congruent with the Ten Commandments.⁹ At the same time, he insists that any reasoned knowledge of things-in-themselves, beyond the realm of worldly experience, as mediated by our categories of mental judgment, is strictly impossible.¹⁰ He places the idea of a Supreme Being as an idea of reason that is beyond these categories, although generated from them in the manner of an artefact of the mind. Whatever truth this Supreme Being may or may not correspond with is an unknowable one. This does not lessen by one iota Kant's passionate convictions about the rational foundation of human greatness and of the certitude of our strictly reasoned capacity to understand and distinguish right and wrong.

All credible contemporary secular attempts to further refine ethics agree in a few fundamental assumptions: that all human beings have equal inherent worth and equally sound claims to self-determination, as well as the capacities to fulfil that claim in the context of an ethically sound society. This goes hand-in-hand with the end of special claims to knowledge residing in, or rule by, some privileged class, be they hereditary kings, a priestly caste, or a master race. All of us are capable of reasoning, and reason is the most necessary basis of ethical insight.

This core assumption is by no means the whole story, and it is not able to dispatch all our pressing worldly moral problems with tidy clarity. There are also valid objections with trying to derive too much from reason alone. A key objection to Kant is that he seems to ignore another necessary condition of ethical action, namely an affective (emotional, volitional) orientation towards acting in accordance with ethical beliefs. Human beings are shaped by drivers other than only the capacity for conscious reasoning, such as empathy as a biological and psychological phenomenon, and these drivers are also part of the essential picture in understanding ethical orientation. Affective and other dimensions of ethics are increasingly recognized by empirical science. Compassionate or altruistic impulses are phenomena that can be observed even in non-human species. This does not, however, compel us to assume such species are influenced by religious ideas.

These hasty sketches of the history of moral philosophy are meant to give some sense of the profundity of secular theories of ethics. Such theories help validate the strength and urgency of encountered ethical concerns, and to some extent, they can help precise one's responses to them. There can be no more fundamental ethical concern for military personnel than the ethics of killing (and the choice of target under what circumstances). Although called upon to engage in lethal combat as part of a professional responsibility, military members can be affected in a private and personal way by such a "public" experience. This is where doctrines like Just War Theory, the Laws of Armed Conflict and their philosophical underpinnings are critical tools in helping shape perceptions about warfare, both before and after the actions in theatre occur. While they cannot make responsibility for casualties something morally easy or unambiguous, it is obvious that theoretical elements of military ethics are a vital part of military professional development, one that has no small impact on the choice of one's actions in theatre, and one's private perceptions of these actions. Military ethics (and *ipso facto* ethics in general) is a critical contributor to one's personal, private experience of warfare, as well as one's outward conduct in war.

As mentioned by Pichette and Marshall, the Three Principles of the Defence Ethics Program attempt to capture the ethical foundations of the defence institution in a liberal democracy. They adhere firmly to the core ethical insight of human dignity. Respect for human dignity comes first in the sense that the CAF exists to defend Canadian society and its more basic political values, as well as sometimes to exert an influence in areas of the world where political states of affairs are at odds with our own vision of a good society (typically a judgment shared by our international allies). However, reality is usually more complex and at least somewhat morally ambiguous. There is doubtless an element of expedient self-interest in some governmental decisions to enter operations in foreign lands, but the ethics that the CAF requires its members to practice are largely intended to align the espoused military objective – a furtherance of human dignity in geopolitics – with the patterns of military conduct that also support human dignity at the tactical level. Enlightenment ideals and corresponding standards of conduct are not "administrative" only. They are at the heart of what we believe about good and bad, right and wrong – and what humanity stands for.

A Way Forward: Joining Forces?

The potential for collaboration between the programs, notwithstanding all this, seems great. Chaplains have a unique position, both with their extensive informal knowledge of the climate and issues in the units they serve, and their unique relationship to the chain of command. By contrast, ethics representatives at the unit level under the Defence Ethics Programme architecture report to their own unit superiors, and to no one else. The insight possessed by chaplains about the actual trends and perspectives among unit personnel, and their capacity to share this insight in suitably anonymized fashion to any level up the command structure needing to know, are both capacities from which the Ethics program could significantly benefit, if it could, to some extent, tap into them.

Moreover, the human skills that chaplains recognize as central to their professional success are of vital relevance to an ethics program, yet they have not been traditionally recognised within that program's parameters as vital to it. Even if an ethics coordinator sees himself or herself as willing to hear confidential, serious, and delicate ethical concerns of a member (that is, they are about pressing problems that seriously harm morale and team health, rather than being only, say, an undeclared conflict of interest that does not yet do so), the member may not have confidence that the coordinator is the kind of person whom one can trust to receive one's complaint well, and wisely offer advice or suggestions on how to best resolve it.

Much of the weakness in the Defence Ethics Programme's attempts to promote everyday awareness and engagement about ethical matters among all personnel seems to tie to lack of minimum standards in *how* this program is communicated at the unit level. Unless it is by way of authentic, reprisal-free dialogue, a subject matter like ethics that is both full of "grey areas" and often contentious and sensitive in content is difficult to discuss constructively. One-way briefings that reiterate principles, values, and recourse mechanisms without actually tying them to real informal unit issues can be the unfortunate result, having little impact or perceived relevance, in that they skirt the toughest practical questions. Pity the unit ethics coordinator, who may aspire to facilitate a group conversation about ethical issues at a level of honesty that is difficult to attain at times, even in a private one-on-one meeting with a padre.

Conclusion

My very short and very selective excursion into the history of secular moral philosophy means to show that, like religion, ethics has always concerned itself with the deepest questions about life's meaning and its implications for one's own way of life. The fundamental contrast between the approach of moral philosophy and that of theology to the question concerns the method of seeking the possible answers: Whether it is faith or reasoning which is the *sine qua non* of any ethical knowledge. A secular institution ought to serve the needs of its diverse members by providing both an inter-faith



DND photo VL2011-0230-240 by Sergeant Jean-François Néron

Captain Shaun Turner, Padre of the Disaster Assistance Response Team for Operation *Hestia*, helps the Medical Mobile Team by registering sick children so they can be treated at the temporary medical clinic in Tom Gato, Haiti, 31 January 2010.



DND photo AF2009-JJ016-26 by Corporal Jonathan Barrette

Padre Major Martine Bélanger distributes school supplies donated by Canada to Afghan children at a school near Kandahar airfield, 5 May 2009.

chaplaincy and deliberate practical efforts to help sustain a regular and authentic team conversation about the team's own ethics needs and concerns. The obstacles to making headway for an ethics program might well lead the organization to ask how these two functions, sharing the goal of helping members face the difficult challenges of their chosen profession of arms, can support each other better than they have up to now.

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NOTES

1. I am grateful to Chief Warrant Officer Richard Nadeau, Major Sonia Rogers, and Ann Louise Gratton, all of the Defence Ethics Programme, for their comments on this manuscript.
2. Padre Yvon Pichette and Padre John Derrick Marshall, "Is there a Role for Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) Chaplains in Ethics?" in *Canadian Military Journal*, Vol. 16, No. 1, Winter 2015, pp. 59-66.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 64-65.
4. C. MacDonald & W. Norman, "Conflicts of Interest and Professional Ethics," in G. Brenkert & T. Beauchamp, (eds.), *Oxford Handbook in Business Ethics*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 441-470.
5. See, for example, Christopher Hitchens' *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Twelve Books, 2007).
6. Aristotle, *Metaphysics* XII, pp. 6-7.
7. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* X, p. viii.
8. For a discussion of the influence of Aristotelian moral virtues in contemporary values thinking, see, for example, Peter Olsthoorn, "Courage in the Military: Physical and Moral," in *Journal of Military Ethics*, Vol. 6 (2007), pp. 270-279.
9. Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Pure Reason Alone*, Theodore M. Greene (ed.) (New York: Open Court Publishing, 1960), p. 116.
10. Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, Paul Carus (trans.) (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1977). See Section 43-44 and Conclusion.