COMMENTARY ARTICLE

ENHANCING ETHICAL PERFORMANCE IN MILITARY FORCES THROUGH EMBEDDED EXCELLENCE

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Abstract

In this article, I propose the creation of what I will here call the Joint Ethics Development Initiative (JEDI). The title is, of course, offered partially in jest, but the image of the Jedi warrior of the *Star Wars* saga is intentional. At the heart of the proposed initiative is the development of a new, rigorous and highly demanding qualification and associated training programme. Graduates ('JEDI warriors') will have demonstrated excellence in a range of capabilities necessary for success in today's complex operational environments, but most centrally they will have demonstrated excellence of character and the capability to make clear, sound and well-reasoned ethical judgments under highly challenging conditions. The proposed qualification should be viewed as playing a similar role as that played by the US Army's Ranger qualification. It would indicate a special degree of competence and mark the bearer as someone to whom peers, superiors and subordinates can reliably turn for guidance in that area of competence. Just as the Ranger programme allows for the embedding of excellence in small unit leadership and tactics in units across the Army, the JEDI programme would allow for the embedding of excellence in ethical awareness and judgment across the Joint Force.

Introduction

"Wars not make one great," so says Jedi Grand Master Yoda to the impetuous young Luke Skywalker in Episode V of the *Star Wars* movie phenomenon, *The empire strikes back*. It is perhaps the most important lesson that must be learned by those seeking to join the ranks of the Jedi, that class of warrior-monk which, though small in number, is so central to the military efforts and, perhaps more importantly, to the self-identity of the forces of the Galactic Republic and the Rebel

Alliance.

The idea of a distinct elite class of warrior fighting alongside and embedded among more traditional troops is of course not one that is unique to the intergalactic mythology of George Lucas' creation. In the United States, that role is perhaps uniquely played by the US Army Rangers. While the armed forces of the United States can rightfully boast of being home to many of the most elite military units in the world, it is only those who proudly bear the Ranger tab who can be found scattered throughout the fighting units of the US Army, bringing with them what I will here call 'embedded excellence' in military skills.

In this article, I will argue for the creation of a new initiative that, if adopted, will bring a different, but complementary kind of embedded excellence into military forces. The kind of excellence I have in mind is excellence in ethics. I will refer to the initiative I am proposing here as the Joint Ethics Development Initiative, or JEDI. The title is offered partially in jest, and with apologies to graduates of the US Army's School of Advanced Military Studies (SAMS),[2] but the image of the Jedi warrior of the *Star Wars* saga is intentional and heuristically useful.[3]

Before beginning to articulate the JEDI concept it is, of course, necessary to give some justification for its necessity. This begins with a recognition that the environments in which our warfighters today find themselves engaged are arguably unique in their complexity and degree of moral difficulty. Furthermore, ethical challenges abound in the barracks and on the home front in general. This is no great news – it is the reason that ethics is now part of the education and training curricula of many military forces around the world. But while these developments are valuable and important, I think few would argue that there is no more that could be done to help military personnel to succeed ethically in the demanding environments in which they operate, particularly in the light of the recent history of strategic damage caused by ethical failures among (particularly US) troops in Afghanistan and elsewhere.

Generally speaking, within the 'working world' of the military, ethics tends to be equated with 'chaplain business' (i.e. addressing personal moral struggles), or 'lawyer business' (i.e. legal compliance) or 'inspector general business' (i.e. senior leader personal conduct failures). The JEDI concept seeks to go beyond this and articulate a means of positively building ethical excellence and embedding it into the very fabric of the units that together make up a nation's armed forces.

The JEDI concept

At the heart of the proposed initiative is the development of a new, rigorous and highly demanding qualification and associated training programme. Graduates ('JEDI warriors') will have demonstrated excellence in a range of capabilities necessary for success in today's complex operational environments, but most centrally, they will have demonstrated excellence of character and the capability to make clear, sound and well-reasoned ethical judgments under highly challenging conditions. The proposed qualification should be viewed as playing a similar role, but with a different focus, to that played by the US Army's Ranger qualification.[4] It would indicate a special degree of competence and mark the bearer as someone to whom peers, superiors and subordinates can reliably turn for guidance in that area of competence. Just as the Ranger programme allows for the embedding of excellence in small unit leadership and tactics in units across the US Army, the JEDI programme would allow for the embedding of excellence in ethical awareness and judgment across the force. JEDI warriors would not only provide ethics-specific expertise, but would also serve as role models and mentors for other members of their communities, contributing to a broadly Aristotelian model of moral development across the force. It is envisaged that the rigorous, specialised and demanding nature of the JEDI training and qualification regime will lead to those who earn the 'JEDI warrior' moniker, taking that to be a central feature of their identities, in the same way that being a Ranger is almost always central to the identity of those who have earned the right to that title. Just as being a Ranger is a strong incentive to work hard to maintain a high level of physical fitness and competence in martial skills, it is hoped that JEDI warriors will be similarly motivated to maintain the distinctives of their field of excellence. As William Frey points out:

> Moral exemplars excel because they have integrated moral concerns into their self-systems. Acting morally, for them, is acting in accordance with identity and, thus, [they are] highly motivated … Falling short of their internalised conceptions of moral excellence leads to dissatisfaction and the motivation to do better. Because moral values have been made constitutive of a moral exemplar's identity, they serve to motivate these individuals toward excellence, not just in moral reasoning, but also regarding … dispositions, emotions, choices, values, desires, perceptions, attitudes, interests, expectations, and sensibilities.[5]

Selecting the JEDI warrior

In the *Star Wars* saga, we learn that not just anybody can become a Jedi trainee or Padawan. Only those who seem to display the appropriate character traits are considered. Indeed, the Jedi Council at first forbids the training of Anakin Skywalker as a Jedi, due to concerns that his future seems cloudy due to the fear he displays. They later relent – a decision they most certainly regretted when Anakin turned to the Dark Side of the Force and became Darth Vader. Setting aside the mystical aspects of the fictional *Star Wars* story, it remains true that something similar must be the case for those who would earn the JEDI warrior qualification, for good character is an essential prerequisite for becoming an ethical exemplar, and no amount of training can produce the desired effect if the essentials of good character are not already there. Here the emerging science of moral psychology is of potentially great value. As Frey explains:

> Traditionally the notion of character (interpreted as the seat of virtues) has fluctuated between two extreme views. One portrays it as an underlying, unchangeable substrate. Individuals are born with or develop good or bad characters. Fixed by adulthood, they become manifest over time; consistently good conduct expresses goodness in character while consistently bad conduct reveals a corrupt character. On the other extreme, there is no character at all. Instead, analysis breaks it down into separately existing parts. On this view, character is nothing but a bundle of loosely associated dispositions, emotions, choices, values, desires, perceptions, attitude, interests, expectations and sensibilities. … Recent discussions in ethics and moral psychology provide evidence that place character somewhere between these two extremes ... Outstanding conduct reveals a high degree of integration of personality traits around internalized moral commitments; these, in turn, are supported by well-honed practical skills. Character does not exist apart from its parts. But neither can it be reduced to their mere conjunction or association. Integrating these components into a well-functioning character becomes a central part of moral education.[6]

As Rebecca Johnson has pointed out (following James Rest), the four key prerequisites for ethical behaviour are: i) moral sensitivity/awareness; ii) moral judgment; iii) moral motivation; and iv) "the moral character or 'psychological toughness and strong character' needed to actually do the right thing".[7] Research in moral psychology can help to identify those who already possess these traits, while a

well-designed education and training programme can complement and enhance such traits.

Entrance screening for the JEDI programme should not, however, focus only on the candidate's psychological and cognitive characteristics. A critical goal for the JEDI programme must be for its graduates to achieve a level of respect among their peers, subordinates and superiors that will allow their influence on the ethical culture of the military to be far broader than the combined records of their individual careers. For that to work, JEDI warriors will need to be perceived as more than just 'ethics geeks'; they will need to be widely respected first and foremost as capable warfighters. For that reason, the training and assessment programme would need to be physically and mentally demanding, and should combine the development of high-level expertise in the warrior arts with high-level expertise in ethics. Screening of potential JEDI candidates must, therefore, include screening for the physical and mental toughness necessary as precursor to learned excellence in the central martial disciplines.

Training the JEDI warrior

Academic philosophers, like me, are most commonly those given the task of teaching ethics courses (though in the military context, that task is shared with chaplains, legal officers and others). Our qualifications to do so centre primarily on our grasp of ethical theory and the (hopefully) sharper-than-average critical reasoning skills that an education in philosophy is thought to develop. There is, however, no requirement that a moral philosopher be a moral philosopher, in the sense of being a moral exemplar. The same cannot be the case for the JEDI warrior, and for that reason, while having skills and knowledge akin to those of a moral philosopher should be an indispensable part of the JEDI warrior's toolkit, the central focus must be on the warrior's virtue. As Frey, drawing on the work of Rosalind Hursthouse, helpfully explains:

> Virtues, generally, are dispositions that consistently issue in or express themselves through exemplary conduct. They begin with skills of moral reasoning to accomplish the discernment between right and wrong or good and bad. But they also go beyond this to terminate in morally outstanding action. This requires reinforcing moral reasoning with strong commitment to moral value, supportive attitudes, finely tuned moral sensitivities, and select emotions calibrated to motivate moral action. On top of all this, moral exemplars possess practical and technical skills that translate moral intention into virtuous actions and good results. Thus, virtues, once

acquired, are well entrenched … They require extensive practice as Aristotle recognized when he pointed out that one becomes good by performing good actions. But once they are acquired they become second nature precisely because they "go deep" to infuse with excellence an agent's "dispositions, emotions, choices, values, desires, perceptions, attitudes, interests, expectations, and sensibilities" ….[8]

Frey further argues that, contrary to much common practice in ethics training (Frey himself writes in the context of ethics within the field of computer science), moral virtues can be enhanced through appropriate pedagogical techniques employing practice and different forms of feedback. As he puts it:

Moral expertise displays skill sets such as moral imagination, moral creativity, reasonableness, and perseverance. Together these represent capacities for instantiating virtue and integrating moral content with technical knowledge and practice. Moral skill sets can be taught successfully but require extensive practice accompanied by expert feedback. Moral imagination lies in the ability to project into the standpoint of others; viewing situations from different participant standpoints opens new dimensions relevant to action. Moral creativity collects skills in designing non-obvious solutions to moral problems such as the ability to frame situations in different ways to uncover novel solutions … Agents manifest reasonableness when they provide arguments for their positions, are open to the views of others, change stances when argument and evidence warrant, but short of this remain firm in their convictions ... Finally, perseverance "is the ability to plan moral action and continue on that course by responding to circumstances and obstacles while keeping ethical goals intact" … These skills, best learned in groups (highlighting the importance of cooperative or team-based learning activities), are honed through practice accompanied by a variety of types of feedback including peer feedback.[9]

The kind of group practice needed to improve virtue-enhancing skills and abilities could productively be combined with the training and practice of techniques and capabilities characteristic of highly proficient warriors. Because it is envisaged that JEDI warrior candidates will be drawn from across all three services, and will perhaps also include non-military candidates from other security-related agencies and entities, it will not be possible to develop the training to fit the specific specialisations of each candidate. It is therefore proposed that JEDI training be

focused on those skills and capabilities traditionally considered to be at the core of the warfighter's art, such as small-arms skills, combatives, land navigation and the like.[10] While some of the martial training will be directly relevant to the job-specific requirements of some of the candidates, its main purpose is twofold: firstly, to provide a challenging and testing context in which to develop and assess candidates' moral character, ethical judgment and critical reasoning skills; and secondly, to earn graduates of the programme the respect of their peers, superiors and subordinates (thereby enhancing their potential to positively influence those peers, superiors and subordinates).

The programme should not only focus on military and ethical skills and capabilities, but also on the ability to communicate effectively to others on the areas of JEDI warrior expertise. As Bernward Gesang points out, ethicists are best characterised as 'semi-experts', and as such must approach their subject in a particular manner:

> Because they are semi-experts, ethicists should not only promote their own normative judgments, but should also show the other participants of the discourse what consequences their own views have. Ethicists should provide others with a kind of land map. With this map they can determine their own positions and the alternative ways to their aims. Here, ethicists can use all those capabilities that Birnbacher and Singer describe, as mentioned above. They become mediators. So they must fight for their own standpoints – that is their duty as experts. But this activity has its limits and they must show some restraint, because they do not have sole access to the truth – that is the duty of a semi-expert.[11]

Another essential feature of the JEDI warrior's training must be a focus on enhanced critical reasoning skills.[12] There is a broad presumption that critical reasoning skills are a kind of by-product, something we accumulate along the way while doing other things, like studying math or history or Latin. Unfortunately, current evidence suggests that this approach is far less successful than has generally been presumed. In one of the most comprehensive studies of academic learning on US college campuses, Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa concluded that –

> … many students are only minimally improving their skills in critical thinking, complex reasoning, and writing during their years through higher education. From their freshman entrance to the end of their sophomore year, students in our sample on average have improved these skills, as measured by the CLA [College Learning

Assessment], by only 0.18 standard deviations. … we observe no statistically significant gains in critical thinking, complex reasoning and writing skills for at least 45 per cent of the students in our study.[13]

One of the only pedagogical methods currently available for which there is evidence that its employment results in significant improvements in critical reasoning capabilities, is computer-assisted argument mapping (CAAM). As Tim van Gelder explains,

Argument mapping is diagramming the structure of argument, construed broadly to include any kind of argumentative activity such as reasoning, inferences, debates, and cases. … Typically an argument map is a "box and arrow" diagram with boxes corresponding to propositions and arrows corresponding to relationships such as evidential support. Argument mapping is similar to other mapping activities such as mind mapping and concept mapping, but focuses on the logical, evidential or inferential relationships among propositions. Argument mapping is concerned with informal reasoning and "real world" argumentation and thus contrasts with the use of diagrammatic techniques in formal logic such as Venn diagrams.[14]

Because of the complexity of all but the most basic arguments, traditional 'pen-and-paper' argument mapping is limited in its utility. Recently, however, we have seen the maturation of CAAM platforms such as Austhink's Rationale[TM], which enable the true benefits of argument mapping to come to the fore. Early indications are that CAAM-based critical reasoning courses are significantly more successful at inculcating critical reasoning skills than more traditional approaches.[15]

Whether or not the JEDI warrior training regime should incorporate a fully-fledged classroom CAAM-based critical reasoning course, is something that will need to be decided. Research and experimentation may show that incorporating CAAM into the training programme in other, creative ways would reap useful benefits. One possibility, for example, would be the employment of CAAM as an assessment and communication tool in after-action reviews of some or all of the exercises conducted during the training programme. The point here is not to dictate any particulars about the specifics of the JEDI training programme, but only to emphasise the importance role that critical thinking training must play in the programme. The specifics of the course itself will need to be developed on the basis

of ongoing research and experience on how best to equip the graduate to complete the 'ethical OODA loop' most efficiently and successfully.[16]

To be truly effective the Joint Ethics Development Initiative will need to be constantly refining its training regime in the light of new research and lessons learned. A dedicated research and lessons learned unit would be the ideal means to ensure that this happens. While there will be much to be learned from ongoing research in the broader scholarly community, the very specific nature of the JEDI programme will necessitate an in-house research capability, focused on moral psychology, moral philosophy and related issues. This research should be informed by an in-house 'lessons learned' capability focused on feedback from and about the performance of JEDI warriors, as well as ethics-relevant lessons from the broader military community.

Conclusion

In this article I have argued for the creation of a Joint Ethics Development Initiative, aimed at securing 'embedded excellence' in ethics across a nation's military forces. It is hoped that the thoughts outlined in this brief article will, if nothing else, stimulate further thought and discussion on how best to enhance the ethical climate within the armed forces of the world.

Endnotes

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[2] The School for Advanced Military Studies (SAMS) trains a select group of US Army Majors who have excelled in their Intermediate Level Education (ILE) in the art and science of strategic planning. In US Army circles, SAMS graduates are nicknamed 'Jedi's'. I am grateful to Col Roger Cotton, USA, for this point and several other improvements I was able to make to this article as a consequence of Col Cotton sharing his insights as both a commander and a US Army Ranger. Naturally, all remaining shortcomings in the article are my responsibility alone.

[3] I am also conscious, located as I am in Australia, that this title is unfortunate in that it is a reminder of the misdeeds of the so-called Jedi Council, a group of Australian Army officers and NCOs allegedly engaged in predatory sexual behaviour (see Lion, P & Marszalek, J. "Anger and disgust at army sex scandal as 'Jedi Council' emerges". *News Limited Network*. 14 June 2013. <http://www.news.com.au/national-news/anger-and-disgust-at-army-sex-scandal/story-fncynjr2-1226663459046> Accessed on 27 June 2013).

However, given the broader readership of this journal, and the heuristic value of the image of the Jedi Knight of the *Star Wars* films, I have decided to retain use of the device.

[4] Other programmes that are broadly similar in providing 'embedded excellence' include the Lean Six Sigma programme, the Marine Corps Martial Arts Program (MCMAP), and the Master Resilience Training Program, which is part of the US Army's Comprehensive Soldier Fitness programme.

[5] Frey, WF. "Teaching virtue: Pedagogical implications of moral psychology". *Science and Engineering Ethics* 16. 2010. 616.

[6] *Ibid.*, pp. 613–614.

[7] Johnson, RJ. "Moral formation of the strategic corporal". In Tripodi, P & Wolfendale, J (eds), *New wars and new soldiers: Military ethics in the contemporary world*, Farnham, Surrey and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011, 247, quoting Rest, J. "Background: Theory and research". In Rest, J & Narváez, D (eds), *Moral development in the professions: Psychology and applied ethics*, Hillsdale: Erlbaum, 1994, 23 & 24.

[8] Frey *op. cit.*, p. 613.

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 618.

[10] As Col Cotton has pointed out to me, military officers up to 0–4 focus on direct level leadership, while those from 0–5 up focus on strategic issues and joint warfare. As initially envisaged, the JEDI programme would focus on warfighters engaged primarily at the tactical level, though perhaps there may be an argument for a second tier of JEDI training focused on those focused on the operational and strategic levels.

[11] Gesang, B. "Are moral philosophers moral experts?" *Bioethics* 24/4. 2010. 159.

[12] This section on critical reasoning draws on my article "Making good better: A proposal for teaching ethics at the US Service Academies". *Journal of Military Ethics* 11/3. October 2012. 208–222.

[13] Arum, R & Roksa, J. *Academically adrift: Limited learning on college campuses.* Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2011, 35–36.

[14] Van Gelder, T. "Argument mapping". In Pashler, H (ed), *Encyclopedia of the mind*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage 2013, 50.

[15] In an important meta-analysis of the impact of critical thinking courses, Claudia Alvarez found that standardly taught critical thinking courses produce an average increase of 0.34 standard deviations in critical thinking ability over that produced by undergraduate courses in general, and CAAM-based critical thinking courses produced about twice as much improvement as standardly taught critical thinking courses. Álvarez Ortiz, CM. "Does philosophy improve reasoning skills?" MA thesis. University of Melbourne, 2007.

[16] The OODA Loop is a concept that was developed by fighter pilot John Boyd in response to his experiences as a fighter pilot in Vietnam. The concept has become widely known and influential. The 'loop' describes the agent's decision cycle, with 'OODA' standing for 'observe, orient, decide, act'.

Boyd argued that in any direct competition between agents, the agent that moved most quickly and effectively through the OODA Loop would be the victor. The ethical agent, of course, will not usually be acting in the context of a direct competition, but the OODA Loop is nonetheless a useful description of the ethical agent's decision cycle.