Chapter 2

Strengthening moral competence: a ‘train-the-trainer’ course on military ethics

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Abstract

If one of the most important aims of education on military ethics is to strengthen moral competence, we argue that it is important to base ethics education on virtue ethics, the Socratic attitude and the process of ‘living learning’. This article illustrates this position by means of the example of a ‘train-the-trainer’ course on military ethics for Non-Commissioned Officers (NCOs), which is developed at the Netherlands Defence Academy, and uses a number of examples both from its structure and from experiences from its actual use.

Keywords: Military ethics, moral competence, virtue ethics, Socratic attitude, ‘living learning’

Introduction

Military personnel often encounter moral dilemmas during deployments and in their work environment at home. Moral dilemmas are situations where conflicts arise between two or more values. Being able to deal with moral dilemmas requires moral competence. If one of the major objectives of ethics education is to strengthen moral competence, that will have methodological consequences in practice. Little has been published in this area until now. In this article, we want to explicitly identify the consequences. We shall do that on the basis of three premises: virtue ethics, the Socratic attitude, and the process of ‘living learning’. That will then be elaborated with the help of a case study, a ‘train-the-trainer’ course in military ethics, which has been developed for NCOs who are already teaching ethics themselves. We shall begin by defining the concept of moral competence and by showing why it is important for dealing with moral dilemmas.

Moral competence

Moral competence can be defined as:

... the ability and willingness to carry out tasks adequately and carefully, with due regard for all of the affected interests, based on a reasonable analysis of the relevant facts. A competence is an interplay of attitude, knowledge and skills. (Karssing 2000: 39)

1 The ‘train-the-trainer’ course was developed at the direction of the State Secretary for Defence (Quadrennial Defence Review 2000) and designed by the Military Behavioural Sciences and Philosophy (MGF) Section of the Faculty of Military Sciences (FMW) and the Netherlands Institute for Military Ethics (NIME) of the Netherlands Defence Academy (NLDA). The group that developed this course comprises Prof. Dr D. E. M. Verweij, Dr Th. A. van Baarda, Lt Col F. G. W. P. Ramakers (drs.), J. Bosch (drs.) and E.M. Wortel (drs.).
Moral competence refers to situations in which people know what is expected of them and in which they (are willing to) act accordingly. Moral competence is therefore not restricted to the knowledge domain. The very idea of ‘willingness to act’ shows that it concerns a particular attitude. An important distinction to be made here is that between schooling and education. Schooling (in German: *ausbildung*; in Dutch: *opleiden*) refers to the teaching and learning of cognitive and practical knowledge, while the central focus of education (in German: *Bildung*; in Dutch: *vorming*) is the mastery and internalization of that knowledge (van Baarda & Verweij 2006: 11). As noted by van Baarda and Verweij, the primary concern of education is not only at the cognitive level, but also at the affective level (i.e., concerning morally relevant feelings) and the voluntary level – the level of the will.

American philosopher Shannon French emphasizes that what she refers to as ‘the warrior’s code’ entails more than schooling. She describes the warriors’ code as a code of honour: a shield that guards our warriors’ humanity (French 2003: 242). Referring to Osiel (1999) she argues that:

… the best way to ensure that a young... Marine will not commit a war crime even if given (illegal) orders to do so by a superior officer is not to drill the said Marine on the provisions of International War and the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ), but rather to help him internalize an appropriate warriors’ code that will inspire him to recognize and reject a criminal direction from his officer. (French 2003: 14)

The important feature is not a list of rules, but the internalization of specific rules, a culture and tradition which combine to determine what it means to be a true soldier. That code helps military personnel both during deployments and when they are back home (ibid.: 243). When those values are internalized, they become part of a person’s identity and form their character. Many of these ideas seem to be rooted in virtue ethics, which we shall be examining in more detail below.

Edgar Karssing (2000: 39) breaks moral competence down into five elements, slightly adapted by Verweij (2005: 5). It is necessary to be aware of the fact that Karssing identifies this as a pragmatic approach (2000: 39), which basically deals with applied ethics. There is also a more fundamental ethics at stake: Being able to identify the moral dimension of a situation and thereby identifying the values at risk assumes that people are already aware of their personal values. That does not always appear to be the case, however. Verweij defines this situation as ‘moral blindness’ (2005: 5). To underscore the importance of becoming aware of one’s personal values, we have chosen to make that element explicit. Moral competence can be made specific by breaking it down into six elements: (1) becoming aware of one’s personal value and the values of the military organization; (2) being able to identify the moral dimension of a situation and the values that are at risk of infringement or violation; (3) being able to make a judgement concerning a moral question or dilemma; (4) being able to communicate that judgement; (5) being willing and able to act on the basis of that judgement
in a morally responsible way; (6) being willing and able to account for that judgement and action to oneself and others.

The Importance of moral competence in moral dilemmas

Military personnel are often confronted with moral dilemmas. The essence of a moral dilemma is the conflict between different values and the fact that a choice must be made between them. As we mentioned above, this assumes that one is aware of one’s personal moral values and the values which are important to the military organization. This can be stimulated through fundamental moral education which focuses on character building.

In the current climate of ethics education in the Netherlands Defence Academy, the default position is to automatically place dilemmas in a deployment situation. It is equally possible, however, for moral dilemmas to arise on the work floor in the Netherlands.

Regardless of how complicated dilemmas may be, a choice ultimately has to be made. It is therefore understandable that ethics education often favours a solution-oriented approach, which can be illustrated by instructors providing participants with decision-making models. These models, such as the ‘Ethical Awareness Model’, ask a number of questions\(^2\) which enable the person who has to make a decision to consider all aspects and to be better able to arrive at the best decision. While there is nothing wrong with these models in themselves, they are sometimes (mis)used as a ‘technician’s model’ with little room for reflection. It may not even be clear which values are actually at stake in the moral dilemma. The implicit danger is that the technician’s method seems to entail that there is exactly one fairly straightforward answer – an approved solution – to every moral problem (Miller 2004: 208).

Another disadvantage of such models is that they generally do not take the person who is confronted with the dilemma into account. While the moral involvement (of the individual with a problem or dilemma) is of great importance in dilemma training, students should learn to stand up for their own point of view. Making choices means standing for something, and standing for something means making yourself vulnerable. It requires courage (van Baarda & Verweij 2006: 297).

Moral competence begins with the identification of the moral dimension of a situation. In the first place, the dilemma and the values that are at risk have to be identified. That is only possible if the person in question is aware of the values that are important to himself or herself for the organization and, furthermore, if they are aware of the values at stake of other people in a specific situation.

\(^2\) The Ethical Awareness Model asks the following questions: (1) what are the facts and which parties are involved? (2) What are the solutions and also their possible consequences? (3) Is my solution legal? (4) Have all interests been considered? (5) Is it acceptable? (van Baarda & van der Heijden 2006: 155).
Consequences for ethics education

Moral competence begins with the recognition of the moral dimension of a situation. That requires people to be aware of the values that are at risk. Therefore, we should consider the examination of one’s personal values to be the starting point of ethics education (Reynolds 1993: 33). Only when in-depth contact has been made with one’s personal values will it be possible to take the next steps, such as identifying the values of others or of the organization.

One of the first consequences of this is that ethics education requires such a personal approach. As noted above, we are concerned here about education and not about schooling. In schooling, one is concerned with learning objectives that can be achieved by the end of a lesson or a course. In education, one is concerned with a permanent learning process that goes on after a lesson or course has been completed. In ethics education, it is therefore more appropriate to speak of development objectives rather than learning objectives (van Baarda and Verweij 2006).

The next phase, strengthening the moral competence, is concerned with making a judgement and being able to communicate with others about it. Once again, the participants are encouraged to ‘think for themselves’. That makes it difficult to provide a clearly defined blueprint for a lesson in military ethics. A great deal depends on the person who is ‘teaching’ the ethics education. He or she should be able to ask the right questions at the right time, and thereby give the course participants the opportunity to think for themselves.

The second consequence for ethics education is that the strongly solution-oriented approach – e.g., by only giving participants decision-making models, which is done in many ethics lessons – should be avoided. The disadvantage of such models is that they generally do not take the person who is confronted with the dilemma into account (van Baarda & Verweij 2006: 297).

In addition, the emphasis given in ethics education to the final two elements of moral competence – ‘being willing and able to act’ and ‘being able to account for decisions and actions’ – should be sufficient to make them resonate strongly with participants. This, too, is an important task for the instructor: to encourage the participants to engage with one another concerning their views and behaviour and to conduct interventions that, in effect, hold a mirror up to the participants.

The final consequence for ethics education that we want to refer to here is the need for the person who is ‘teaching’ ethics education to be flexible. He or she should also have worked through the various elements of moral competence with respect to himself or herself. Our basic concept in this respect is that everyone who is engaged with military ethics education is an example to others. We shall discuss this point in more detail when we elaborate upon the case study of the ‘train-the-trainer’ course in military ethics below.
Starting points of ethics education

To (make it possible to) enable participants in ethics education to really begin working on their moral competence, it is important for attention to be paid to three starting points: virtue ethics, the Socratic attitude, and implementing a process of ‘living learning’.

Virtue ethics

This section defines virtue ethics, discusses its importance for moral competence and the relationship between a value and a virtue.

The Greek philosopher Aristotle was one of the founders of virtue ethics. He developed this philosophical ethical theory in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Aristotle defines virtue as excellence or virtuosity, an attitude that makes it possible for us to achieve happiness (*eudaimonia*). Virtuous behaviour is functional excellence; the excellence of the human being is associated with growth towards some final realization of one’s true and best nature. The final goal is happiness: ‘we choose everything for the sake of something else – except happiness, happiness is an end’ (1176b; in Aristotle 1998: 261). This English rendering causes some difficulties if we do not remind ourselves that to the Greeks happiness meant much more than the experience of pleasure or satisfaction; the notion includes the proper conditions of a person’s life, what we might more properly call ‘well being’, ‘living well’ or ‘the life of excellence’ (Mintz 1996: 828).

Moral virtues are values that are so internalized that they are truly part of us; they have become character traits. Examples of virtues include prudence, honesty, generosity, moderation, courage and loyalty. According to Aristotle, many of those virtues are the centre point between two vices. Generosity, for example, lies between miserliness and magnanimity. The just mean is not a mathematical average, however; moral or practical wisdom, phronesis, is required to determine what is honest, friendly or generous in each individual situation. The consequence of practical wisdom is that, in each situation, one is able repeatedly, on the basis of experience, to weigh the variable and individual factors that could have an impact on the decision of whether to carry out an action.

While virtues and values are related, there is also a difference between values and virtues. A value can be defined as something that is valuable to you, an ideal or something that one strives for. That does not have to mean that one actually acts on that basis. One speaks of a virtue when a value has been completely internalized and one’s actions are based on it. Righteousness, for example, could be a value, but it is only a virtue when one’s actions are repeatedly righteous. One cannot be both virtuous and be ‘unrighteous just for a bit’ because you don’t feel like it at a particular point in time.

Virtue ethics is primarily concerned with people and with questions such as ‘what kind of person do I want to be?’ and ‘what kind of person am I?’ and not so much with questions...
such as ‘what should I do?’. In that, it is different from both rule or duty based deontology and consequentialism (utilitarianism). According to virtue ethics, one must act morally because it is part of what one has chosen. Virtue ethics is the pre-eminent example of an ethics of being; it tries to answer the question that preoccupies everyone: ‘how should I live?’ and especially, ‘how can I live to ensure that I am happy?’ If we extrapolate that into the military context, the question then becomes one of how a soldier who is confronted with moral dilemmas can deal with them in such a way that he can still look himself in the mirror.

One may ask whether this implies that virtues are relative. It is important, however, to emphasize that moral education is not merely ‘values clarification or value communication’. Not all opinions are equally good. As Martha Nussbaum argues, there are different values and virtues and they may change over time. Does this imply that virtues are simply a reflection of local traditions and values? We agree with Nussbaum that such a relativist approach is incompatible with Aristotle’s virtue theory. He has identified spheres of human experiences that figure in more or less every human life, and in those situations we all have to make some choices rather than others and act in some ways rather than others (Nussbaum 1987: 5).

The fact that there are different values and virtues does not imply that all of them are equally valid and altogether non-comparable. Certain values and virtues can still be criticized. This is inherent in the Aristotelian tradition of virtue ethics, since phronesis is deliberation on values and interests with reference to specific cases.

Virtue ethics is concerned with the development of inner discipline, with people beginning to look critically at themselves. It is not something that can be taught by cramming or drilling (Osiel 1999: 55; Wortel & Schoenmakers 2006). One could say that having a critical attitude and self-reflection is at odds with the interests of the armed forces, where people are expected to follow regulations and, if necessary, orders. The question is whether a loyal, critical attitude is even possible. Can one have soldiers who are loyal but, at the same time, critical in situations where that is required? We believe that it is definitely possible. Ethics education arguably does not undermine authority; on the contrary, it will reinforce an authority that is legal and ethical (Wakin 2000: 67). In addition, it provides a firm foundation in situations where the orders or rules are unclear or inadequate (Toner 1993: 33; French 2003: 242).

Recent years have seen increased interest in dealing with moral problems in military practice by means of rules and codes of conduct. Such value-oriented regulations are usually a response to specific abuses. Codes of conduct comprise a list of commandments and obligations. The problem with those regulations and codes of conduct is that it is not possible to provide general guidelines – unless they are extremely general – to cover all of the different situations and dilemmas that military personnel may encounter. There are no checklists that can guarantee one becoming a good soldier. As Richard Gabriel argues:
... a code of ethics is... meaningless for a soldiery that did not possess some military virtues... a code of military ethics and the education and training of the soldier in the military go together in producing an ethical soldier. (Gabriel 2007: 159)

Values that are not supported and internalized by individual soldiers will not be very effective. According to virtue ethics ‘being a good human being (or being a good soldier)’ means primarily being able to analyze important aspects of each situation adequately and to find the just mean for one’s actions among the numerous emotions and inclinations (van Tongeren 2003: 29). A good soldier is someone who has learned through repeated practice, in heart and soul, and as second nature, to do what is expected from a ‘good’ soldier. He has the right virtues at the right time with respect to the right person in the right way.

The key point of virtue ethics is arguably the idea of development. That also assumes that people want to develop themselves and therefore also want to reflect on their personal values.

We are assuming that all people, and therefore all military personnel, regardless of rank, have the capability to develop virtues and therefore also to develop and to strengthen their moral competence. This involves taking the self to be always in process, rather than static and unchanging or containing an inner ‘core’ around which reasonably superficial changes are made (Cox, La Caze & Levine 2003: 41).

Socratic attitude

For people to become aware of their personal values and virtues, they must enter into dialogue with one another (and with themselves). How the Socratic attitude and the Socratic dialogue can be of assistance in this regard is discussed below.

The Greek philosopher Socrates was convinced that the best way to acquire knowledge and insight was to conduct dialogues. Through critical questioning, the participants in the dialogue are compelled to think for themselves. Socrates, who only asked questions, saw himself as a midwife in those dialogues. His role was to assist in the birth and thereby, help his interlocutors to become aware of values and of knowledge and insight (Nelson 1950).

In the first instance, a Socratic attitude is one of questioning. In the dialogues that he participated in, Socrates was not the person with all the answers. The investigation and interrogation of his interlocutors was central. Critical questioning can force people to examine their own assumptions and possibly expose blind spots.

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3 This does not exclude the possibility that there are differences between personality traits among people; one person may be more impatient than another, for example. That, however, does not mean that such a person is compelled by his impatience to act impatiently (van Tongeren 2003). It is important that ‘the virtue’ arise though a process of development, and personal choices have an important part to play in this respect. This relates to actions that an individual chooses and therefore not to reflexes or inclinations. Moral competence could help to achieve those virtues.
Time and space are important prerequisites for people to stop to examine their personal values. A dialogue begins with taking time and making space by setting one’s own ‘strategic’ attitude to one side for a while, thereby creating distance from one’s own fixed objectives and to free oneself from the problems that preoccupy everyone constantly (Kessels, Boers & Mostert 2002). Only then will it be possible really to think, to harmonize ideas with one another and to examine what is truly important to you.

In addition to asking questions and taking time and space, being able to listen well is also important in a Socratic attitude. A good listening attitude is also known as active listening or empathic listening. The essence of a conversation or dialogue is very different from a debate or discussion whose purpose is to persuade the other party of the rightness of one’s own position. A dialogue is, in fact, a joint examination of an issue between a person who asks questions and another who answers. The person asking the questions must be able to suspend his or her own judgement and to look at things from the perspective of the other person. The person giving the answers must have an open attitude. A dialogue must be based on rational discussion. Such a discussion is impossible unless the parties acknowledge the possibility that they might be wrong and the other right. ‘We all know this attitude of mind does not come easily’ (Wiredu 2007). The different elements of the Socratic attitude reinforce each other; the whole process benefits from taking time to reflect on what is being said.

We want to emphasize here that being able to recognize and identify emotions is also important. Emotions and values are closely interwoven. Emotions provide information and are often an indication that an issue has been raised that is important to someone; it could relate to a moral value.

One of the methods that can be used here is the Socratic dialogue in which values that are at issue for the participants in the conversation are explored with the help of a case study (Kessels 1997). A moderator (trainer) leads the conversation, just by asking questions and thereby following the specific structure of the Socratic dialogue. The added value of the Socratic dialogue (and therefore of the structure of the dialogue and the consistent questioning attitude of the moderator) is that the participants arrive at a shared answer to a general question of principle with the help of a concrete example from their own daily lives.

In that way, the result of a Socratic dialogue is exactly what Socrates intended: ‘practical wisdom’. The purpose of Socratic dialogues is to develop insights into one’s own values and standards, into how one thinks and therefore also into any prejudices and errors in reasoning. Socratic dialogues are in-depth examinations of one’s own mental world; they are also a shared learning process in which one’s own insights are tested against the insights of other people (Wortel & Verweij 2008). It has been shown in the past that a very important element is that the question really be important to the group of participants, who, in turn, must have had sufficient practical exposure to the Socratic attitude. Another important aspect is that the moderator be able to bring any disruptions to the centre if they arise, for example by calling a time-out.
By showing how virtue ethics and the Socratic attitude assist in achieving moral competence, we now turn to ‘living learning’.

‘Living learning’

First, we examine the importance of ‘living learning’ for strengthening moral competence. Secondly, we explain the added value of Theme-Centered Interaction (TCI), this is a system based on an active, creative and discovering process of ‘living learning’, which has been developed by Ruth Cohn (1975). TCI is on the one hand a training method for personal development and on the other hand an effective intervention instrument for working with group dynamics especially to reveal concealed power mechanisms in the interaction between people.

A learning environment in which the opportunity is offered to make a link between theory, one’s own actions in the group, daily working reality and reflecting on all of those elements is essential for the (further) development of moral competence. In ancient Greek, the word school was used, meaning ‘free space’. Our modern word ‘school’ is derived from school. Kessels, Boers and Mostert (2002: 15) explain that a school was originally a free space, a sanctuary for thinking, with others, about how the world works, what we and others should do, and what ‘the good life’ means. The modern didactic principle that meets those conditions is called ‘living learning’ (Cohn 1975, 1989; Callens 1983).

‘Living learning’ is juxtaposed with ‘dead learning’, which is characteristic of teaching situations where the auditors passively undergo the teacher’s presentation and try to absorb it. ‘Living learning’ could also be defined as ‘learning with the three H’s’ – the head, the heart, and the hands. Those three H’s are equivalent to thinking, feeling, and acting. ‘Living learning’ invites participants explicitly to make contact with and to express one’s own thoughts and feelings about the material. The participants are also stimulated to reflect on themselves as learning persons and on the experiences associated with the learning activity. In this process, one actively exercises learning to recognize and identify one’s own feelings, which lie under the surface. That benefits specific development objectives that are important for strengthening moral competence, such as creating a balance between reflection and reaction, and being able to critically reflect on one’s own first judgement.

As stated earlier, strengthening moral competence begins with becoming aware of one’s own personal values and those of others. That is also an important principle of TCI. TCI’s vision of people and the world is linked to values. Humanity and freedom, for example, are important values in TCI. The tension between autonomy and interdependence is emphasized repeatedly. TCI proceeds on the basis that a person is more able to make independent choices

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4 The founder of TCI is Ruth Cohn, a Jewish psychoanalyst who was born in Berlin in 1912. Her experiences in Nazi Germany motivated her to search for an answer to the question of how psychoanalytical knowledge could be put to use in creating a more humane world.
(i.e., display autonomy) based on his or her own responsibility when (s)he is more aware of the connection with the world and with others (interdependence). One of the principles of TCI expresses this by asking that everyone ‘Be their own chairperson’. That principle is an explicit invitation to all participants in a group (including the moderator) to take their own responsibility for what they do and do not do in the group, with each person asking what is going on with himself or herself, in his or her surroundings, and with other people and keeping focus on the task that the group has taken upon itself.

A situation in one of the groups in the ‘train-the-trainer’ course in military ethics is illustrative in this respect. The group was questioning a participant in a Socratic way about a moral dilemma that he had brought into the group. While answering the questions about the dilemma, the person who had brought up the issue became visibly emotional. It soon became clear that it was a dilemma. Before it had become clear how the person who had brought the case in had acted, the other participants began to react and to tell how they would have responded in such a situation. Only one participant said: ‘I don’t want to give a reaction now, because I don’t want to harm the person who brought this dilemma in with my reaction’. In the examination of moral dilemmas (the task), this participant was not only occupied with his own response, but also with what was going on in his environment: in this example with the feelings of the person who had brought the dilemma up.

TCI proceeds on the basis that every individual can decide freely to stay within borders that could be expanded. A person has the free space to decide for himself or herself to expand the borders. For that, too, each individual bears his or her own responsibility. Every person has power. Individuals are not powerless by definition, but neither are they all-powerful. The awareness that everyone has power to act or not to act in every situation is important when a person is confronted with moral dilemmas. That fits with the fifth component of moral competence (being willing and able to act on a judgement in a morally responsible way).

A third key aspect in the vision that lies behind TCI is respect for growth and development. That fits with our view of virtue ethics. Personal development is essential. Recognizing and examining one’s own resistance can be very helpful here. In TCI, this is expressed in a second principle: ‘Disruptions take precedence’. This ‘disruption postulate’ includes the invitation to participants to state when they are no longer able to continue in the group because of disruptions, tensions or intense emotions. To illustrate, Cohn (1975) uses the metaphor of a big stone in the middle of the road. There are many things that you can do to get around it or climb over it. One thing that you cannot do, however, is pretend that the stone is not there! Cohn uses that image to illustrate that there are many obstacles that could prevent someone from taking part in the learning process. ‘Living learning’ is not possible without the acknowledgement of any disruptions that are present.
In addition to its values-oriented vision, TCI is also a concrete methodology for mediating within groups. To promote the ‘living learning’ process in a group, a dynamic balance is deliberately created in TCI among the four factors that arise in a group or team in every learning or working situation: the task (the IT), the group (the WE), the individual (I), and the global (social CONTEXT).

Placing too much emphasis on any one of the four factors interferes with the ‘living learning’ process. Too much attention to the IT, for example, leads to a strong task and results-orientation and gives too little attention to how the participants are feeling. A result could be that the participants lose interest and temporarily switch off. If a participant is very dominant or destructive, however, and demands too much attention (in TCI terms, too much attention for an I), it could generate rivalry, uncertainty or irritation in a group, which stands in the way of a healthy learning climate. The four factors offer a variety of ways to keep the free space that is necessary to learn, think and reflect freely (see, e.g., Van den Braak 2004).

TCI is also an excellent methodology for learning in the here-and-now. That fits with our view of virtue ethics and the development of moral competence. It is not just something that you talk about; it is also something that you can do. Empathic capability and the courage to stand up for one’s own values are some of the elements of the moral competence that can be demonstrated in the here-and-now in the group. TCI makes it possible to respond very flexibly with what is happening in the group here and now. That is possible because TCI uses themes. By formulating a theme, the focus is placed on something that is topical within the group at a particular moment. TCI offers many possibilities ‘at the cutting edge’ for working on moral competence.
The structure of the ‘train-the-trainer’ course in military ethics

What does ethics education in which the focus is on strengthening moral competence and the underlying principles are virtue ethics, the Socratic attitude and the process of ‘living learning’ look like in practice? We shall use the ‘train-the-trainer’ course in military ethics to illustrate this.

Aim and target group

The aim of the course is to strengthen the moral competence of the individual participants. The basic concept is that everyone who is engaged with military ethics education is an example to others. For that reason, the course is aimed in the first place at the non-commissioned officers (NCOs) who are themselves instructors in military ethics or will be in the near future.

The fact that the course aims first at NCOs is somewhat unique. International comparative research shows that this is not common (Robinson, de Lee & Carrick 2008). Most ethics education in military settings concentrates on officers. Carrick even talks about an ‘officer bias’ (2008: 191). It is our contention, however, that strengthening the moral competence of NCOs is crucial. This is the group with a very important, perhaps even the most important, role in the moral development of the soldiers. That makes NCOs key personnel (Romses 1998: 19).

The NCOs who participate in the course come from all Services and an all-Service approach was chosen deliberately. The aim is for the participants to learn from one another and be aware of different perspectives. Experience has shown that each of the Services has tried to develop its own approach to moral dilemmas (van Baarda et al. 2006).

Course structure

As noted previously, working on the basis of virtue ethics, improving the Socratic attitude and activating the process of ‘living learning’ assumes the existence of the so-called ‘free space’ (schole). To maximize the free space for the participants, we deliberately chose an outside, non-Defence site for the programme. Our experience and the responses in the evaluations show that the context that we chose inspired the participants; gave them the opportunity to put some distance between themselves and their daily work, and provided space for reflection. Participants also wear civilian clothes during the course. That makes the military service, branch and rank of the participants invisible.

5 Participants are not always NCOs; some of them are officers.
The course has also been structured to support the ‘living learning’ process. After all, the learning process arguably makes it possible to link theory with one’s own actions in the group and in daily working life, and to reflect on all of those elements is essential for strengthening moral competence. For that reason, we have chosen to run the course over three non-consecutive blocks of three days each, giving the participants the opportunity to put the knowledge and experiences into practice between the blocks. This is further stimulated by assigning so-called ‘homework assignments’.

Furthermore, the course days are structured to alternate the focus between the I, the We, the Task, and the Context. The module ‘ethics and emotions’, for example, covers two half-days. The module starts with a short introduction of the aims, which are to develop insight into and knowledge about the relationship between ethics and emotions. Time is then spent on the subject of one’s own emotions (I), after which the link is made between emotions and moral dilemmas during deployments by means of video material (Context), and everything up to that point is discussed in pairs. The module concludes with a group discussion during which conclusions are drawn (We).

After having completed the course, the participants are given the opportunity to participate in so-called inter-vision days. On those days, experiences and problems in daily life are discussed and additional workshops are provided.

Two trainers are always present throughout the ‘train-the-trainer’ course in military ethics. They monitor and assist the individual participants in their personal development, the group process and, if necessary, help to bridge the gap between (academic) content and military practice. At several times during the course, guest lecturers present their own perspectives in various areas where military ethics has played or could potentially play a part.

The content of the ‘train-the-trainer’ course in military ethics

The principles of virtue ethics, the Socratic attitude and the process of ‘living learning’ are also comprehensively explored during the course, as well as serving as the common thread that links the other subjects with one another. The other subjects are personal mastery, integrity, power, human rights, ethics and emotions, and the blurring of moral standards. In addition, a Socratic dialogue is conducted, exercises are carried out with the ‘flow model’ (Bos 1974; van Baarda and Verweij 2006), and time is provided for demonstrating ‘one's own lessons’. Three of the more substantial subjects are elaborated on below.

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6 The flow model is a model for making judgements; it is a dynamic and reflective model which focuses on reflecting on one's own actions during the judgement forming process (van Baarda and Verweij 2006).
Personal mastery

The question of ‘What do I stand for?’ is raised very explicitly early in the course. Above, we have made clear that virtue ethics is concerned with the attitude that motivates action. The leading question is ‘what kind of person do I want to be?’ Answering that question requires knowledge and insight into one’s own values and convictions. Obviously this is part of fundamental moral education. The participants begin by bringing in their own life and learning history, an ingredient that comes from the theory and practice of ‘living learning’ (Callens 1983). On that basis, they determine their own personal development objectives in relation to strengthening their own moral competence. Each of the participants is personally responsible for their own development process. The participants are expected to create an inventory of their own development objectives and over the course of weeks will record and evaluate their progress.

In addition, we look both theoretically and practically at the concept of ‘personal mastery’ (Senge 1990, 2004; Ramakers 2009a, b). That invites the participants to critical self-reflection. They are asked about their personal vision and to explain the values behind that vision. The potential tensions between their own values and the reality of their lives and the organization in which they work are also examined. The participants are then asked how they deal with those tensions. The point is to develop awareness of their own values and knowledge of the values and moral conventions in the organization and in society at large. Participants also investigate the obstacles that they encounter in the organization in terms of acting in accordance with their own values, making critical judgements and being able to call others to account for their conduct. Given a tension between one’s own values and those of the organization, one may ask to what extent an individual is prepared to or capable of accepting this tension. What is the lowest limit? What does one person find acceptable and the other person unacceptable?

And finally, in keeping with the fifth part of moral competence – being willing and able to act on the basis of one’s own judgement in a morally responsible way – the participants are invited to indicate what they are going to do themselves when dealing with the obstacles in the area of military ethics in the organization. An underlying principle of the course, after all, is that each individual has power in every situation to act or not to act. Interestingly, not all participants are aware of this perspective, they seem to have resigned themselves to the perception that they are powerless vis-à-vis the organization. This powerlessness may be related to the military (hierarchical) organizational structure and culture. The subject of power is therefore explored in more detail during the course.
Power: How does it work?

Power is a factor in every situation, especially in situations in which values are at issue and at risk of being infringed on or violated. In the ‘train-the-trainer’ course in military ethics, we begin by increasing the knowledge of and insight into the working and meaning of the concept of ‘power’. To do so, we use the work of French philosopher Michel Foucault, especially with regard to the concepts of discipline and normalization.

In Foucault’s view, a new type of power developed during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: discipline. That is defined as a power technique that subjects people to detailed and permanent compulsion and thereby increases their economic utility and political submissiveness. The techniques that are used are the same as those which already existed in military barracks, for example: hierarchical oversight combined with normalizing sanctions by means of punishment and reward.

According to Foucault, power is everywhere: every social area is infused with power relationships. That does not mean that freedom does not exist. The only time there is no freedom is in situations of dominance: power is then so petrified that it has become fully asymmetrical and the margin of freedom is extremely limited (Foucault 1978: Vol. I, 121–2).

Following the in-depth discussion of the theoretical aspects, we explore the meaning and working of the concept of power in the living and working context of the participants. We examine the role of power in society, within the Defence organization and in one’s own group. A primary question is what visible and invisible power mechanisms are operational within the group. It is not easy to make the participants aware of the invisible workings of power, although they certainly exist, as the following examples will show.

Although during the course members wear civilian clothes and their military position is, in principle, invisible, the participants are highly skilled in identifying one another’s military background and rank. This results in some of the participants, who are very aware of their position in the military hierarchy, easily giving the floor to a fellow course member whom they know has a higher rank. The reasoning is that ‘being a lieutenant or captain, you know better’.

The presence of course members who are in the Royal Netherlands Marechaussee, the military police corps, has also caused some participants to censor themselves. The investigative authority of the personnel of the military police corps has influenced the hesitation of some participants to bring up examples of moral dilemmas that potentially involve violations of military discipline.

In order to make those mechanisms clear and to give the participants the opportunity to make a judgement that is based on morality and to communicate it, the following interventions are necessary.

In the first place, the concept of ‘safety within the group’ is raised at the start of the course. The issue of each participant’s requirements to be able to speak openly and freely

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7 Participants are not always NCOs; some of them are officers.
is raised explicitly. If those mechanisms arise as the course progresses, we identify it as a dilemma and discuss with the entire group how we are to proceed.

Secondly, the participants are always reminded of the basic TCI rules of ‘Be your own leader’ and ‘Disruptions take precedence’. That means that all of the participants are always watching what is going on, in themselves and in their environment, and are always attentive to the task that the group has taken upon itself. The participants are regularly encouraged not only to think about this, but at various times to talk about it, too.

In addition to these explicit reflections on the group process, film material is used. In the ‘power’ module, the film *Das Experiment*\(^8\) is shown. We have participants react to several concrete examples of the workings of power and abuses of power in the film. The film also serves as the transition point to the module ‘blurring of moral standards’.

Blurring of moral standards

Blurring of moral standards’ refers to the process in which the conduct of a specific group gradually, and sometimes imperceptibly to the people involved, becomes unacceptable (Vogelaar & Verweij 2009). Being able to identify the moment when values are at risk of being infringed or violated is crucial for moral competence. It is also very difficult because it often happens on a sliding scale and the single moment is elusive. ‘Blurring of moral standards’ is a complex and slippery subject; a great deal of time is therefore spent on that subject during the course. The aim is to help participants understand the causes of the blurring of moral standards so that they can identify it when it occurs, and to have the participants reflect on what they can do to prevent moral standards from becoming blurred. The bystander effect is given a great deal of attention in this area.

The presentation of the theory begins with Philip Zimbardo’s infamous Stanford Prison Experiment and Milgram’s study of obedience,\(^9\) after which we have the participants make a comparison with the Abu Ghraib prison abuse incident in Iraq in 2004 where extreme cases of the blurring of moral standards (torture and even executions) took place. We then draw up an inventory of the causes of the blurring of moral standards, using the experiences with the blurring that course participants have had, and after that go on to discuss the theory of moral disengagement of psychologist Albert Bandura, who identifies nine reasons for people exhibiting morally incorrect behaviour (van Baarda and Verweij 2006: 51–6).\(^{10}\) The

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\(^8\) The German movie ‘Das Experiment’ (2001: directed by Oliver Hirschbiegel) is inspired by the events of the Stanford Prison Experiment which was conducted in 1971 by a team of researchers led by Psychology Professor Philip Zimbardo at Stanford University. See also George Mastroianni’s article in this issue of *Journal of Military Ethics*, for more on Zimbardo.

\(^9\) Both studies were carried out in the early 1970s. See Vogelaar and Verweij (2009) for details.

\(^{10}\) (1) Self-justification; (2) Euphemistic language; (3) The favourable comparison; (4) Shifting the responsibility; (5) Creating confusion as to who bears (ultimate) responsibility; (6) Ignoring the consequences of a particular decision; (7) Dehumanizing the enemy; (8) Blaming the victim; (9) Gradual loss of loyalty to norms and values (becoming numb, callousness).
participants then take another look at their experiences and we discuss what actions could have been taken to counter the blurring of moral standards in those situations.

Experience

At the time of writing, the course has been held six times, two refresher sessions have been held and a trainers’ pool has been set up for trainers. On the basis of those experiences, we present some of our lessons learned from the perspectives of the participants and the trainers.

Participants’ experiences

The evaluations thus far have been positive. The participants appreciate being given additional substance. One of the major points that has come out has been that the participants find it important and satisfactory to have their own input be taken seriously, that they are listened to and that they are given space to reflect on personal experiences during deployments and at home. In the normal course of events, there is little space and time for reflection in their daily working lives.

Participants also state that ‘finally’ they understand what military ethics is about. That makes them feel more secure when they are presenting military ethics lessons to military personnel. The course gives the participants a solid foundation. The participants also indicate that when they have completed the course, they realize that they have to create their own materials for ethics education. They do not have a link with the lesson objectives that they receive from higher up. The participants state that the content and the structure of ethics education in the Services are still in their infancy. We conclude further that there is a great need for additional training for people developing the military ethics course materials.

Finally, the evaluations also show that the all-Service structure of the course presents many new insights. Former participants in the course, from the different Services, exchange material and audit the lessons that others give. They find this to be ‘very inspiring’.

Trainers’ experiences

Our experience shows that it is very important for a team of two trainers to be present throughout the course. Together they can monitor and assist the individual participants in their personal development, the group process and, if necessary, help to bridge the gap between (academic) content and military practice. To really do justice to the development objectives that the individual participants have drawn up with respect to strengthening their
moral competence, individual interviews and feedback during the course are necessary. This type of assistance is so (labour) intensive that it is important to ensure that sufficient personnel is available to do it.

The experience of the trainers is that it is useful to be able to consult with each other about the interventions that are necessary to keep the group as a whole and each participant individually sharp. After all, the participants are being encouraged to provide feedback to themselves and to others about how each of them is applying his or her moral competence in the group and in the here and now.

We have also found it necessary for trainers to reflect critically on themselves. In that sense the trainers of the course are also an example. Characteristics that are useful in such training include: sharing power, being transparent, creating free learning space, coordinating content with the participants, being involved, asking many questions (in which the Socratic attitude is important for the trainer), reflection (including self-reflection) and the courage to admit when one is wrong.\footnote{These are characteristic of being a group-leader in the theme-oriented interaction (Cohn 1989; Langmaack 2001).}

A final conclusion is that the tempo of the course should not be set too high. Thinking, reflecting and allowing everyone to be heard takes time. This requires patience on the part of the trainers.

Discussion and conclusion

In this article, we have examined the consequences of centralizing the strengthening of moral competence in ethics education. We have argued that it is important to base ethics education on virtue ethics, the Socratic attitude and the process of ‘living learning’. We have illustrated that position by means of the example of the ‘train-the-trainer’ course in military ethics as presented in the Netherlands Defence Academy. We want to close with the following discussion points and conclusion.

Discussion points

The first discussion point concerns the discrepancy between working on strengthening moral competence, which is about ‘doubt’ and ‘asking questions’, and the work context of the participants, which is oriented, both literally and figuratively, towards ‘defence’. Thinking within a framework of legality, standards, regulations and obligations is so common within the culture of the (Netherlands) Defence organization, that sometimes there is very little room for ‘doubt’ and ‘asking questions’. ‘Just tell me what to do!’ is an oft-heard comment. This demands a great deal of patience and explanation from the trainers. Although we believe that the culture of a military organization underscores the importance of working from
the perspective of virtue ethics and the Socratic attitude, the military environment may pose a challenge to engaging with this methodology. However, we believe that the importance of strengthening moral competence in the military sphere outweighs this, and that the methodology we put forward can meet such a challenge, as the success of the case study arguably shows.

The second discussion point concerns compulsory versus voluntary participation in the ‘train-the-trainer’ course in military ethics. Given the personal approach of the course, participants should actually take the course voluntarily. People will only be able to work on their personal development on the basis of willingness. It also requires being able to make one’s self vulnerable. The participants do not always sign up voluntarily for the course. Some of them are ‘sent’ by their superiors. That is a difficult point for the course trainers. Raising that issue with the participants, we have found that those ‘who had to come’ do adopt a willing attitude. The question, nonetheless, is how far the organization can go in requiring an individual to work on his/her moral competence.

The third point concerns the role of emotions in ethics education. Focusing on personal values regularly leads to an emotional response. It should be clear that the intent is not to deliberately provoke an emotional response, but during the course a lot of emotions could be stirred up. Alertness is also required when participants become emotional when discussing a moral issue. In any case, it is important for trainers to make an assessment at the end of the course as to whether anyone has any ‘unfinished business’ in terms of dealing with emotions. The precise emotional impact for participants of exploring their morally charged experiences is still fairly unknown. More research should be done in this area.

Fourth, we realize that reflecting on moral dilemmas and talking about personal considerations require a certain level of verbal capability. Not everyone is equally gifted in this respect. It is worth investigating other methodologies.

The fifth discussion point concerns the homogeneity of the group in terms of rank. Speaking freely is important, and this is easier to achieve in groups of the same rank. However, in order for participants to become aware of dilemmas that are faced by other ranks or to practice communicating about moral issues when rank differences are a factor, it could be an advantage in the future to work with mixed groups of NCOs and officers.

The final discussion point concerns the measurement of effectiveness of moral education. While our evaluations so far have been positive, it is too early to draw definite conclusions regarding the effectiveness of the course. In order to do that we would need more research on the long-term effects of the ‘train-the-trainer’ course in military ethics.
Conclusion

Working with personal values is relatively new in a military setting. Arguably, such an approach should be embedded in ethics-education policies. Course developers should be informed of the developments where such courses have been tried, as in the Netherlands. Explicit opportunities should be offered for self-study, personal development, independent thinking, being able and willing to make judgements, reflecting critically and thereby recognizing and identifying one’s own resistance.

This requires time and focused, continuous attention, because moral competence also has to be maintained after the course. Time and space to do so are not always available, but it is always necessary. As one of the participants in the ‘train-the-trainer’ course in military ethics passionately expressed:

‘Certainly in the military context, where we are confronted with complex dilemmas and have to deal with them, and can also completely lose our way, the important thing for me is the care for those men and women. That’s why I’m teaching military ethics. That is where my commitment lies.’

References


Chapter 3