

FEATURE ARTICLES

Ethics and Respect for Human Dignity: Understanding and Assessing the USAFA Ethics Outcome

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In its most general usage, the term *ethics* refers to standards or principles of right and wrong action, good and bad character. As an academic discipline, ethics, or moral philosophy, is the branch of philosophy that is concerned with understanding, systematizing, and justifying ethical concepts and moral claims. From ancient times, moral philosophers have believed that the purpose of studying ethics is not merely to arrive at a theoretical understanding of right and wrong action, or good and bad character, but rather to discover wisdom about how to live a morally good life and grow in virtuous moral character. As the Greek philosopher Aristotle explained in his seminal book of virtue ethics, *Nicomachean Ethics* (1999), “The purpose of the present study is not, as it is in other inquiries, the attainment of theoretical knowledge; we are not conducting this inquiry in order to know what virtue is, but in order to become good” (II.2, p. 35). Taking a cue from Aristotle and other ancient sages, when he was an undergraduate at Morehouse College, Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote an article on “The Purpose of Education” (1947) for his campus newspaper in which he warned his fellow students and his teachers, “We must remember that intelligence is not enough. Intelligence plus character—that is the goal of true education.”

Author Note

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In keeping with Aristotle's and King's vision of the purpose of education, especially education in ethics, one of the U.S. Air Force Academy's (USAFA) nine institutional outcomes is Ethics and Respect for Human Dignity (referred to hereafter as "the Ethics Outcome"). In service of the Air Force Academy's mission to "educate, train and inspire men and women to become officers of character motivated to lead the United States Air Force and Space Force in service to our Nation," we are committed to helping our cadets learn and grow in four key areas of ethics:

- moral knowledge,
- respect for human dignity,
- moral decision making, and
- habits of moral excellence (or, virtues).

The Ethics Outcome white paper explains:

When deciding how to act, Air Force leaders of character comprehend moral knowledge and ethical alternatives, respect the dignity of all affected persons, use ethical judgment in moral decision making as leaders to select the best alternative, and act consistently with that judgment so as to develop habits of moral excellence. (United States Air Force Academy, n.d.)

As compared with the other Academy outcomes to include Scientific Reasoning, Critical Thinking, and National Security, the Ethics Outcome is perhaps the most controversial and misunderstood of USAFA's

institutional outcomes. For, while there is wide agreement today about the value of scientific reasoning, critical thinking, national security, and our other outcomes, 21st century American society is marked by deep ambivalence, confusion, and even suspicion about the nature and value of ethics. In the following pages, we will briefly address some of the sources of these cultural attitudes toward ethics, along with the challenges they pose for ethics education today, and we will explain some of USAFA's efforts to overcome these challenges as we seek to educate, train, and inspire our cadets in the four areas of ethics enumerated above.

Moral Knowledge

The U.S. Declaration of Independence professes that, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness." Unfortunately, many people in our society today—including most undergraduates—do not hold these truths to be self-evident, at least not with any confidence. Given the widespread acceptance of moral skepticism in 20th century Western societies, many today are uncomfortable claiming to possess any moral knowledge at all, even moral knowledge as basic and fundamental as that all people share equal human dignity and human rights. Indeed, moral knowledge sounds like an oxymoron to many people today (Pelser, 2019). Perhaps this should not surprise us since our students are taught from a young age to believe that knowledge belongs in the realm of objective facts and empirical science, while morality belongs in the realm

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of subjective opinions, values, and feelings (McBrayer, 2015). Despite having been challenged by rigorous philosophical arguments, such as those presented by Princeton University philosophy professor Sarah McGrath in her recent book *Moral Knowledge* (2020), the distinction between the realm of knowledge and the realm of morality has become such an established tenet of cultural orthodoxy that it is widely assumed to be obvious without question and without argument.

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In his posthumously published book, *The Disappearance of Moral Knowledge* (2018), University of Southern California philosophy professor Dallas Willard laments the disappearance from Western society of moral knowledge as a publicly available good. Willard (2018) acknowledges that many individuals still possess moral knowledge today in the sense that

they are “able to represent [morality] as it is on an adequate basis of thought or experience” (p. 19). Yet, he argues that moral knowledge “does not...present itself as a publically accessible resource for living and living together” (p. xxx). He elaborates, it is now true that knowledge of moral distinctions and phenomena is *not* made available as a public resource; and most of those who supervise the course of events in our institutions of knowledge—principally those of ‘higher education’—think that such knowledge should not, morally *ought* not, be made available through them. (p. xxxi)

This cultural suspicion of moral knowledge—and of any college professors who would dare to teach it—obviously poses a challenge for the project of educating for ethics and respect for human dignity at the Air Force Academy. The Academy’s core course, Philosophy 310 – Ethics, confronts this challenge. In the Ethics course, cadets are taught to think carefully and critically about the arguments for and against adopting radical moral skepticism (which denies the possibility of moral knowledge) and its conceptual cousin moral relativism (the view that there is no objective moral truth and that all moral truth is relative to one’s culture). It is, of course, important to protect the vulnerable against the kind of abuses that historically have been committed in the name of moral absolutism. But in an effort to prevent such abuses, it would be a mistake to reject the possibility of knowing basic moral facts. Indeed, one moral fact that we can

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know is that injustice in the name of moral absolutism is wrong.

This core course also introduces cadets to efforts in the history of Western philosophy to provide a comprehensive theoretical foundation and justification for ethics—namely, Virtue/Eudaimonistic Theory, Natural Law Theory, Social Contract Theory, Deontology, and Utilitarianism. The cadets also learn about the foundational principles of Just War Theory, along with the principles and virtues of military professionalism.

Cadets are assessed on their abilities to defend moral knowledge against challenges, demonstrate knowledge of ethical theories and concepts, and apply the principles of Just War Theory judiciously to historical and contemporary ethical cases. Assessments take the form of participation in classroom discussions, writing assignments, and a comprehensive final exam. Ethics instructors also assess cadets on their commitment to the principles and virtues of military professionalism—including the Air Force Core Values of Integrity, Service, and Excellence—through a variety of discussions and essays. There are obvious limitations on how effectively a cadet’s moral judgment and moral character can be assessed through classroom discussions and essays, but the Academy is confident that the assessment practices in use adequately, albeit imperfectly, capture cadets’ proficiency and ethical maturity in moral knowledge and moral reasoning.

Respect for Human Dignity

The second category of proficiencies for USAFA’s Ethics Outcome is respect for human dignity. Article 1 of the U.N.’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948) states that “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act toward one another in a spirit of brotherhood.” In

keeping with this international moral commitment, the U.S. military has made fostering respect for human dignity a point of emphasis.

As Adam Pelser (2021) has argued elsewhere, “human dignity is the basic, inherent value that all human beings possess in equal measure, in virtue of being human” (p. 284). The philosopher Immanuel Kant (1785/1997) helpfully distinguishes dignity from another kind of value—price. He explains, “What has a price can be replaced by something else as its *equivalent*; what on the other hand is raised above all price and therefore admits of no equivalent has a dignity” (p. 42). According to this view, every human being has dignity and is, therefore, literally priceless.

Human dignity is a kind of moral worth insofar as the dignity of human persons entitles them to a certain basic level of respect from others.¹ Of course, some people deserve greater respect than others by virtue of their superior position, abilities, accomplishments, virtuous character, etc., but all human beings deserve equal respect for their dignity. In the military, respect for rank and for other institutional structures and symbols is important, but it is not the same as respect for human dignity. All members of the military deserve respect for their human dignity, regardless of their rank. And officers of good moral character will respect the human dignity of all persons, including our enemies in war. Respect for human dignity involves both a felt appreciation for the basic, equal worth of others and a commitment to treat them accordingly. The commitment to act toward others in a way that befits their dignity is what Stephen Darwall (1977) calls recognition respect. He explains, “to have recognition respect for persons is to give proper weight [in deliberation about how to act] to the fact that they are persons” (p. 39).

¹ Material in this and the following paragraph (including the bulleted list) is used and modified from Pelser (2021) with permission of Henrik Syse, the editor of *Journal of Military Ethics*.

A crucial part of growing in respect for human dignity is cultivating the ability to recognize, prevent, and, where prevention fails, to act appropriately in response to such treatment. To that end, USAFA exposes cadets to past violations of human dignity; especially those committed by members of the military profession, and emphasizes discussion on why such treatment of human beings is wrong, how we can prevent it, and how we ought to respond to it when it occurs. Types of degrading, dehumanizing, and humiliating treatment that we must learn to recognize include, but are not limited to:

- speaking about or treating human beings (including our enemies) as though they are non-human animals;
- denying human beings their basic right to autonomy over their lives or bodies (e.g., in rape, murder, slavery, human trafficking, or unjust imprisonment);
- treating some persons as less valuable than others based their nationality, race, gender, sexual identity, religion, socio-economic background, physical or intellectual abilities, etc.;
- making jokes or using derogatory language (slurs) that belittle others, often having to do with race, gender, sexual identity, religion, socio-economic background, physical or intellectual abilities, etc.

An important moral-psychological skill that contributes to respect for human dignity is the ability to take on the perspective of people who are different from ourselves. In a core course entitled, Behavioral Science 110 – Introduction to Behavioral Science, cadets learn and are assessed on taking on perspective applied to human dignity. A central premise of that course is that many problems—to include those tackled by behavioral scientists—are best understood by considering multiple perspectives. This idea is reinforced in a series of lessons near the end of the course in which cadets learn to engage in productive dialogue with people who disagree with them. In one exercise, cadets state their positions

on a number of potentially controversial topics (e.g., “Confederate statues should be removed from public places” or “Local school boards should have the right to ban particular books from school libraries if they find the content of those books distasteful.”). Then, they work with a classmate to identify a topic on which they and their classmate disagree and have a conversation about that topic. The task for each person is to listen closely enough that they each are able to write a clear, detailed statement of their partner’s perspective on the topic. In addition, the two people are also required to write a joint statement on that topic that both of them would be willing to agree to. As an example, when two cadets disagreed about whether removal of confederate statues from public places, they agreed that, while the confederacy’s commitment to slavery was wrong, it is important to acknowledge part of the nation’s history, and that more conversations about the impact of that part of our nation’s history should occur.

Cadets and instructors alike have reported that they have found this kind of assignment to be very valuable in helping cadets learn perspective-taking skills. As part of a written reflection following this exercise, one cadet wrote: “This conversation was different from other disagreements I’ve had in the past because I was actually listening to my partner and not just ignoring his perspective while plotting in my mind what I was going to say next.” This cadet went on to say “It would be beneficial for me to engage in more of these types of conversations throughout my time at USAFA and beyond because it would allow me to get to know the perspectives of those who work with me and not judge people. For example, as a future officer, I will be able to see the bigger picture by understanding people’s perspectives and thus use that to make better decisions and help in making me become a better leader.” Other courses such as an Advanced Sociocultural Option course, Philosophy 401 – Comparative Religion, also offers cadets the opportunity to expand and assess their understanding of and respect for diverse religious perspectives.

Beyond the classroom, cadets' abilities to take on the perspectives of others, and to recognize and respond appropriately to violations of human dignity are reinforced by a variety of non-classroom learning experiences. Examples of these perspective-shaping opportunities include recent discussions of George Takei's reflections on the prejudicial mistreatment of Asian Americans during WWII in *They Called Us Enemy*, which was this year's featured book for the "One Book One USAFA" initiative. Growth in the skills and attitudes constitutive of respect for human dignity are encouraged through events sponsored by the Center for Character and Leadership Development (CCLD) such as the National Character and Leadership Symposium (NCLS), and through training sessions such as those focused on Sexual Assault Prevention and Response (SAPR). In SAPR training sessions, for example, cadets and permanent party are encouraged to consider multiple different ways to act appropriately in response to sexually degrading jokes and other forms of sexual harassment and assault. As discussed in these sessions, appropriate responses to such violations of human dignity include, but are not limited to direct confrontation, private discussion at a later time, reporting to a superior, changing the subject/distraction, refusing to laugh, and protesting in other non-confrontational ways.

Moral Decision Making

In addition to moral knowledge and respect for human dignity, the Ethics Outcome also involves proficiency in moral decision-making. Moral decision-making is a deliberative enterprise, even more so when the issues are complex, and when faced by a group instead of an individual. Many philosophers, behavioral scientists, and leadership theorists propose decision procedures for individuals and groups to use in moral judgment.²

Common features of these procedures include awareness, reasoning, deciding, and action (ARDA). Cadet proficiency in understanding and applying the ARDA procedure for moral decision-making is taught and assessed through various programs and tools, and includes the Cadet Wing's *Cross-Curriculum Plan for training in Core Values, Character and Leadership* (U.S. Air Force Academy, n.d.), and the Academy's Honor Code. Throughout their four years at the Air Force Academy, cadets discuss the steps of the ARDA procedure and apply them in action in training scenarios, in an effort to grow in the following skills of awareness, reasoning, deciding, and action.

Moral decision-making is a deliberative enterprise, even more so when the issues are complex, and when faced by a group instead of an individual.

Awareness. Many scholars believe that moral decision-making begins when an agent recognizes or becomes aware of the morally relevant facts and principles that must be brought to bear under a given set of circumstances. This means that agents must be familiar with the relevant facts and principles and be capable of identifying their relevance in the circumstances in question. In easy cases, the agent discerns a clear moral problem with a clear, single solution. For example, an agent sees another person suffering and has the ability to help in the moment. In difficult cases, there are many possible challenges. Scholars and practitioners sometimes refer to these difficult cases in terms of a theater or space marked by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA).

Reasoning. Once you have identified the facts and principles that are relevant to moral decision making, you must deliberate, either by yourself or with others,

² For a discussion of the way that a procedure for moral decision-making can be applied in difficult military cases, see Jensen (2013).

in order to determine what options are available and what facts and principles support these various options. Principles will include those derived from moral theory, professional commitments, and life experience.

Facts will include those received from behavioral and social science as well as those received through investigation of the circumstances, together with individual experience. In the absence of standard operating procedures for deliberation, we rely on the practice of the relevant moral and intellectual virtues such as charity, forthrightness, inquisitiveness, patience, prudence, wisdom, industry, and respect for the views of others—especially for those who disagree with us. To be clear, deliberation in accord with these virtues does not guarantee a particular outcome, but it will provide for an inclusive and defensible process.

Deciding. Decision makers, in the final instance, need principles of execution. Once decision makers have ranked their choices according to their deliberative procedures, they need a way to make a final decision. Sometimes this is easy—options are comparable, commensurable, and clearly ranked with a single choice at the top. Other times, options cannot be compared or are not commensurable, leaving the overall ranking of choices unclear. In groups, decision procedures include various forms of voting and delegation. An important aspect of group formation is the development of group decision-making procedures, especially for difficult cases.

Action. Acting in accord with sound moral judgment, and therefore in accord with a clear conscience, should be easy. In many cases, it is. But as far back as Aristotle, scholars have been concerned about *akrasia* or what some today call the decision-action gap, the condition of knowing what we ought to do and yet not doing it. Two prominent, interconnected approaches to solving this problem are (1) the intentional cultivation of habits of excellence in action (i.e., the moral virtues),

and (2) the individual and institutional use of exercises or disciplines designed to indirectly reinforce habits of excellence in action. The cultivation of moral and intellectual virtues is thus among our chief moral tasks and is the final category of proficiencies of the Ethics Outcome.

Habits of Moral Excellence

As codified in the Ethics Outcome white paper (United States Air Force Academy, n.d.), all cadets must learn to “Develop trust and commitment by promoting Air Force core values (integrity first, service before self, excellence in all we do) through goals, words, and actions.” To promote the Air Force core values, cadets must first understand the core values. Lt. Gen. Jay Silveria (2018) aptly explained these values in a previous issue of this journal:

Integrity First means that all individuals will act with a soundness of character. We will be honest, truthful, and authentic in what we do and in our interactions with others, both inside and outside of the military...

Service Before Self indicates that military service can require sacrifice. We serve something larger than ourselves and we do this freely...This means that there may be times where we need to suspend our own personal desires in order to answer the call to which we committed...

Excellence in all We Do is not just a mantra, it is how we approach our profession. It becomes the standard by which we can expect others to perform. It implies that we are always willing to better our best. (pp. 8–9)

With respect to integrity, we might add that in our context, integrity implies a virtue of constancy—the disposition to think and act consistently with the good and the right, especially in the face of personal and

organizational obstacles. In other words, authenticity and sincerity are not enough; our intentions and actions must also be properly aligned with the good. With respect to service before self, we might clarify that military professionals do not merely put service first, but in fact identify with the goods of the nation and the institution, seeing them as their own goods, and orienting their lives toward their achievement. In other words, military service is not merely a job that a citizen performs, it is rather a profession with which a citizen identifies. Finally, with respect to excellence, we might clarify that our aim is not perfection—an unattainable end, the dogged pursuit of which fosters unrealistic expectations and swallows time and resources. Instead, we aim at continual improvement, taking every opportunity to improve our institutions, and ourselves never content with minimum or acceptable performance.

More generally, the core values reflect an officer's aim to cultivate those excellences or virtues that are native to the profession. A list entailed by the core values might include truthfulness, forthrightness, constancy, loyalty, humility, dutifulness, industry, thrift, and intrepidity. Officers promote the core values and their associated virtues when they intentionally develop and model them in their own lives, through practices and disciplines known to contribute to their cultivation and when, having made progress themselves, they act as friends and mentors to other officers and enlisted personnel who are intentionally working to develop them as well.

Officers who demonstrate a commitment to developing and exemplifying the Air Force core values, along with the virtues of character they entail, earn the trust and commitment of their units, superiors, and the society they serve. Trustworthy officers intentionally and systematically practice those habits that contribute to the stability of good character and the internalization of the goods of the military

profession. However, individual virtue does not fulfill the ethical responsibilities of officership. U.S. Air Force officers must also cultivate and sustain ethical teams and organizations, which are also marked by ethical systems, procedures, and cultural ethos.

Colonel Don Snider (2015) explains that professionals must be granted quite a bit of autonomy in order to put their expert knowledge to work in the performance of their professional duties. But professionals must earn trust from their society in order to be granted the autonomy that their professional leadership requires. Snider (2015) explains that:

...professions earn and maintain the trust of their clients through their effective and ethical application of their expertise on behalf of the society they serve. Thus *it is the society served* that will determine whether the profession has earned the high status of a noble occupation and the autonomy that goes along with it. ... Professions that fail to meet expectations for effectiveness and ethical performance risk losing the trust of their clients and their ... status as a profession (think of accountancy after the Enron scandals, and the Navy after the Tailhook scandal). (p. 17)

As Snider observes, the trustworthy officer's performance will be both ethical and effective. In other words, leadership that inspires trust and commitment requires both virtuous character and professional competence. Character and competence are not independent features of good leadership. Virtuous character entails developing and maintaining the expert knowledge and skills required for professional competence. An aeronautical engineer with integrity, for example, will work to maintain knowledge of the best practices for designing and building safe and reliable aircraft. The interdependence of character and competence, ethics, and effectiveness, are underscored by the three components of USAFA's Leader of

Character Framework—Living Honorably, Lifting Others, and Elevating Performance (U.S. Air Force Academy, 2011).³

Commitment to the core values and growth in the virtues characteristic of leaders of character are encouraged through the Honor System, the Cadet Wing's Cross-Curriculum Plan previously discussed, and the mentorship that happens formally and informally across each cadet's four-year experience. Such mentorship and character growth happens in all areas of cadet life including airfield training, intercollegiate and intramural athletics, Cadet Wing training, the Center for Character and Leadership Development programs, USAFA clubs, academic advising, and the Student Success Center.

As intimated above, however, moral growth at the character level is very difficult (perhaps impossible) to assess through discreet learning experiences. Rather, evaluations of moral character growth must be holistic and longitudinal. The best forms of assessment of whether cadets are growing in habits of moral excellence, therefore, are the evaluations and recommendations of the leaders and mentors who know them best. Along those lines, we were recently pleased to learn from the results of the 2020-2021 Mission Measures surveys (formerly known as the USAFA Graduate Surveys) that Air Force supervisors ranked the USAFA graduates under their command very highly (on average, 8.5–9 out of 10) in comparison with their peer officers in the Air Force along every dimension of the Ethics Outcome. These kinds of average ratings of course do not mean that every officer commissioned from the Air Force Academy is morally superior to their peers from other commissioning sources, but they serve as an encouraging indication that USAFA's efforts to cultivate habits of moral excellence in our cadets are bearing fruit.

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³ These three components of the Leader of Character Framework are discussed in detail in other articles in this issue.

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