



## THE CORE VALUES

### FRAMING AND RESOLVING ETHICAL ISSUES FOR THE AIR FORCE

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**T**HE CORE VALUES of the United States Air Force—integrity first, service before self, and excellence in all we do—are astonishingly simple and forceful. But are they too simple and too forceful? Are they so simple, so general, they can mean anything to anyone? If so,

will they turn out to be only this year's slogan? Are they so forceful, so demanding, they are unrealistic? If so, will they lead to hypocrisy or cynicism?

Questions like these are not unreasonable—but they have good answers, and it is worth spelling them out. There are many

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good approaches to these questions, but I think distinctions and methods of moral philosophy offer an especially promising way to explain the tremendous appeal and power of the Air Force core values. That is what I attempt here—an explanation of the Air Force core values based on strategies of moral reasoning. I first describe possible misunderstandings about the core values. Then I claim that airmen can use the core values to frame and resolve ethical issues because the core values can represent all dimensions of the structure and purpose of morality. Understood in terms of the structure of morality, the core values represent the core concepts airmen need to frame ethical issues. Understood in terms of the purpose of morality, they represent the values airmen need to resolve those issues.<sup>1</sup>

### **Misunderstandings about the Core Values**

There are several reasons to doubt the core values. None of them is sound, but it is imperative to confront them head-on. One reason for skepticism is that the core values may not last. They could be a fad. Organizations of all kinds—businesses, service organizations, and federal, state, and local government agencies—have “bought into” the notion of core values.<sup>2</sup> Management tools change, however, and core values may sooner or later go out of style.<sup>3</sup> If core values become tired formulas, leaders will need new devices to promote ethical behavior. But even if the core values fashion lasts a while, will the Air Force’s current core values last? Will another secretary or chief of staff name new core values or restore the six the Air Force had before the current three were announced in 1995?

Asking whether a new administration might name new core values raises a more general question: On what basis does any administration pick the Air Force’s core val-

ues? How do we explain why integrity, service, and excellence—and only these three—are the Air Force’s core values? There is no doubt these values are vitally important to any ethical organization. But for that very reason, airmen may ask themselves how these values distinguish the Air Force from other organizations. Why are military virtues like courage and obedience not among the airman’s core values? Then, too, how should the Air Force coordinate its core values with the other armed services and the rest of the federal government? Each of the armed services has a different list of core values.<sup>4</sup> The Joint Ethics Regulation, which describes itself as “the single source of standards of ethical conduct and ethics guidance” (emphasis added)<sup>5</sup> for all of the Department of Defense (DOD), has its own list of ethical values.<sup>6</sup> This variety of values just within DOD could lead some to conclude that any set of values is as good as the next.

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### **Understood in terms of the structure of morality, the core values represent the core concepts airmen need to frame ethical issues.**

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A more troubling question about the core values is whether they are unrealistic—so unrealistic that they are irrelevant in practice or, even worse, will result in hypocrisy. It is not just that the values could seem too abstract to be meaningful or too difficult to attain in the real world. Rather, taken literally, they seem impossible to attain. Integrity, at least if understood as simple honesty, may seem easy—just tell the truth. But if we understand anything about human fallibility, it is that no one can be completely guileless with self and others all the time. Similarly, no one can be completely selfless all the time. In fact, it usually happens that the less military members think of themselves, the

more likely they are to succeed; and so service before self could even become a kind of selfishness. And no one can excel at everything. Given human limitations, we achieve excellence in some areas by concentrating on them while accepting mediocrity in others. Thus, it seems everyone will sooner or later fail to meet the “zero defects” standard that integrity, service, and excellence appear to require. If it seems inevitable that airmen, including Air Force leaders, will fall short of these impossibly high principles, is it not just as inevitable that cynicism and hypocrisy will result? Claiming that the Air Force holds individually accountable for breaches of these apparently unrealistic values can only exacerbate the cynicism and hypocrisy.

The most serious question about the core values is whether they can permit or even promote immorality. A person can be forthrightly honest, forget about self, and achieve excellent results—all for the sake of an evil purpose. Nazi leaders expected their officers to report truthfully the details of their crimes against humanity. In obedience to orders to commit these crimes, Nazis willingly put service before self. Indeed, they sacrificed their souls doing so. And Nazis constantly sought more efficient ways to excel in carrying out their atrocities.<sup>7</sup> Integrity, service, and excellence by themselves do not appear to guarantee morality. On the contrary, if they reduce morality to truthful reporting, working selflessly, and obtaining excellent results, the core values will mask fundamental ethical problems. An airman single-mindedly embracing honesty, selfless work, and excellent results might fail to ask what these values are for. They could as easily be for a lawless, immoral regime as for a law-abiding, moral democracy. Airmen whose values are simply to tell the truth, to follow orders at any cost, to perform well, and nothing more, could not draw an ethical distinction between the two. Taken this

way, the core values could become means to an evil end.<sup>8</sup> But all these doubts are mistakes, and lining the core values up with the structure and purpose of morality shows why.

## The Structure of Morality and the Core Values

The structure of morality, as I understand it, has three dimensions—agent, act, and outcome. Strategies for framing ethical issues line up along these three dimensions. This section first sketches the structure of morality and then describes a strategy of moral reasoning based on each of its dimensions and shows how that strategy refers directly to one of the Air Force core values. The result is to show that the core values point out for airmen all the kinds of strategies there are for framing moral issues—and that this accounts for the core values’ comprehensiveness.<sup>9</sup> Finally, I use this analysis to answer the objections that the core values could be only a transitory slogan and that they are not particularly appropriate for the Air Force.

### Agent, Act, and Outcome in Morality

Moral experience is often dense and complex, but its structure is simple. All of morality concerns persons doing things that affect others. The structure of morality is simply someone doing something to someone. The three dimensions of any ethical issue are thus: (1) the someone who does something, (2) the something that person does, and (3) the outcome of that act for someone. In particular cases the lines dividing these dimensions will be blurred because the three dimensions are inextricably linked together. A person performs acts, but those acts in turn help define who the per-

son is. Acts produce outcomes, but acts are in part defined by their outcomes. And outcomes affect persons, but it is those persons who say what the outcomes mean for themselves and others. Still, one can discern these three dimensions—agent, act, and outcome—in every ethical issue. They are the logic or grammar of moral reasoning—the subject, verb, and object.

Because they can be lined up with these dimensions, the core values provide a forceful framework for moral reasoning. As the analysis below shows, each of the core values matches one of these dimensions. Integrity is about the person who acts—the agent. Service is about what the person does—the person’s acts. And excellence is about what the acts produce—the outcome. In this way, the core values can completely describe any moral situation and so can provide a complete plan for framing ethical issues.

**Integrity: Agent.** In morality’s structure as “someone doing something to someone,” the first dimension is the someone who acts. Theories of morality refer to this someone as “the moral agent.” The moral agent may be an individual—for example, an airman carrying out orders. Or the moral agent may be a group—for example, the staff of an Air Force organization working together as a team. The moral agent may be directly responsible—the aircrew who puts the weapon on target. Or the moral agent may act by supporting others—the ground crew who launches the mission.

The moral agent is the focus for one strategy for framing ethical issues. Agent-focused theories map significant features of the moral terrain by requiring us to ask what the moral agent should be like. These theories emphasize that in ethics, as in law, much depends on the agent’s motives and intentions. For this strategy of moral reasoning, it matters, for example, whether an airman’s motive for truthfully reporting the results of a mission is a sense of duty or a fear of punishment if caught lying. For these theories, in fact, the agent’s inten-

tions would typically matter more than what the agent in fact accomplishes.<sup>10</sup> Moral value would depend, for example, more on the fact that a crew struggled to rescue a downed airman than on whether they actually succeeded in doing so. The agent’s intentions can also be called on to justify otherwise troubling results. For example, under “the principle of double effect” and subject to certain stringent conditions, airmen who kill or injure noncombatants in striking a target would be morally justified provided they did not intend to harm the noncombatants—even if they could foresee the harm.

Agent-focused theories also ask about the agent’s moral character. Indeed, these theories often take the position that motive and intent must be wrapped into more general questions about the kind of person the agent should be. They ask what makes a person morally good or bad. For example, lying and slaveholding are wrong because they necessarily corrupt the moral character of the liar and slaveholder. Agent-focused theories study character in general and particular character traits called “virtues” and “vices.” Character and virtue theories ask what the virtues are and how we learn and teach them. Western philosophy has its origins in such questions. Socrates practiced his belief that “the unexamined life is not worth living” by asking probing questions about courage, justice, and other virtues.<sup>11</sup>

Aristotle’s ethics also focused on virtues, claiming that moral virtues are habits acquired through practice by finding the mean between extremes.<sup>12</sup> The Beatitudes too represent this approach. And it is an approach that has an influential place in contemporary academic and popular moral philosophy—that is clear from the best-seller success of *The Book of Virtues*.<sup>13</sup> The agent-focused approach to moral reasoning is indispensable to airmen in framing moral issues—and it is one with which they are very comfortable because of their strong sense of personal honor.

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**A person can be forthrightly honest, forget about self, and achieve excellent results—all for the sake of an evil purpose.**

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The core value of “integrity first” points directly to the moral agent—to the airman’s character. Integrity characterizes the moral agent. We talk about integrity as something an airman has, as a character trait the moral agent possesses to some degree or another. When we speak of the moral agent’s integrity, we refer not merely to his or her proclivity for honesty, but more generally to the kind of person he or she is and the motives and intentions that matter to the agent. Indeed, integrity is not just one more character trait. Integrity defines the agent. As the etymology of the word shows, integrity is “integral” to the moral agent. It is integrity that “integrates” all of a person’s moral traits. An airman’s integrity is his or her character. Staking out integrity as a core value makes character crucial to moral reasoning in the Air Force. In framing moral issues, it is not enough for airmen to ask about acts and outcomes. They must also consider their character, the kind of persons they ought to be. They must ask what their integrity requires and how their acts will affect their integrity.

**Service: The Act.** In morality’s structure as “someone doing something to someone,” the second dimension is the “doing something.” We can refer to this dimension as “the moral act.” It may be active or passive, an act or an omission. It may cause something to happen—for example, an airman strikes and destroys a target. Or the moral act may allow something to happen—for example, leaders allow an accident to occur by failing to restrain a pilot known for unsafe flying.

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**Understood in terms of morality’s “someone doing something to someone” structure, the core values are a comprehensive framework for moral reasoning.**

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Like the moral agent, the moral act also provides focus for a strategy for framing ethical issues. And like agent-focused theories, act-focused moral theories outline significant features of the moral terrain. They require us to ask what acts ought to be done or what acts ought not to be done. Act-focused theories ask, that is, whether the act itself is right or wrong. These theories hold that certain acts are morally right or wrong regardless of the agent’s intentions, the act’s consequences, or any other circumstances. For such theories, lying and slaveholding are inherently wrong regardless of motives or consequences. On this approach, a morally required act is required even if no particular benefit will result, and a morally prohibited act is prohibited even if little harm would result. According to this way of moral reasoning, it is simply wrong for an airman not to complete an item on a checklist—even if the airman knows the dereliction would not result in an accident or any other bad consequence. Thus, act-focused moral theories are usually “deontological” because they evaluate acts, as well as persons and results, in terms of duty. The moral agent has a duty to perform morally required acts and a duty not to commit morally prohibited acts. This familiar and forceful way of thinking about morality is as old as the Ten Commandments. Immanuel Kant’s “categorical imperative” is the best known and most powerful philosophy of duty.<sup>14</sup> Because of their strong sense of duty for duty’s sake, airmen understand that the act-focused approach to moral reasoning is just as in-

dispensable in framing moral issues as the agent-focused approach.

The core value of “service before self” points directly to the moral act—to the airman’s duty. Service describes what the moral agent does. Service is an act done at the direction of and for a superior. It is an act done out of a duty owed to a superior and without regard for the agent’s personal interests. The superior for whom an airman performs a duty is someone in the chain of command to whom the airman owes obedience. In more general terms, however, the superior whom the airman serves is also the airman’s organization, the Air Force as a whole, and the nation. Still more generally, the superior is simply duty itself. Service is performing a moral act for the sake of duty. In this way, service is not just a feature the moral act might have. It is the defining feature of the moral act understood as duty. Identifying service as a core value makes the moral act—the moral agent’s duty—crucial to moral reasoning in the Air Force. In framing moral issues, it is not enough for airmen to consider their own integrity or their acts’ outcomes. They must also ask what their moral duties are under the circumstances, what acts are morally right or wrong. They must ask, that is, what service requires of them.

**Excellence: The Outcome.** In morality’s structure as “someone doing something to someone,” the third dimension is the someone affected by the moral agent’s act. This someone may be a person or a group of persons, and it may be or include the moral agent himself or herself.<sup>15</sup> We can refer to the effects of the moral agent’s act as “the moral outcome.” The moral outcome includes the immediate and the long-term consequences of an act, the direct and indirect consequences, and the intended and the unintended consequences. It is, for example, the neutralization of a target struck by an airman, the contribution of that sortie to the overall strategy, and the unintended collateral damage caused by the strike. The

moral outcome is simply what happens to persons because of the moral agent’s act.

Like the moral agent and the moral act, the moral outcome also focuses a strategy for framing ethical issues. Outcome-focused moral theories chart significant features of the moral terrain by asking what results ought to be attained and what results ought to be avoided. These theories consider whether or not the consequences of an act are morally desirable, and so these theories gauge moral worth on the basis of what an act achieves in actual benefits and harms to persons. According to these theories, certain outcomes—overall human happiness, for example—are morally more desirable than others. Moral worth depends more on achieving those outcomes than on the agent’s intentions or the morality of the means taken to produce the outcome. On this approach, lying and slaveholding are wrong because the harm they cause outweighs any benefits they produce. Outcome-focused theories are typically “utilitarian” because they evaluate character and acts by reference to their utility for achieving morally desirable outcomes. Some variants of this approach hold that what really matters is not the outcome of a particular act, but rather the outcome of following the rule prescribing that act. In either case, however, it is still the “bottom line” that counts. This is a persuasive way of thinking about morality, and many find it hard to imagine how to evaluate character traits or acts except in terms of the real-world consequences of those traits and acts. John Stuart Mill’s “greatest happiness principle”—that acts are right to the extent they maximize happiness—is the classic outcome-focused theory.<sup>16</sup> Because of their strong sense of mission and getting the job done, the outcome-focused approach to moral reasoning is as attractive to airmen and as effective for them in framing moral issues as the act-focused and agent-focused approaches. The core value of “excellence in all we do” points directly to the moral outcome—to the airman’s mission. Just as integrity characterizes the moral agent and

service characterizes the moral act, excellence characterizes the moral outcome. To the extent that a person's moral responsibility is to optimize morally desirable results, excellence is the morally required outcome. In this way, excellence is not just one more feature of what a person does. It is the defining feature of the morally expected outcome. It describes the level of success expected of the moral agent in producing an outcome—and for the airman the outcome that matters is the mission. Excellence is producing excellent results in carrying out the mission. Identifying excellence as a core value makes the moral outcome—the results the airman achieves—crucial to moral reasoning in the Air Force. In framing moral issues, it is not enough for airmen to consider their integrity or their duties. They must also consider the results they are morally expected to achieve in getting the job done. They must ask, that is, how to accomplish their mission with excellence.

#### **The Core Values as a Framework for Moral Reasoning**

Understood in terms of morality's "someone doing something to someone" structure, the core values are a comprehensive framework for moral reasoning. All of the core values, and only these three, are needed to frame moral issues. They are a map to any situation in which airmen plan what to do, carry out an operation, or draw "lessons learned." Integrity, service, and excellence name and link together all dimensions of the structure of morality—agent, act, and duty. And so they in effect activate all strategies for moral reasoning.

This explains why airmen must keep all three core values in sight. Agent, act, and outcome are inextricably tied together. Many mistakes in ethical theories and in practical moral reasoning result from reducing all of morality to a single dimension and claiming that dimension is the "foundation" of all morality.<sup>17</sup> Some agent-focused

theories attempt to reduce act and outcome to aspects of character. A narcissistic focus on character will, however, invite some to excuse themselves from moral rules. They might reason: "I am a person of integrity, and so, by definition, I am right and rules others need to distinguish right and wrong don't apply to me." Some act-focused theories devalue character and consequences by insisting that there is moral worth only in doing the right thing. But a sense of duty that is limited to unthinking obedience to Air Force instructions will too readily divert airmen from character development and from finding ways to improve Air Force practices. Similarly, some outcome-focused theories see little value in character or in moral acts except to the extent that they produce results. There is some reason to worry that the Air Force officer and enlisted evaluation systems may contribute to this mistake. By focusing almost exclusively on "mission impact" and "performance," performance reports may cause airmen to undervalue character and to think too little about the means they use to achieve mission impact. The core values can prevent all these mistakes. The framework of integrity, service, and excellence allows—indeed requires—the airman to keep in balance the entire structure of morality—agent, act, and outcome.

It is for this reason that the Air Force's core values, understood as a framework for moral reasoning, cannot be a short-lived management program. Any plan for moral reasoning—in or out of the Air Force—will look something like the Air Force core values if it takes all of morality into account. Management styles (and ethical theories, for that matter) come and go. But the structure of morality and the strategies for moral reasoning based on it will not. The Air Force could call the framework's parts something other than "core values." The Air Force could use different labels for its core values—"honor," "duty," and "country," for example, come close to the same thing.<sup>18</sup> Whatever labels the Air Force uses, however, there will be this three-part framework of



“values” that are “core” for thinking through ethical issues. Some airmen may question whether organizational core values are a fashionable management gimmick, but because the Air Force core values express the entire structure of morality, they have every reason to commit themselves to them.

Taking the core values as a framework for moral reasoning also answers the doubt that the core values are not particularly appropriate to the Air Force or to military professionals. As a framework reflecting morality’s structure, the core values are not unique to the Air Force—nor are they intended to be. Anyone could profitably take them as a plan for moral reasoning. It is the Air Force’s “core competencies” that describe its singular strengths. The core values show airmen how to develop and employ those competencies ethically. Reflecting the entire domain of morality, the core values are altogether appropriate for airmen of a nation committed to preparing for, waging, and winning its wars lawfully and ethically.

Another way of putting this is to say that it is airmen who make the core values appropriate to the Air Force. The Air Force’s core values define airmen. Integrity defines who airmen should be, service defines what they should do, and excellence defines what they should achieve. But that is only half the story: airmen also define the core values. The core values do not themselves frame ethical issues. Airmen do that—using the core values. In many cases, airmen face multiple ethical demands. The toughest ethical choice airmen face is not telling right from wrong. Airmen know the difference between right and wrong. The toughest ethical challenges are balancing complementary and sometimes competing values.<sup>19</sup> It is often a challenge to balance the demands of being a morally good person doing morally right acts to achieve morally desirable outcomes. This is so for anyone, but especially true for airmen in the “fog” and “friction” of preparing for and waging war. Airmen must use the core values to put these complementary demands into balance

for themselves and the Air Force. In that sense, airmen executing the Air Force mission for the nation fill in the definitions of the core values and make them military values and Air Force values. They do so by discussing the core values, by using the core values to guide their decision making, and by putting the core values into action. In the end, it is airmen who show what integrity, service, and excellence actually mean in the Air Force.

But how exactly can airmen use the core values not only to frame ethical issues, but also to resolve them and put their decisions into action? Taking the core values as a framework for moral reasoning dispels doubts that the core values are only an ephemeral slogan not especially appropriate to the military. This analysis, however, does not yet address the doubt that the core values are unrealistic and will not work in the real world. Nor does it show that the core values cannot in practice become good means for an evil end. To do that, it is necessary to show how the core values resolve ethical issues. And to do that, it is necessary to distinguish not only the dimensions of morality’s structure, but also the dimensions of its purpose. While the structure of morality is the core of moral reasoning, the purpose of morality provides values for moral reasoning.

## The Purpose of Morality and the Core Values

The purpose of morality, as I understand it, has two dimensions—regulation and inspiration. Values for resolving ethical questions line up along these two dimensions. This section outlines these two dimensions and then shows how each of the Air Force core values represents both regulation and inspiration. The result is to show that the core values point out for airmen standards and ideals—and that this accounts for their coherence.<sup>20</sup> This answers objections that the

core values are unrealistic and that they could become a good means to an evil end.

#### **Morality as Regulation and Inspiration**

The purpose of morality is to show us how to attain the goals of a moral life. Every human enterprise, including morality, has means and ends. Often the line between the two is blurred, and the end of one activity is usually the means for another. But the basic pattern is that every activity provides its means to reach its ends.<sup>21</sup> The purpose of any human enterprise thus has two dimensions: (1) the tools or means it provides for reaching goals and (2) those goals or ends. The athlete reaches for the goals of playing the game well and winning by using the sport's tools—by following the rules of the game and exploiting its techniques and tactics. The military strategist reaches for the goals of military victory and peace by using the instruments of war—by following rules governing the technology, principles, law, and morality of war. In every human activity, practitioners follow the activity's rules—not just for the sake of following the rules, but for reaching the activity's goals. The enterprise of leading a moral life has these same two dimensions. Morality has various and complex roles, but its purpose is just to provide the means and ends for a moral life. If morality's structure is someone-doing-something-to-someone, its purpose is to provide the means and ends for doing so morally.

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#### **Service means duty, and duty means respect and dignity.**

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Morality's means are moral standards that regulate us, and its ends are moral ideals that inspire us. Morality is a system of obligations and also a source of aspirations, and the Air Force core values are best under-

stood as representing both. Just as the core values require airmen to take into account all three dimensions of morality's structure, they should also be understood to point airmen toward both dimensions of morality's purpose.

The first dimension of morality's purpose is regulation. Morality does this through standards that impose moral obligations. Moral standards prescribe morally prohibited, permitted, or required character traits, acts, and outcomes. Airmen find these standards expressed in their law, regulations, policies, and customs—and in their core values. Obligatory standards maintain the military efficiency and the good order and discipline required to carry out the military's role. Because of the military's crucial role in national security, standards for airmen are more demanding than those outside the military. For example, it may be improper for others to be late for work or rude, but it is both a breach of morality and a criminal offense for a military member to be late or disrespectful. Moral standards are typically expressed in rules, and many of the rules impose a penalty for their violation. But whether or not a moral standard is formalized in a punitive rule, its violation is immoral, and the airman is accountable for the violation. When serving morality's regulatory function, the core values represent standards airmen must meet and answer for.

The second dimension of morality's purpose is inspiration. Morality does this through ideals that give us moral aspirations. If moral standards are "rules of the game" we must follow, moral ideals are the goals of "playing the game well and winning." Moral ideals portray character traits, acts, and achievements we should aspire to. For airmen, these ideals are implicit in their law, regulations, policies, and customs. They find them too in the examples set by their moral heroes and mentors. And they find them in their core values. These ideals show airmen how to use military efficiency and good order and discipline to triumph decisively and morally in carrying out

the military function. Just as military standards are more demanding than civilian standards, military ideals also demand extraordinary dedication and sacrifice. Persons outside the military who do not constantly strive for moral ideals usually do not imperil others. But airmen who do not constantly exert themselves to reach for the ideals of the military profession put national interests and even national survival at risk. While moral standards are usually expressed in rules, moral ideals are often expressed in stories of extraordinary virtue, acts, or accomplishments. Moral standards demand compliance, and we hold violators accountable. Moral ideals, however, inspire striving, and we admire those who thrive on their ideals. Reflecting morality's inspirational dimension, the core values are ideals airmen must constantly strive for.

In any particular case, the line between standard and ideal may be blurred. Indeed, the ideal in some circumstances may be the standard in others. In ethics, as elsewhere, "the nice to have" at one time and place may be "the bare minimum" at another. Still, one can distinguish standard and ideal in every ethical situation, and it is important to do so because confusing them will confuse moral reasoning. When airmen use the core values for moral reasoning, it is important they see that each of the core values expresses both obligations and aspirations. Although it is by no means a complete account of all the standards and ideals the core values represent, the following analysis indicates how the core values can both regulate and inspire.

**Integrity: Fortright Honesty and the Good Person**

As a moral standard, integrity ordinarily means forthright honesty. It means being the kind of person others can rely on for accurate, complete, and timely disclosure of facts. Leaders at every level in any organization require truthful reporting from subor-

dinates to make effective decisions. This is especially so for military leaders preparing for and waging war. Decisions about the procurement and employment of weapon systems, for example, must be based on full and exact reports about the systems' performance. Decisions taken "in the fog of war" are especially dependent on honest reporting about capabilities and operations. And if leaders at every level require truthful reporting from subordinates, subordinates also require honesty from their leaders. Good order and discipline and a high state of morale require complete confidence in leaders' words.

As a moral ideal, however, integrity demands more than being the kind of person who can be counted on to tell the truth. Integrity also demands that airmen be persons of good character. This, in fact, is the original sense of the word "integrity" as "integratedness," "wholeness," or "wholesomeness." It is a wholeness Plato described as a kind of harmony within a person among reason, spirit, and desire—a harmony possible only if reason is in command.<sup>22</sup> Airmen find this sense of integrity in the Air Force's "whole person concept." This does not mean "checking blocks" by obtaining academic degrees and doing volunteer work in the community. It means a continuing ethical responsibility to improve oneself. Integrity is an ethical responsibility to develop not just the virtue of truthfulness, but all the virtues. Carrying out the military role well requires not only that military professionals do their duty and have an impact on the mission, but also that they strive to be persons of good character. Integrity as honesty is "a rule of the game" from which airmen cannot deviate. Integrity as the whole person, on the other hand, is the goal of "playing well and winning" for which airmen must reach. They reach for this ideal not merely for the sake of playing well, but for the sake of being the air and space force needed to win the nation's wars. For the Air Force to perform its function

well, it is not enough that airmen be truthful. They must also be good persons.

**Service: Obedience and Respect for Human Dignity**

As a moral standard, service before self ordinarily means always doing one's duties whatever the cost to self. Service is unconditional obedience to lawful orders. In this sense, military service is unlike any other calling. Persons in other professions, in ordinary jobs, can opt out. They can quit. Doing their jobs is conditioned on their continued interest in doing so. Military professionals, however, cannot quit. It is a criminal offense for them to disobey orders or absent themselves without authority. Beyond this legal obligation, however, they are under an ethical obligation always to place military duties before all other interests. They must avoid even the appearance of a conflict between personal interests and military duties. National security requires this. Their promise to defend the nation imposes an ethical obligation to put military duties first.

As a moral ideal, however, service before self demands more than obedience. Service also demands that airmen always serve out of respect for human dignity. Service means duty, and duty means respect and dignity. The entire meaning of moral duty is respect for human dignity.<sup>23</sup> The only basis for any moral duty—the only basis for claiming that some acts are right and others are wrong regardless of their consequences—is protecting and promoting the moral worth of each individual. Or, as Kant put it, we must never use persons only as a means for achieving some end. Airmen must treat each other not only as instruments for getting the job done, but also as individuals unquestionably worthy of respect. And airmen may not limit their respect for human dignity to other airmen. Their respect for humanity must extend to all persons—to the people they defend, to their allies, and even

to their adversaries. Two axioms of the law and ethics of war—that we must discriminate between combatants and noncombatants when we apply military force and that our application of military force must be proportional to the military objective—are based on respect for human dignity. It is because of our respect for their dignity that our use of military force against innocents and noncombatants, as well as against combatants, is subject to the severest constraints. Even in war—or especially in war—airmen cannot lose sight of the moral worth of humanity. Many Air Force standards—targeting rules and rules prohibiting sexual harassment, for example—reflect respect for human dignity. Service as a moral ideal, however, requires not only that airmen comply with these specific standards, but also that they strive constantly to show respect for each individual's dignity. Service as obedience is “a rule of the game” from which airmen cannot deviate. Service as respect and dignity, on the other hand, is the goal of “playing well and winning” for which airmen must always strive. They strive for this ideal for the sake of serving as the air and space force needed to prepare for and to win the nation's wars lawfully and ethically. For the Air Force to perform its function well, it is not enough that airmen be dutiful. They must also act out of respect for human dignity.

**Excellence: Mission Accomplishment and Constant Improvement**

As a moral standard, excellence ordinarily means accomplishing the mission well. It means a determined focus on results—on getting the job done right the first time and on time. The military function is so important and so exacting that getting the job done demands more in the military than it does elsewhere. Mission failure in the military endangers national survival, and performing the military role requires capabilities and entails risks not found in other callings. For this reason, a standard of

excellence is needed merely to get the job done in the military. Getting by with a minimal level of effort often suffices outside the military, but excellence is the only standard for accomplishing the military mission. The airman's promise to defend the nation imposes an ethical obligation to use every effort to accomplish the mission.

As a moral ideal, however, excellence demands more than mission accomplishment. Excellence also demands that airmen constantly produce more and better results. This is the meaning of "excel"—to surpass, to go beyond what is expected. As an ideal, excellence means exceeding the demands of duty to achieve results in excess of "getting the job done." To remain the world's most respected air and space force, the Air Force must constantly improve, must constantly innovate. Merely maintaining today's standard, merely achieving today's mission requirements, puts the Air Force in danger of falling behind. Airmen must be adventurous in "reinventing" the Air Force to protect and promote the nation's interests. They must take risks, and must encourage others to take risks, to improve everything about the Air Force—its organization, its processes, its doctrine. Excellence as mission accomplishment is "a rule of the game" airmen must observe. Excellence as constant improvement, on the other hand, is the goal of "playing well and winning" for which airmen must continuously strive. They strive for this ideal for the sake of producing the air and space force needed to fight and win the nation's wars. For the Air Force to defend the nation, it is not enough that airmen accomplish the mission. They must also constantly find ways to excel, to go beyond mission accomplishment.

## The Core Values as Standards and Ideals

Looked at in terms of morality's purpose, the Air Force core values are moral

standards and also moral ideals. They point out obligations and aspirations as airmen think through any situation in which they make a decision, execute the decision, or learn lessons from an operation. They point out both forthright honesty and the whole person, both obedience and respect for human dignity, and both mission accomplishment and constant innovation.

This explains why airmen must understand their core values as both standards and ideals. Of course, the labels *honesty*, *whole person*, and so on do not capture all the obligations and aspirations the core values contain for airmen. They do, however, show that the distinction between obligations and aspirations is a tool airmen can use to resolve ethical issues. It is a tool airmen can use together with the distinctions the core values draw among agent, act, and outcome to frame ethical issues. In meeting the challenge to be a morally good person doing the morally right act and achieving the morally desirable outcome, airmen must consider the varying weights that the core values have as standards and ideals in any particular situation.

Many mistakes in ethics and in practical moral reasoning result from confusing obligation and aspiration. Both are necessary: without moral standards it is not possible to maintain order, and without moral ideals it is not possible to direct that order toward moral victories. But we should not confuse them by making compliance with standards optional or by making achieving ideals compulsory. We admire and praise persons who embody moral ideals. We do not, however, praise them for observing standards. Truthfulness, obedience, and mission accomplishment are just what the Air Force expects. On the other hand, while we blame persons for their violations of standards, we don't blame them for their shortfalls in reaching for ideals. This explains some of the confusion about "the one-mistake Air Force." Airmen must be held to account for violating the Air Force standards expressed in the core values. But "accountability" misses the

point in talking about the ideals expressed in the core values. Violations of Air Force standards are a kind of mistake, often a criminal mistake. Falling short of Air Force ideals may also be a kind of mistake, but a very different kind. For example, mistakes made in seeking to improve the Air Force are often the results of risks airmen should take in striving for the ideal of excellence. A fear of "accountability" should not deter airmen from searching for better ways to perform. But neither can the Air Force's willingness to accept such mistakes lead airmen to suppose that the Air Force condones violations of its standards.

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**If they [Air Force leaders] tolerate breaches of Air Force standards or if they selectively enforce them under a "double standard," there will be cynicism about the core values.**

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It is for this reason that the Air Force's core values, understood as obligation and aspiration, should not lead to hypocrisy or cynicism. The core values require airmen to meet Air Force standards, but they do not require airmen to be perfect. Air Force leaders must hold themselves and others accountable for failing to meet the Air Force standards expressed in the core values. If they tolerate breaches of Air Force standards or if they selectively enforce them under a "double standard," there will be cynicism about the core values. There is no reason, however, for cynicism about tolerating, learning from, and even encouraging those who strive for but fall short of the ideals expressed in the core values. It confuses the means and ends of morality to claim that the core values set unrealistically high standards that cannot be enforced. As standards of honesty, obedience, and mission accomplishment, the core values are not impossi-

bly high. Air Force standards are indeed extraordinarily high because the military mission is crucial to society. But airmen can and do meet these standards everyday, and Air Force leaders can and do enforce the standards. As moral ideals, however, the core values are, in a sense, impossibly high. The whole person concept, unwavering respect for human dignity, and constant improvement are high ideals—even impossibly high ideals in the sense that they always ask more of airmen. Ideals that did not always ask more would be worth little to the Air Force. Air Force ideals ask airmen to go "above and beyond" throughout their careers. Without the distinction between standards and ideals, airmen could mislead themselves into cynicism about the core values. With the distinction, however, they will hold themselves to the Air Force's high standards and drive themselves toward the Air Force's high ideals.

The most serious mistake about the core values—that they could become a good means to an evil end—also gives way when we see that the core values are both standards and ideals. The core values cannot be a good means to an evil end simply because they are not mere means. As standards and ideals, they are both means and ends. It is true that a person can be truthful, put duty before self, and achieve excellent results—all for the sake of aggression, genocide, or some other immoral purpose. Criminals, including war criminals, may observe an "honor among thieves" with standards of honest reporting, putting the organization ahead of self, and achieving results. No one, however, can pervert the standards of integrity, service, and excellence toward an evil end when these standards are linked to their corresponding moral ideals. Integrity understood as the good character of the whole person is entirely irreconcilable with honest reporting in support of an evil goal. Service understood as respect for the dignity of all persons in and out of the Air Force is completely inconsistent with wrongfully harming the innocent. Excellent but evil results

are not possible when excellence is understood as constant improvement of the air and space force needed to defend the nation morally and lawfully in pursuit of moral and lawful interests. A person of good character acting out of respect for human dignity to achieve the greatest benefits for the greatest number simply cannot serve an evil end. Understood as standards solidly linked to ideals, the core values do not limit the airman's ethical horizon to truthful reporting, working selflessly, and obtaining excellent results. On the contrary, they expand the ethical horizon to encompass inspiring and demanding ideals that ennoble airmen.

## Conclusion

The Air Force core values are wonderfully simple and forceful. Their significance is self-evident. Still, in order to prevent misunderstanding and misuse of the core values, it is important to explain the tremendous potential they hold for the Air Force. I have attempted to do that in terms of the structure and purpose of morality. By no means is this the only way to account for the core values. There are other philosophical accounts of the core values, and it would be instructive also to examine the core values from perspectives offered by law, history, behavioral sciences, management theory, political science, religion, and so on. In addition, showing one role for the core values in framing and resolving ethical issues is, of course, only a first step toward actually framing and resolving those issues. Nevertheless, an analysis driven by the

structure and the purpose of morality does turn out, I think, to be particularly useful for explaining the power of the core values.

Understood in terms of morality's structure and purpose, the core values are a comprehensive plan for framing ethical issues and also a coherent source of standards and ideals for resolving them. The core values encompass each dimension of morality's structure—agent, act, and outcome—and so map out the entire domain of moral reasoning. In this way, they represent core elements for framing ethical issues. Airmen frame ethical issues by asking how a person of integrity puts service before self to achieve excellent results in the Air Force. The core values also encompass both dimensions of morality's purpose—obligation and aspiration—and so stand for standards and ideals. They stand for integrity as both forthright honesty and the good person, for service as both obedience to duty and respect for human dignity, and for excellence as both mission accomplishment and constant innovation. In this way, they represent values for resolving ethical issues. Airmen resolve ethical issues by adhering to the high standards for which they hold each other accountable in order to carry out the military role and also by striving for the demanding ideals that propel them to build the most respected air and space force. It must seem fantastic to claim that the Air Force core values can somehow contain all dimensions of morality. But the three phrases the Air Force uses to name its core values are meaningful enough for airmen to understand them just that way.□

## Notes

1. Two notes on terminology: (a) Although in some contexts it is useful to distinguish "ethics" and "morality" (and "ethical" and "moral"), I make no such distinction here. (b) The term airmen means everyone in the Air Force—officer, enlisted, and civilian at all levels. The roles of these three groups differ, as do the rules governing them; and so the detailed appli-

cation of the core values to them may also differ. But generally, there is no need to distinguish among them in explaining the core values.

2. One has only to search for "core values" on the Internet to raise the question of whether there is an organization that hasn't identified its core values.

3. "All good ideas eventually get oversold. The importance of a corporate vision and values is no exception. . . . The idea was—and is—right. . . . But we must acknowledge how quickly values can age, becoming hopelessly narrow, ludicrously ramified—and at odds with a shifting marketplace. Ironically, the more virtuous the value (service, people), the greater the chance of long-term perversion. Why? Because the 'better' the value, the more 'the establishment' tries to make sure that you adhere to it exactly (emphasis added)." Tom Peters, *Liberation Management: Necessary Disorganization for the Nanosecond Nineties* (New York: Knopf, 1992), 616.

4. For the Navy and the Marine Corps, the core values are honor, courage, and commitment. Until recently, the Army described its "ethos" as based on the values of duty, integrity, and selfless service; these values were in turn supported by the "professional qualities" of commitment, competence, candor, compassion, and courage. But in 1996, the Army identified seven core values: duty, integrity, loyalty, selfless service, honor, courage, and respect.

5. DOD Directive 5500.7-R, *Joint Ethics Regulation*, August 1993, paragraph 1-100.

6. DOD's 10 "primary ethical values" are: honesty, integrity, loyalty, accountability, fairness, caring, respect, promise keeping, responsible citizenship, and pursuit of excellence. DODD 5500.7-R, August 1993, paragraph 12-501. The *Joint Ethics Regulation* defines these values in terms of public service with no reference to war fighting. The *Joint Ethics Regulation* also provides a 10-step "ethical decision-making plan" (par. 12-601).

7. Himmler identified four "virtues of the SS-man"; he called them "the basis of this organization" and said they were of "decisive significance and importance." The four virtues were loyalty, obedience, bravery, and truthfulness. "Speech of the Reichsfuehrer—SS at the meeting of SS Major-Generals at Posen, October 4th, 1943," Document 1919-PS, *Nazi Conspiracy and Aggression*, vol. 4 (Washington, D.C.: Office of United States Chief of Counsel for Prosecution of Axis Criminality, 1946), 558-72.

8. "None of this should surprise us. After all, most mass killing has been in the service of rigid virtuous values. . . ." Peters, 616.

9. Numerous works in applied ethics put strategies of moral reasoning in three groups that approximate the three dimensions I identify here. For example, Abraham Edel, Elizabeth Flower, and Finbarr W. O'Connor describe three "families of concepts" we use to formulate ethical issues. They are "virtues and vices and the moral atmosphere," the "moral law: the straight and narrow path," and "the good: ends and means." *Critique of Applied Ethics: Reflections and Recommendations* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), 136-68. Rushworth M. Kidder describes "three principles for resolving" ethical dilemmas. They are: care-based thinking, rule-based thinking, and ends-based thinking. *How Good People Make Tough Choices* (New York: Morrow, 1995), 151-76. Christopher D. Stone finds in "the logics of moral discourse" a distinction between "moral grading" and "moral prescription." Grading concerns the evaluation of agents (persons and institutions) while prescription concerns their conduct. Within the logic of prescription, he finds a further distinction between systems that prescribe a single "maximand" (e.g., classic utilitarianism) and other systems (e.g., Kantianism). *Earth and Other Ethics: The Case for Moral Pluralism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 153-99.

10. "It is impossible to conceive anything at all in the world, or even out of it, which can be taken as good without qualification, except a good will. . . . A good will is not good because of what it effects or accomplishes—because of its fitness for attaining some proposed end: it is good through its willing alone, that is, good in itself" (emphasis added). Immanuel Kant,

*Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. H. J. Paton (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), 61-62.

11. In the *Apology*, Plato has Socrates explain why the unexamined life is not worthy of a human. The *Laches* is about courage, and the *Republic* is about justice in the individual and the state. A. E. Taylor, *Plato: The Man and His Work* (New York: The Humanities Press, 1937), passim.

12. *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Martin Ostwald (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Publishing, 1962), II.2 and 6.

13. William J. Bennett, ed., *The Book of Virtues: A Treasury of Great Moral Stories* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993).

14. "A categorical imperative would be one which represented an action as objectively necessary in itself apart from its relation to a further end. . . . There is therefore only a single categorical imperative and it is this: 'Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law'." Kant, 82, 88.

15. It is one of the more interesting tasks of moral philosophy to say which persons are morally relevant in assessing the outcome of an act. Do the "persons" we must take into account include future generations? Past generations? God? Nonhuman living things? The environment?

16. "The creed which accepts as the foundation of morals 'utility' or the 'greatest happiness principle' holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness; wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness." John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1957), 10.

17. It is when this happens that "the structures known as ethical theories are more threats to moral sanity and balance than instruments for their attainment. They have these malign characteristics principally because they are, by nature, reductive. They restrict and warp moral reflection by their insistence that moral considerations are related in some hierarchical order." Edmund L. Pincoffs, *Quandaries and Virtues: Against Reductivism in Ethics* (Lawrence, Kans.: University Press of Kansas, 1986), 2.

18. Some other well-known triads of values also come close to the same thing. For example, it does not seem too much of a stretch to suggest that "faith" describes the kind of person the moral agent should be, "charity" describes what the moral agent should do, and "hope" refers to the outcomes the moral agent strives to achieve.

19. "When good people encounter tough choices, it is rarely because they're facing a moral temptation. . . . The really tough choices . . . don't center upon right versus wrong. They involve right versus right. They are genuine dilemmas precisely because each side is firmly rooted in one of our basic, core values." Kidder, 17-18. This is the theme too of W. D. Ross's theory "that there are these various and often conflicting types of prima facie duty." *The Right and the Good* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1930), 16-47.

20. Most moral theories rely to some degree on a distinction approximating the one drawn here between standards and ideals. Kant's distinction between "perfect" and "imperfect" duties is one example. Kant, 89-91. Other examples include Lon Fuller, who distinguishes "the morality of duty" and "the morality of aspiration." *The Morality of Law*, rev. ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969), 5-32. Bernard Gert points out: "Although the moral rules are the most important part of morality, they are not all of it. Morality consists not only of rules, but also of ideals." *Morality: A New Justification of the Moral Rules* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 160.

21. "Every art or applied science and every systematic investigation, and similarly every action and choice, seem to aim at some good." *Nicomachean Ethics*, 3, I.1, 1094a.

22. "And justice was in truth, it appears, something like this. It does not lie in a man's external actions, but in the way



he acts within himself, really concerned with himself and his inner parts. He does not allow each part of himself to perform the work of another, or the sections of his soul to meddle with one another. He orders what are in the true sense of the word his own affairs well; he is master of himself, puts things in order, is his own friend, harmonizes the three parts . . . He binds them all together, and himself from a plurality becomes a

unity." Plato's *Republic*, trans. G. M. A. Grube (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1974), 107 (443d-e).

23. That is what Kant showed in formulating the categorical imperative first in terms of "universal law" and then in terms of the "end in itself." The second formulation of the categorical imperative is: "Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end." Kant, 96.

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**Official manuals, by the nature of their compilation, are merely registers of prevailing practice, not the log-books of a scientific study of war.**

—B. H. Liddell Hart, 1944