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Military virtues and contemporary challenges: Respect as a military virtue in Afghanistan

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Soldiers and respect - introductory case

This happened to a task group of ISAF soldiers and lower rank officers (hereafter soldiers) in Afghanistan at the very beginning of the ISAF mission. Their mission was to cover an information gap along a route where ISAF forces were to make important movements with personnel and equipment into new territory. A group of twenty to thirty mujahedeen soldiers dominated the route. They were heavily armed and controlled checkpoints where they claimed tax from locals and transport companies. There were reports of kidnappings, but otherwise little was known about the group's loyalty, intentions, activity and conduct at the checkpoints. Their view on ISAF was not known, and there was uncertainty as to whether one could expect cooperation on security or whether the group itself represented a security threat to ISAF. The main effort for the ISAF soldiers had to be put into building confidence between themselves and the mujahedeen group.

The ISAF group succeeded in getting an invitation to meet the leaders of the group. The meeting was a success. The ISAF soldiers had brought halal meat which was shared, the mujahedeen men were positively curious about the soldiers, the atmosphere was good, and the ISAF soldiers spent the night. On this first meeting, the ISAF group noticed a boy about ten or twelve years old, who served them tea and food. They were thinking that he might be an

orphan of some relatives and that he was taken care of by the group, something which there was nothing unusual about.

Over time the ISAF soldiers and the mujahedeen leaders got to know each other well, so well that they were able to make jokes about sexuality and women. The boy appeared every time, and several times now dressed up in women's clothes and make up. He danced for the men, the rest of the time he sat in a corner rocking back and forth. The men made hints about "the little lady". At one point, after yet another dinner meeting, the mujahedeen men asked the ISAF soldiers whether they would like "to spend some time alone with the boy". There was no hint of joke in their offer, it was rather more like a vote of confidence. The ISAF soldiers somehow managed to get out of the situation without offending the men, but from that point it was clear to them that this young boy was more than a servant of the house. What was perceived by the ISAF soldiers as clear signs of psychological problems like the boy's stuttering, the catatonic rocking, no eye contact, his being introvert, the dressing up, the way he performed and the way he was treated and referred to by the mujahedeen men, made the soldiers conclude that the boy probably was being raped on a regular basis by one or more of these Afghan men¹.

From the point where the ISAF soldiers knew about the boy's situation they started to weigh the boy's future against the trust they had gained from the mujahedeens, and thereby the whole mission. The soldiers were seriously worried about the boy, and at the same time very conscious about the importance of the relation to the mujahedeen group, a relation that would be important for the security of the ISAF in the area.

¹The practice of "bacha bazi" – literally "boys for play" is an illegal, but common, practice in Afghanistan. These boys, orphans or boys from poor families, are sold to powerful men to dance/entertain and are often sexually abused by these men. See for instance <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/dancingboys/etc/synopsis.html> (20th April 2010, retrieved 22th June 2012) and <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/sep/12/dancing-boys-afghanistan> (retrieved 22th June 2012)

Introduction

One proposed question for discussion in the ISME Call for Papers is: “What are the appropriate character traits and virtues required in war?” The question fits my paper proposal well as its focus originates from an interest in core values established in the Norwegian Armed Forces’ *Value base* {Forsvaret, 2011 #52}. These values are ‘respect’, ‘responsibility’ and ‘courage’, and each of them comes with an interpretation or description of what is expected from soldiers and officersⁱ. The meaning of the core value ‘respect’ will be the focus of this paper. It seems obvious that being respectful or acting with respect is important in the multi-cultural context ISAF soldiers serve in as the above case illustrates, but how does respect really come across in the complex war reality of Afghanistan?

The objective of this paper is to use the case to show the complexity in the situation concerning respect, stressing the importance of soldiers being able to distinguish between types of respect. A discussion of military virtues in complex war contexts is part of an important broader discussion about what moral compromises we can accept on behalf of soldiers, where the relation between the individual and the system is only one of the issues at stake: the “soldier individual” in this case seems powerless versus the “soldier professional”ⁱⁱ. This overall question is too comprehensive for this paper, but important to mention as a backdrop for the question of respect in complex conflicts. I will now briefly place the relevance of virtues in the context of Afghanistan and then proceed to the question of respect from there.

Virtues, character traits, agency

As one of three overall approaches to ethics, virtue ethics emphasize the virtues, or moral character. Thus a virtue ethicist would say that one should help a person in need because that would be charitable or benevolent, not because it would produce the most happiness or because this would be in accordance with a moral rule {Hursthouse, 2012 #108}.ⁱⁱⁱ For a

discussion of military virtues in contemporary war scenarios, the possibility for agency guidance in virtue ethics is important. It has been argued that virtue ethics is agent based rather than agency based and therefore does not give any guidance for action. On the other hand it has also been argued that action guidance can be found in rules employing so-called virtue and vice terms: ‘Do what is honest/charitable;do not what is dishonest/uncharitable’, would be such a rule {Hursthouse, 2012 #108:7;Hursthouse, 1999 #110}. The soldiers in our case serve in a communicative context, which demands that they pass judgments. This is about the ability to be a moral decision maker in war (character), and also about the act of making moral judgments (agency). If it is true that ‘virtues involve rational reaction to situations’ {Thomas, 2013 #109} it is not enough just to possess certain character traits. Contemporary virtue ethicists would according to Alan Thomas say that virtues are ‘a foundation to start from’ {Thomas, 2013 #109}. There are no principles, just virtuous agents. In a situation one could therefore simply ask: ‘What would a virtuous person do, or advise you to do?’ {Thomas, 2013 #109}. Transferred to the field of military ethics, one could likewise ask: What would a virtuous soldier do?

What is truly virtuous is a question of debate. One can as virtue ethicist for instance draw a line between “full” or “perfect virtue” and continence or “strength of will”. One can fall short of perfect virtue for instance by lack of *phronesis* – moral or practical wisdom {Hursthouse, 2012 #108}. Indeed, *phronesis* seems to make sense to the idea of virtues in contemporary war situations, since soldiers will make judgments relying much on professional experience, let alone life experience in general. ^{iv}

Aristotle wrote about the importance of correct perception and right feeling. For a man to be virtuous in the sense of being brave, he distinguished brave soldiers from soldiers who seem brave because they have knowledge of certain facts or soldiers who are ‘sanguine’:

‘Professional soldiers turn cowards, however, when the danger puts too great a strain on them and they are inferior in numbers and equipment; for they are the first to fly, while citizen-forces die at their posts (...) [sanguine people] are [confident] because they think they are the strongest and can suffer nothing. (Drunken men also behave in this way; they become sanguine)’ {Aristotle, 350 B.C.E. #99: Book III}.

So, only the man fighting for the honor of the city, risking his life, with full knowledge of the situation and the risks, is virtuous. The drunken one and the mercenary are not. According to a more contemporary view “the virtuous agent” is “the agent with the virtues”, and part of an ordinary understanding of the virtue terms ‘each carries with it its own typical range of reasons for acting’ {Hursthouse, 2012 #108:9}. Thus the virtuous agent acts in the way he does because he believes that it would be more honest, charitable or beneficial. Now I would like to turn back to the complex Afghan context, the expectations laid down in the Norwegian Value base and the question of respect as an appropriate virtue in war today.

A complex context and the question of respect - Afghanistan

Contemporary wars are generally described as complex, a fact that is established through experience and extended research. For the soldier this means a more complex service, preparations and education. Afghanistan as an example can be seen as a “grey-zone” scenario between war and peace, where soldiers have to be prepared for an extreme variety of situations. Military leadership has to be measured according to “a complex reality, which is difficult to predict and understand; the unexpected is to be expected” (Forsvaret 2012:5). This means that the role of the soldier has several aspects, and typically has to fit the task of ‘winning hearts and minds’ as well as the task of the traditional fighting soldier. The morally challenging situations arise throughout a whole range of situations. What does it mean to be a respectful soldier in such a scenario? What would a respectful soldier do? Starting with the

Norwegian Armed Forces' expectations towards soldiers, the description of respect in the *Value base* gives several and potentially conflicting clues:

'Respect is not a right, but a moral duty, which is to be expressed in attitudes and agency. The basis for respect is self-respect. Self-respect gives the strength to stand up in difficult situations. Self-respect is strengthened by ethically conscious action patterns, by striving to do the right thing when doing ones best. In the Armed Forces we show respect for each other – between colleagues and between subordinates and superiors alike. In demanding situations where we live close together, respect for others will be put to the test. The basic ethical starting point in any case is to treat others the way you would expect others to treat you' {Forsvaret, 2011 #52:9;Forsvaret, 2011 #52}.

In addition to the references to a Kantian view of respect as a moral duty and likewise a rejection of respect as a right, it is interesting to note that respect according to the *Value base* is something to be expressed both in attitude and agency. Particularly relevant to our discussion is a sentence about expressions of respect in soldiers' meeting with civilians, parties and adversaries in military operations {Forsvaret, 2011 #52}. Generally, one should show respect for 'the basic values and cultural traditions of society' (Forsvaret 2011:9), a sentence which must be seen in relation to the *Value base* as starting from 'the historical and cultural basic values of Norway, which are expressed in the Christian and humanistic tradition of society' {Forsvaret, 2011 #52:3}. So far, although parts of the description seem to have a view to the organizational and state sphere, the red thread seems to be *respect for persons*. It is not quite clear what this respect for persons means, other than implied by the Kantian approach of treating others as you would expect others to treat you. For our discussion it is relevant to look at respect for persons as persons on the one hand and respect for persons as members of a collective on the other. There is a tension between the individual and the collective, which can be found in the dialogical context of developing identity. A

fundamental dialogical character of human life is what connects identity and recognition, a point Charles Taylor made in his essay “The Politics of Recognition”. This means that in our process of defining ourselves we acquire the languages we need through interaction with others who matter to us {Taylor, 1994 #105}. In the present case we can talk both about individual identity as well as collective identity as a point of departure for respect. The relation between these two identity concepts and how that relation affects respect for persons and different cultures is a point I will return to.

Turning again to the Norwegian Value base an important type of respect expressed here is *respect for authority*: ‘personnel in the Armed Forces should show respect for decisions and missions. Once a decision is made and a task is given, we stay loyal to the decision and execute the task in the best manner possible’ {Forsvaret, 2011 #52:9}. At the same time it is stated that superiors should ‘actively take into consideration advice and suggestions from subordinates and from different parts of the organization’ {Forsvaret, 2011 #52:9}. This means that service men and women have some individual room of expression within the frames of the profession.

The different types of respect displayed in the *Value base*, imply a confidence in soldiers’ ability to handle them all. Different types will get into conflict with each other in practical situations, and respect does not mean the same in all cultures, which means that the soldiers need knowledge about the other culture(s) to navigate respect. They also need to be clear about cultural relativism: What actions are due to culture and worthy of respect, and what actions are not. Concerning our case, we can start with the kind of respect which is said to be owed to all persons and which has been classified as *recognition respect* {Darwall, 1977 #101}.

Recognition respect is respect for a person just by virtue of a person being a person. In our case all parties should be subject to such respect. As an expression of attitude recognition respect means ‘giving appropriate weight to the fact that he or she is a person by being willing to constrain one’s behavior in ways required by that fact’ {Darwall, 1977 #101:45}. In one way this is exactly what we see the soldiers doing vis-à-vis the mujahedeen – they constrain themselves in their ways of behaving. That said, recognition respect may be only part of – and the less important of – the reason why the soldiers display an apparent respect for the mujahedeen. Respect for authority is presumably just as important in explaining their behavior. Authority and respect are linked by the idea that authority is something that must be reckoned with. Bird has suggested criteria for what it takes for something to be “reckon-worthy”, that is exerting ‘an independent and recognizable normative force with which deliberating agents must “reckon” {Bird, 2004 #100:212}. Bird’s example is directly transferable to our case: ‘A valid command issued by an authority is not simply something I can dismiss as of no importance – I must recognize the claim it makes upon me and reckon with it, even if I decide eventually to disobey’ {Bird, 2004 #100:213}. An interesting point is that there is a link back to Kant. Bird points out that Kant’s view of persons as self-legislators ‘just is to recognize a kind of authority that they bear’ {Bird, 2004 #100:213}. For the soldiers in our case such an interpretation would mean that there is a kind of tension between the soldiers’ status as authorities in deliberating about what to do on the one hand and the respect for authority that is imposed by the system on the other.

Respect for cultural differences, which is not specified in the *Value base*, yet implied in the respect for people that soldiers meet in military operations, is central to our case. Much of the challenges soldiers face in Afghanistan is related to cultural differences between their own Norwegian background and Afghan culture, as well as differences internally in ISAF and in

relation to different governmental and non-governmental parties in Afghanistan. How are differences in culture important for respect in this case?

Keeping “dancing boys” is indeed a crime by Afghan law {Observer, 2013 #112}, but difference in culture might for one thing be displayed in the parties’ relation to respect for authority. While the soldiers respect the authority in military orders and tasks, the mujahedeen do not respect the authority in law. Whether lack of respect for authority on the mujahedeen’s part can be ascribed to cultural differences depends on how comprehensive the concept of culture is. Culture generally is related to collective identity, so I would like to pause here at the relation between individual identity and collective identity and how that relation affects the question of respect.

How can we talk about one, unified Afghan culture in Afghanistan? The ISAF is officially invited by the Afghan government to establish security, to protect the Afghan people, but who are the Afghan people, including their culture? There is no easy or short answer, because the Afghan state is a conglomerate of collective identities and cultures. So what about culture do we ask the soldiers to respect? Is there anything unifying that defines what is Afghan culture? To be brutal and blunt – is it part of Afghan *culture* to treat children like objects in the way the mujahedeen men in our case do? If individual identity is developed in a dialogical process, collective identity would not be less so, and in our case the collective identity of the mujahedeen is probably developed strongly within categories of ethnicity or family tree, and at best is only partly related to an “Afghan” perspective. The persons within these structures would then have a way of life defined by the same structures. This is about how individual identity is related to collective identities in discussions about recognition (respect), a question that K. Anthony Appiah has raised {Appiah, 1994 #111}. Appiah is puzzled by the apparent importance of the individual and authentic self on the one hand and the use of collective

language in discussions about recognition, where the individual is defined according to categories of gender, ethnicity, nationality, etc. on the other.

If it is hard to see where identity as individual and authentic self ends and as member of group starts in some cases it is still hard to see – or accept - that abuse of children should be part of any collective's culture. The acts towards the boy in this specific case can possibly be explained by internal power relations, group dynamics and psychology, and they seem to be more like a practice by a group – although it takes each of the complicit individuals to make it happen.

If we extend the practice of this particular group of men to a practice common amongst former warlords and rich businessmen in Northern Afghanistan, does it make any difference? Whatever the size and form of a collective in society, if individual identity is subordinate to collective identity and its culture, then it is probably difficult for the individual in that culture to see the distinction between individual identity and collective identity. For bystanders to the culture it is still possible to see the distinction. When it comes to how the soldiers should approach differences in culture, I note how Taylor argues that culture is not relative:

“It makes sense to demand as a matter of right that we approach the study of certain cultures with a presumption of their value...but it can't make sense to demand as a matter of right that we come up with a final concluding judgment that their value is great, or equal to others' {Taylor, 1994 #105:68-69}.

The word culture itself usually describes characteristics of human activity, often in positive terms, or for instance behavior or beliefs characterizing a group in general. Without going deeper into the discussion of what culture is, there is enough evidence in the case to say that the bacha bazi practice is unacceptable. It's enough to look to the Children's Convention of the Human Rights, which both Norway and Afghanistan have signed and ratified. What we

see is violations of foundational human rights. If we use culture as an argument, we disguise the problem, which is a moral mistake with possible demoralization as a result. The more challenging it is to respect the individual mujahedeen who is part of it, and the more pressing it is to get across the complexity and clarify what respect means. The soldiers have to see the difference between unacceptable individual or group acts and the rest of the culture these individuals otherwise represent. Let us return to the concept of recognition respect in the case.

From the soldiers' point of view the mujahedeen's abuse of the boy is not only a crime, it is a foundational disrespect for the boy as an autonomous person. The boy is treated like an object and gets no recognition, a fact that the soldiers are brutally confronted with - first as observers and then when they are offered to spend some time alone with him. For the soldiers facing the mujahedeen in an atmosphere of co-operation, there is a tension between two main kinds of respect: first - the respect for activities, practices and ways of viewing the world etc., and second - the respect for the unique identities of each individual {Gutmann, 1994 #102}.

Habermas questions whether the first kind of respect follows from the second or whether these two kinds of respect necessarily will come into conflict with one another {Habermas, 1994 #103}. The soldiers have apparently no reason not to respect Afghan culture as such, but what about respect for the mujahedeen men as individuals? Is it possible to respect persons who abuse a child in the first place?

Darwall has drawn a distinction between recognition respect and *appraisal respect* {Darwall, 1977 #101} that might help in clarifying respect for persons in the case. Appraisal respect is the appraisal of certain individual characteristics of a person, and it does not expect or require any special kind of behavior. Following Darwall there is therefore 'no puzzle at all thinking both that all persons are entitled to respect just by virtue of their being persons and that persons are deserving of more or less respect by virtue of their personal characteristics' {Darwall, 1977 #101:46}. The soldiers may therefore despise the inclination these

mujahedeen men have towards child abuse as much as they like, but they should according to Darwall's distinction retain the respect for each person as a person. It is however not given that the soldiers under the circumstances are able to act accordingly, which is another important discussion for another paper. The fact is that they don't act out of respect for the boy, and even if the soldiers act in a respectful manner towards the mujahedeen, they don't really respect them. Instead I argue that they tolerate, which is different. The distinction between respect and toleration is important in this case, and the next point I will share.

Let alone that there are positive and negative definitions of toleration, in his essay "On Human Diversity and The Limits of Toleration" Adeno Addis writes something that gives a clue to the distinction between respect and toleration:

'To tolerate is not necessarily to respect, we could call this paternalistic toleration, which is based on *indifference* or accompanied by *non-respect*. On the other hand, to treat individuals with "equal respect" entails, at least partly, respecting their traditions and cultures, the forms of life which give depth and coherence to their identities, which means to *engage* those lives, not simply to tolerate them as strange and alien' {Addis, 1997 #98:121}.

Even if Addis's description is meant for a different discussion, I find some useful perspective here for my purpose, the main point being: Respect is everything but indifference, but indifference is what toleration can be. Addis writes that "equal respect" means engaging in other people's life. This could mean to engage in dialogue with the men, confronting them, telling them that what they do is unacceptable. The soldiers would do that because they reckon that the men are just as fit as themselves to engage in dialogue and prepared as themselves to meet other people's opinions. This would be in line with Addis thoughts about respecting other people as equals. But here such a respect competes with respect for role obligations in a situation where the soldiers have to make decisions under great uncertainty,

and where they consider the security risk as too high. They end up not taking that risk and choose to tolerate.

The demand for recognition is also often referred to as based on the ideal of human dignity. It has been argued that this demand points in at least two directions: ‘1) The protection of the basic rights of individuals as human beings; (and) 2) The acknowledgement of the particular needs of individuals as members of specific cultural groups’ {Taylor, 1994 #105}. As previously stated the first direction is recognition respect. The challenge is that the boy in our case too has a demand for recognition, in fact – as a child he has a right to special protection according to the human rights, which the mujahedeen men violate, and while the soldiers’ discussing the problem reflects a respect, they fail in acting out of respect for the boy on the one side and the mujahedeen on the other.

The point I want to make is that some dilemmas seem to be unsolvable, yet they need to be addressed in theoretical discussions about what we should and should not display concerning respect and toleration.

Conclusion

The worries I have raised in this paper emphasize the importance of character and virtue in war today. The soldiers’ virtue of respect in this case is about being able to make important distinctions between respect for persons and respect for culture in general on the one hand and unacceptable actions and practices on the other.

The case reveals the known challenge of cultural relativism to any ethical approach.

In general, there are certain actions that are condemnable independently of culture, and in this case in particular culture is not an argument for tolerating the bacha baza practice, because bacha baza is just that – an intolerable practice. Thus there will be a tension between generally respecting other human beings and their culture on the one hand and respecting the actions of

the other party *per se* on the other. A virtuous soldier in this context would be a soldier who, with the right attitudes and *phronesis*, is able to judge acts before culture.

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ⁱ For simplicity I will use 'soldiers' for both officers and soldiers, since the core values are applicable to all individuals of all ranks in the Norwegian Armed Forces, and since leadership is essential to soldiers and officers alike.

ⁱⁱ By ‘soldier individual’ I emphasize the individual and his individual moral judgments that may be more universal than judgments more dependent on the role of the soldier. By ‘soldier professional’ I emphasize the profession, the role, which puts certain restraints on the individual’s moral choice.

ⁱⁱⁱ The three central concepts to virtue ethics with roots in ancient Greek: *arête* (excellence or virtue), *phronesis* (practical or moral wisdom) and *eudaimonia* (happiness or flourishing), are important concepts to look into in order to understand where virtue ethics come from. For the purpose of this paper I will not go into the discussion of these concepts themselves.

^{iv} The relevance of practical wisdom in terms of life experience is for instance partly the reason why there is a lower age limit for service in certain kinds of military units.