Responsibility Towards Myself and my Conscience: Leadership Responsibility between Ethics and Purpose

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Paris – Shrivenham – Amsterdam – Koblenz. All the people of Koblenz will be extremely flattered to see their city as a meeting place, as part of a tradition, as the venue for a conference that has dedicated itself to special topics and that brings together a group of people – soldiers and civilians – to address ethical issues associated with the military profession.

It is a pleasure for me, as the host of this year’s conference, to welcome you here to the Zentrum Innere Führung (Leadership Development and Civic Education Centre of the Bundeswehr).

We see your attendance of the conference as an honour and a distinction and will try to make your stay here as pleasant and as interesting as possible.

The header of the 4th Annual Euro-ISME Conference is: Didactics of Military Ethics “From Theory to Practice”. I have been asked to deliver the opening presentation. I am highly grateful to the organisers, notably Brigadier General Royal, for the choice of the topic for this year. I believe it is important, indeed indispensable, for moral and philosophical aspects of ethics and military ethics to be addressed academically.

After being a soldier for more than 37 years and holding an extremely wide range of posts, I have seen many, many examples of situations in which ethical decisions in the military profession have been guided above all by purposive rationality. Maybe it is due to my father – on account of what he had experienced – having urged me at a very early stage not to turn a blind eye to facts. And certainly not if I actually wanted to look at them more closely. Maybe this appeal to me by my father to always want to keep sight of reality played a part in my taking up the career I have. Whatever the case may be, I realized during my education that it is important to know what is right and what is wrong. It was a learning process I went through – sometimes by means of trial and error.

In retrospect, I would say it is very important that I had my own basic ethics to guide me when I became a soldier. The first time I entered a barracks – it was in the mid-1970s –, I had a number of moral standards and values in my head from civilian life, and from the very first minute onwards, I asked myself whether and, if so, how people can manage in a military community with ideas
about morals and morality that are exclusively civilian in nature. I learnt quickly, very quickly that ethics based on principles, an unshakable belief in theoretical, mostly inflated standards of human action, at times make it difficult to live with others in a barracks in a way that is suitable for everyday life. To put it more simply, I knew very soon that I was not without sin. Why should the other soldiers I then lived with be?

As early as my days as a platoon leader – responsible for around 30 mostly young men who were serving their country as conscripts, some with great keenness, others with less –, I sensed the conflict that existed between the temptation to implement ideals in real life and what a military organization really did in the Cold War. Almost every day, I was confronted with questions and problems that my mind could not dismiss – even as part of a team, although they arose on the borderline of moral action. Initiation rituals involving the consumption of large amounts of alcohol are just one example of conflicts of this kind.

In my view, military ethics – more than any other area of ethics – concern the depths of what it means to be human – beyond all the links between developments that can be proven scientifically. My many years of experience of life, my profession and military operations have shown me that it does not help me to simply follow pre-set recipes and argue over philosophical concepts in complex situations that are difficult for humans to handle.

On the contrary, in difficult situations, for instance, when decisions concerning the Afghanistan conflict had to be made, I have lived from the inner disposition I brought with me. You will note that I say brought with me, for it developed without my having occupied myself with these topics ethically or philosophically in the true sense of the words. I particularly felt that I was expected to act morally while on operational deployment. More intuitively than knowingly, I tried to find out how I could do what was morally good, right and proper. I often succeeded, but sometimes I didn’t. The difference in perception does not permit a final judgement to be made. But it was often more a case of trial and error on my own part than the result of conveyance from others.

Principles for a leadership or life style that is as “moral” as possible have been important, but they have not been the sole “source of strength” for what I have thought and done as a soldier and a human being. The search for compromises and the manner in which I have handled and used things that are all too human have frequently prevented me from becoming too theoretical in my ideas. This is why in my concept of leadership as a leader, educator and trainer, I have not primarily strove to find virtually absolutely binding solutions for ethical issues.