Chapter 14

Why People Make the Wrong Choices – The Psychology of Ethical Failure*

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1.0 Part One – Introduction

1.1. Overview

This chapter examines the psychological dimensions of ethical decision making. Before launching into this subject however, I should first clarify what I mean by the terms ethics and ethical decision making. For my working definition of ethics, I agree with Louis Pojman that ethics is about right and wrong. As for what constitutes an ethical decision, I concur with Thomas Jones that any decision with the potential to result in harm or benefit for people is a decision that has ethical dimensions.

There are five parts to this chapter. Part One serves as an introduction, laying out the scope and intent of the chapter. Part Two presents a theoretical discussion of the cognitive and motivational processes that decision makers employ when they take ethical and unethical actions. This discussion revolves around two models of rational decision making. Rest’s four-component model of morality describes how sensitivity, judgment, motivation and character lead to ethical (and sometimes unethical) behaviour. A similar decision model developed by Latané and Darley explains the cognitive and motivational steps involved in deciding whether or not to help someone. Part Three of the chapter describes research from the field of person-environment psychology that shows how unethical behaviour is caused by personal dispositions such as moral-reasoning capacity and empathy, as well as situational factors like organiza-

* The terms ethics and morality are used interchangeability in this chapter; the word ethical means the same as the word moral, unethical is the same as immoral.


tional culture and ideological influences. Part Four examines several psychological processes that can interfere with the effective functioning of the cognitive and motivational mechanisms described in Part Two of the chapter. Often, these harmful processes are, in turn, influenced by the personal and situational factors described in Part Three. Part Five concludes with the argument that reducing ethical failure cannot be achieved by addressing only the shortcomings of individuals; environmental influences also play large part and leaders have a significant role to play in this area by fostering unit climates that encourage subordinates to make ethical choices.

The use of examples and scenarios is helpful when explaining ethical concepts, so this chapter contains a number of real life examples as well as a few fabricated vignettes. These scenarios vary in the ethical gravity they represent. This is done intentionally to show that unethical behaviour is not only the kind of ‘serious behaviour’ that leads to horrible consequences like the death of Shidane Arone at the hand of Canadian paratroopers in Somalia, but also that unethical behaviour can be trivial and banal, like inaccurate reporting in a readiness report, or giving a soldier an unfair load of unpleasant duties. Some of these examples may seem unimportant, but they are ethical issues, for they highlight distinctions between right and wrong, and they result in some harm or benefit to others.

1.2 Background

Few people outside military circles realize just how much latitude that soldiers, non-commissioned officers (NCOs), and officers have in the way they perform their duties and how much potential there is for individuals to do wrong. Military units are usually well disciplined because of the self-control of individual unit members and the organizational structure provided by unit leaders and military regulations. Nevertheless, there is plenty of opportunity for individual behavior to vary and not all soldiers make the right choices all the time. When soldiers make poor choices that impact adversely on others, they can be said to be unethical choices. When such wrong choices violate accepted professional military standards, they are said to be unprofessional choices, but many unprofessional choices in the military are also unethical choices because military decisions usually impact on people and ethics is a core element of professional military behaviour (see the Canadian Forces’ doctrinal publication Duty with Honour for more on the connection between ethics and military professionalism).

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8 The term soldier in this chapter refers to all military personnel, regardless of sex, rank, or service.
9 Canada, Department of National Defence, *Duty with Honour: The Profession of Arms in Canada* (Kingston, Ontario, Canada: Canadian Defence Academy – Canadian Forces Leadership Institute, 2003), pp. 30-34.