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VALUES AND THE PROFESSIONAL SOLDIER

by

JAMES L. NAREL

"I believe in UFOs."

"No you don't."

"What?"

"No you don't."

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying that you don't believe in UFOs."

"But I've just told you that I do."

"And I'm telling you that you do not."

What could be more exasperating than to have someone claim to know, better than we, what we believe? After all, our beliefs are the most personal things about us. Another person might claim to know that the subject of our belief is incorrect—for example, that UFOs do not exist—but it does not seem comprehensible that he or she could claim to know, better than we know ourselves, *what* we believe. Yet, at least in a sense, that is what this essay does. It is not an argument about UFOs, but about values, and it makes the claim, which may seem preposterous at first, that some people do not believe what they sincerely profess to believe concerning values. More particularly, it makes the claim that some people in the military do not believe what they profess about some ethical concepts relevant to their profession and, furthermore, that this confusion has important negative consequences.

Consider the following two assertions:

"I don't believe there is any ethical view that is more true, more accurate, or more valid than any other ethical view. Morality is dependent upon culture; what is right in one culture may be wrong in another, and vice versa. We usually end up professing the values of our particular society because we

have been taught to see these as 'right.' Had we been raised in a substantially different environment, our ideas about morality might bear little resemblance to the ones we now have. Therefore, who is to say which ethical system is best? One view is as good as another."

A second assertion: "All ethical claims are either meaningless or hypocritical because, in the final analysis, everyone does what is in his or her own best interest. However much we claim to be interested in the welfare of others, we always put ourselves first. We serve others only after our own needs have been satisfied, and then our 'unselfish' acts are really motivated by the desire to increase our own prestige or self-satisfaction or perhaps to alleviate feelings of guilt or indebtedness. Since this is a fact of human nature, any moral claim that urges us to act out of concern for others is a sham."

These two opinions are voiced frequently in discussions about values. The arguments have gained in popularity even though—or perhaps because—they reject traditional moral norms. The person who expresses one or the other view seems to imply that he has advanced beyond a blind acceptance of his society's customs and codes and is able to think about these concepts in a more objective way. Furthermore, the two views enjoy added prestige because they are "realistic." Their adherents seem courageously to have abandoned the quaint and comfortable tenets of tradition and to have faced the world as it really is.

There is a sad irony in all of this. It has nothing to do with the value (or lack of value)

of either view or with the increasing popularity of both. It is possible that one or the other is an accurate assessment of the true nature of morality, and the arguments do demonstrate a willingness to confront questions of value objectively. But many who voice the arguments have not examined them thoroughly. A precise and comprehensive investigation of the issues could uncover inconsistencies—not necessarily in the ethical views themselves (though that, too, is possible), but in the network of personal beliefs that includes these views. In other words, a person may conclude that, since one or the other argument sounds rational and acceptable, it must constitute his or her belief about the subject (we do tend to accept as true those propositions that appeal to our reason and involve no obvious flaw in logic). Yet that person may simultaneously hold other beliefs that contradict this one. For example, an individual who on one occasion maintains that one value system is as good as another may, at some other time, express the opinion that there is something inherently unjust about slavery. Obviously, both these beliefs cannot be consistently maintained since it is certainly possible to imagine a value system that finds slavery morally acceptable. Such a person, then, probably does not really believe that all value systems are of equal worth, even though he may sometimes think he does.

While it may be difficult to identify people who are willing to articulate a serious defense of slavery, many people in the military *are* ready to defend one of the two ethical views expressed above. Yet, in several ways, both these positions are inconsistent with the concept of the professional soldier. A person cannot consistently maintain either view and simultaneously be committed to the goals of the military profession. This is not quite as serious a problem as it may first appear because many of those people in uniform who find the views rational will, after study and reflection, find that the views are not *actually* part of their beliefs. The issue does have important ramifications, however, since continued confusion about the beliefs can lead to serious misunderstandings of, or misjudgments about, the profession.

The view that all moral systems are ultimately subjective is called relativism. The cliché “It’s all relative,” when used thoughtfully in a discussion of values, means that the speaker rejects the notion that there is some objective “ground” for morality. He recognizes that most people conduct their lives in accordance with some framework of values, but he maintains that the framework is itself the product of their environment and social conditioning. As a result, when other people claim a certain action is “right,” the relativist argues that they really mean that their particular culture approves of, and encourages, such behavior. If some other social group collectively disapproved, owing to its own cultural experience, the action would, in the relativist’s view, be *wrong* in that setting.

There is nothing logically inconsistent about such a view of morality. It does create the possibility of a particular act’s being both right and wrong at the same time, but this is not a contradiction. For a relativist the word “wrong” does not mean “violating an objectively true principle of morality”; it means, simply, “not acceptable within a particular social grouping.” But a person who claims to be a relativist, if he is to avoid inconsistency, must accept all the consequences that logically derive from this normative system. This means he must be willing to admit that no action can be held to be *objectively* wrong. Cruelly abusing helpless children, for example, cannot be judged as inherently wrong; it must be viewed simply as socially unacceptable in most

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cultures. Furthermore, if a culture were discovered in which child abuse was routinely practiced, the consistent relativist could make no adverse judgment. He would have to maintain that there is nothing objectively wrong with the attendant human suffering; it is merely a matter of cultural preference.

Now this is not what is believed by most people who entertain the notion that morality may be relative. More likely they believe that it is not right for one person or culture to impose its value system on another. "People should be allowed to do anything they choose as long as it doesn't hurt someone else. Live and let live!" This may be a comparatively liberal viewpoint but *it is not relativism*. Such a view does not claim that *all* values are subjective. It contends that some, perhaps many, are situation- or culture-dependent, but it accepts other values as universal. The live-and-let-live doctrine implies the right of individuals and cultures to be free of unwanted interference. It urges tolerance of diverse views. It assumes that human beings have inalienable rights and that their liberty ought not arbitrarily be curtailed.

But it might be asked whether this is not simply a semantic distinction. One may not be a relativist in the sense that it has been defined here, but if one is content to accept the values of others as being fine for them, aren't the practical consequences the same?

The distinction is real. If a person were a true relativist, he would have to admit that the values of his native culture are objectively no better and no worse than those of any other. Hence, his commitment to those values, if he felt any, could only be a matter of convenience or custom. On the other hand, the person who is committed to tolerance and respect for human rights sees these values as having objective validity. One can expect that such beliefs will influence his attitudes and behavior in a more profound way. He might be willing, for example, to accept inconvenience or even to endure danger or suffering in order to support his values.

It is difficult to imagine a thoroughgoing relativist as a dedicated military professional. A relativist might choose to engage in soldiering; indeed, he might find that the

military environment is more consistent with his tastes or preferences than is the civilian world. For example, he may enjoy engaging in adventurous, dangerous, or violent acts or may feel more secure operating in a rigidly structured social hierarchy. But are these the characteristics that define the military professional? While these attitudes might partially describe him, they might also characterize a mercenary or a uniformed bureaucrat. The concept of a professional typically involves something more, namely, binding oneself to particular *principles*. This is particularly true in America, where it is not to a person that the professional soldier swears his allegiance, nor is it a geographical area that he promises to protect when he takes his public oath. Support and defense of the Constitution requires fealty to the principles, to the values, proclaimed by that document. Would it be reasonable for the person who truly believes that one declaration of values is as good as another to promise to engage in brutal combat simply because one of these allegedly arbitrary value systems is threatened or endangered? A genuine relativist would have to forego such action.

And what about the egoist? Egoism is the claim that self-interest is the focus of all human action and that a moral system, if it is to have objective validity, must take this truth into account. Like relativism, the egoistic argument may be, but is not necessarily, a correct statement about the nature of morality. But some persons who see its claims as rational and compelling may not have made a careful study of egoism and may hold other moral views inconsistent with the egoist position. This would be true of the professional soldier who *thinks* he accepts egoism but who has not reconciled it with his commitment to military values.

Because so much of what any person routinely does is motivated by self-interest, it is easy to slide into an almost unquestioned acceptance of egoism. Choosing to put on one's shoes in the morning is a "selfish" act in the sense that the decision is made with little or no consideration of others. The same is true of one's decisions to bathe, eat,

exercise, and so on. What about holding the door for someone, or picking up another person's dropped parcel? Behavior that is seemingly other-directed can also be interpreted as having a selfish motive: following rules of social etiquette, for example, will likely secure similar treatment in return and will enhance the prestige of the polite person in the eyes of others. The argument can be extended to even the most dramatic actions, and persons who give up their lives for their comrades can be seen as doing so primarily in pursuit of an eternal reward or in a subconscious effort to alleviate personal guilt. It is man's nature to act in his own interest, the egoist claims; the dictum is universal and inexorable.

Now, this claim is not self-contradictory, and it cannot be disproven. It is not surprising, then, that many people who encounter the argument erroneously conclude that it is *necessarily* true. But an assertion that alien beings are observing mankind from another dimension is also irrefutable, since no evidence can be produced to show that it is false. One is not thereby compelled to accept the claim as true. Similarly, egoism constitutes one way of interpreting human behavior and, as a theory, it contains no absurdities or inherent contradictions. But the same can be said for many conflicting theories. Indeed, when measured against competing views, egoism is burdened in that its central tenet seems counterintuitive to most people. The egoistic argument hinges on the assertion that *all* (not simply "most") human actions are motivated by self-interest. If so much as a single event in all of human history was characterized by true selflessness, egoism would have to be considered invalid: observing that men are frequently selfish is far different from claiming they are always totally selfish, and that their nature requires them to be so. And, when one thinks about it, the argument for selfishness is not all that persuasive. It depends upon one's willingness to believe that even the most innocent act of human kindness is really determined by self-interest. Does one assist a passerby by retrieving his dropped parcel *in order* to feel good, or does one do it out of genuine

consideration for the other person and then feel good after the fact? The egoist seems to be arguing that one can never know one's own mind in matters like these; if one thinks his concern for others is genuine, he must allow this opinion to be overruled by an outside observer who claims to know more about the samaritan's motives than the samaritan does.

Though the egoist's claim is not necessarily false, neither is his theory nearly so compelling as it may initially appear. It may be that many people have been maintaining two contradictory views: that all actions must be selfish (because the egoist argument cannot be refuted), but that some actions are genuinely unselfish (because they clearly seem to be motivated by concern for others). The military professional who is convinced by the egoist has probably fallen into just this predicament. His professional commitment and many of the values he supports as a member of the military, however, are inconsistent with egoism.

Why couldn't an egoist logically be a career soldier? After all, the service does have its attractive features. Moved by personal desires for a secure job, a guaranteed income, early retirement, leadership opportunities, travel, and excitement, couldn't a person decide on a military career because it satisfied his own needs? Certainly. Without doubt, satisfying one's needs and otherwise serving one's self-interest are motives for virtually everyone choosing the service life. There is no denying that everyone is partially, and perhaps inescapably, motivated by self-interest. But could a person who is motivated *only* by self-interest pursue a military career? It is unlikely, although possible, that he could. Would such a person be a military professional? Decidedly not.

Once again one encounters the distinction between the professional and the person who soldiers only for pay. It is neither merely a semantic distinction nor a wholly arbitrary or subjective one. As the very name of the vocation implies, those who select the military *service* as a profession are placing themselves at the disposal of others. They are pledging to direct their efforts toward the

national, not their personal, welfare. They will routinely be expected to subordinate their own interests to those designated by someone else as being the interests of the unit or of the nation. Without doubt those broader interests will sometimes conflict with pure self-interest. In such circumstances one could hardly expect the egoist in uniform to act like a professional. Would it be reasonable to think that a person motivated solely by self-interest would unhesitatingly obey an order that places his life in extreme danger? Or that he would be the source of such an order himself? Or, in less dramatic circumstances, that he would render a report that reflected badly on his own performance? The motivation that characterizes professional behavior in the military is frequently antithetical to egoism.

This conclusion does not imply that there are numerous egoists in uniform who ought to change careers or, at least, admit that they are unprofessional. On the contrary, there are probably very few egoists in military ranks; but those ranks may contain many dedicated, self-sacrificing professionals who pay unwitting homage to an egoist perspective that does not accurately reflect their true values.

Are there any practical consequences to these conclusions or are the implications trivial? Although military officers may not recognize the contradiction between ethical relativism or egoism and the nature of the military profession, the consequences of holding inconsistent convictions are anything but trivial. Like so many other social institutions, the military profession suffers today from a spiritual malaise that undercuts our collective confidence, saps our energy, and produces a cynicism that seems to feed on itself. The problems may be due in no small part to confusion about values.

Several of the important values traditionally espoused in the military profession have already been identified in this essay. They include commitments to uphold national principles, subordination of personal interests, obedience, courage, and loyalty. But each of these is in conflict with

either relativism or egoism or both. What happens, then, when a person who thinks he is persuaded by the relativist or egoist argument attempts to commit himself to a profession that maintains the importance of values inconsistent with those theories? At best the confusion causes only a minor diminution of moral certainty. But all too likely the consequences will be more profound. For example, the profession urges us to be prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice in defense of the values articulated by Washington, Jefferson, and others. Yet relativism tells us that, from an objective standpoint, these cannot be shown to have any greater moral merit than the values held by King George III, Mussolini, or Joseph Stalin. And while our oath of office commits us to endure danger in order to protect others, egoism claims that human nature absolutely prohibits acts of genuine self-sacrifice. If we are confident that, put to the test, we could be counted upon to act in consonance with our professional values, we are probably implying that our belief in the relativist or egoist propositions is less enduring than our patriotic or professional devotion.

Beliefs to which we cling tightly in times of crisis, we often squander foolishly when faced with subtler challenges. How do we respond, for example, to a proffered assignment that probably will not promote our career? We may acknowledge that the position needs a competent individual, but we may also prefer and suggest that it be some *other* competent individual. At moments like these, how are we likely to regard the argument that, as professionals, we ought to subordinate our personal interests to the greater common good? As we deal with the problem, our confusion about egoism or relativism can have insidious consequences. Since we do not see our colleagues rushing to sacrifice themselves, we may conclude that the egoists have it right: people do not willfully act against their self-interest. Having arrived at such a conviction, we become less ready than ever to accept the task simply because it needs to be done, and we confront

a genuine conflict of beliefs. We continue to pay lip service to the profession's espoused values—in this case, call it self-sacrifice—but we are anything but convinced that self-sacrifice is actually practiced or even possible. The apparent norm—and thus the right action according to the relativist—tells us that we should not take the assignment. We convince ourselves that we cannot really be expected to acquire the virtue of self-sacrifice, and we become cynical as the virtue is preached by the hypocrites. The egoist prophecy of selfish behavior thus becomes self-fulfilled, and the most blatant forms of careerism can be rationalized as prudent and proper.

A clearer understanding of egoism and relativism will not, of course, cause careerism or other professional maladies to disappear. Such understanding can, however, reassure us that the values of the profession, the ones that may well have attracted us to service in the first place, are not illogical or unrealistic after all. We may come to doubt the opinion that all value systems are of equal merit. We may decide that a particular system may indeed be of superior worth. The result can be a renewed and heightened appreciation of the values contained in the Constitution we are pledged to defend. We may conclude as well that the egoist does not have the only explanation of human nature and that all people are not necessarily always selfish. The result can be a new willingness to see, in ourselves and others, at least the *possibility*

of genuinely unselfish action. Acknowledging that such behavior is possible constitutes a first step toward agreeing that it can rightly be expected of a military professional. In both cases the process begins with the recognition that neither relativists nor egoists have a corner on the truth and that competing views have much to recommend them.

While each of us is undoubtedly aware of lapses in professional behavior, by ourselves and others, we should celebrate the daily observation of performance that reflects genuine commitment to traditional values. If there is confusion in speaking about values, the actions of many people in uniform speak louder than words. People do, at least on occasion, give evidence that they can discriminate among value systems and that they can act in the interest of others even at some personal cost (while yet mistakenly claiming to agree with relativists and egoists who argue that this is not so). Clearing up the confusion can have important beneficial effects. It can reduce the temptation, when we are frustrated or disillusioned, to lower our personal standards and our expectations. It can also heighten our professional sense of self-worth by permitting us to take full credit for our dedication and self-sacrifice. We can respond with confidence to cynics and naysayers and can come to regard the profession's espousal of traditional values as noble yet realistic, demanding yet attainable.

