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Design and the Prospects of a Design Ethic

by Christopher R. Paparone

Technical rationality is a culture (that is, a way of thinking and living) that emphasizes the scientific-analytic mindset and the belief in technological progress. The culture of technical rationality has enabled a new and often confusing form of evil that we call administrative evil. What is different about administrative evil is that its appearance is masked. Administrative evil may be masked in many different ways, but the common characteristic is that people can engage in acts of evil without being aware that they are in fact doing anything at all wrong.

-- Guy B. Adams and Danny L. Balfour, "Leadership, Administrative Evil and the Ethics of Incompetence: Lessons from Katrina and Iraq"

Prelude

Neil Sheehan, in his Pulitzer Prize-winning book, tells a remarkable side story of Edward G. Lansdale. Lansdale's quest illustrates the paradoxes of studying history. Lansdale, equipped with a positivist philosophy that still dominates thinking today in military circles, sought to apply strategies and lessons he learned while helping Philippines President Ramón Magsaysay fight an insurgency in 1952 and 1953 and apply them to Ngo Dinh Diem's regime in Vietnam in 1955 into the early 1960s. Lansdale, an US Army major general and later a senior CIA official, exemplifies the problem of *iatrogenesis*—intervening with good intentions when presumably applying professional learnedness while unintentionally causing more harm than good. Sheehan concludes:

Lansdale was a victim in Vietnam of his success in the Philippines. Men who succeed at an enterprise of great moment often tie a snare for themselves by assuming that they have discovered some universal truth. Lansdale assumed, as much as his superiors did, that his experience in the Philippines applied in Vietnam. It did not.¹

In retrospect, Sheehan speculates that Lansdale, who apparently had a positivist view of knowledge about countering insurgencies, that may have, iatrogenically, contributed to starting a second war of independence in Vietnam that, by 1975, was a debacle for the United States.

The main character in Sheehan's history is John Paul Vann who represents a marked juxtaposition to positivistic thinking and acting. Vann arguably was immersed in the situation and realized that the doctrine of the day (how to deal with insurgencies in foreign nations) was not working with the uniqueness of the South Vietnam situation. Rather than towing the institutional line, Vann-the-whistleblower chose to eventually give up his career in the US Army

¹ Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (NY: Random House, 1988), p. 142.

to become a USAID senior official. His effectiveness in influencing the war was cut short when he was killed in a helicopter crash in Vietnam in 1972.

The interrelated histories of Lansdale and Vann are important, not as a source of lessons learned, but more toward the appreciation for the exposed fallacies that military professional knowledge is progressively improved and that military doctrine will be appropriate in wicked situations. This poignant, illustrative statement is oft attributed to Vann: "We don't have twelve years' experience in Vietnam. We have one year's experience twelve times over."²

The story of John Paul Vann (as with other so-called "whistleblowers" in US military history) is largely about bucking the institutional ethics – how institutions frame situations.³ In retrospect, the military institution was not receptive to Vann's discontented ideas about wartime strategy. It was later in the role of a more senior civilian government official that his creatively deviant framings were brought into action, culminating in the 1972 battle of Kontum that was arguably a win for the Republic of Vietnam (Vann died thinking the war was won).

Interestingly, if one examines how the issue of ethical reasoning is approached in the US military institution, the focus of attention seems to be more on the individual rather than the reflexivity of the institution as the frame of reference. The Vann story exposes that the institutional propensity is to orient on ethics of progressivism, compliance, and equality. Progressivism is revealed in the institutional portrayal of convergent and assimilative knowledge artifacts to include published doctrine and regulations and a vast array of organizations devoted to "lessons learned."⁴ The institutional ethic on compliance seems strongly favor that, under normal circumstances, an officer shall not question the decided stratagems of the hierarchy (perhaps the assumptive underpinnings are that the higher you go, the more you know and the more accountable you are). At the same time, there are institutional cross-pressures to accommodate equality – (at least apparently) treating those of the same position and rank equally; albeit, the talents and wisdom are diverse. We will address these sequentially.

The Darkside of Progressivism

Here we presuppose that ethics is a form of knowledge and subject to the philosophical examinations of knowledge as we would other epistemological structures. Philosopher Nicholas Rescher presents five worldviews of epistemology that can help to demonstrate that there are alternative views of ethics construction that should be considered by reflective military designers (the present author added the suffix "-ism" to them, demonstrating these constitute belief systems):

Progressivism is the (social utopian) ethic that knowledge is tested and accumulates toward some final truth about things. The Enlightenment, Copernican-Newtonian science, Comte's positivism, and so on, constitute this approach to science. In terms of war and the conduct of warfare, progressivism entails finding greater and greater understanding. Only

² D. Michael Shafer, *The Legacy: The Vietnam War in the American Imagination* (Boston, MA: Beacon, 1990), p. 100.

³ Serendipitously, while writing this essay (Nov 2010), this headline appeared in the Washington Post: "Marine Whistleblower Franz Gayl: Security Clearance Removal is Retaliation," by reported R. Jeffrey Smith, accessed online at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/11/19/AR2010111903475.html>. Gayl argued that the USMC did was not taking care of its Marines with proper protective technology and reportedly suffered from the wrath of the institutional hierarchy.

⁴ For example, the US Army training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC), with an annual operating budget of over \$3 billion, consists of many schools, colleges, universities, training centers, centers of excellence, and so forth.

through understanding one can respond more ethically in the right way. For the US military community, particularly the Army, doctrine assumes progressive knowledge construction and that one should constitute the “professional” body of knowledge both underpinned by this worldview and that separates the professionals from laypersons. Many of its institutional approaches to ethics are, not surprisingly, bound to analytic decision-making strategies (define the problem, develop alternatives/hypotheses, pick the best alternative/method – including along the way, ethical evaluations).⁵

Retrogressivism is the antithesis of progressivism and sees the need for man’s ethical being to move backwards. Original ethical formations are better than later, liberalized versions. This may be the underlying assumptive structure of the “Green Movement” and those who see the earth as a living being whereas man’s technology has ruined the pristine essence of “Gaia.” The pre-modernist Islamist who calls for a return to the 7th century context of Muhammad and his method (return to the original form of *shari’a* law) is archetypal of this ethics system. In the military context, there are those conservative realists who call for a “return” to the military’s core purpose – to fight and win the nation’s wars (and not engage in peace operations or nation-building).

Stabilitarianism signifies a belief that things remain the same and ethics are a matter of institutions restating that sameness in only incrementally different ways. The French saying *plus c'est la même chose* (the more things change, the more they remain the same) may link to this belief. A military stabilitarian may argue that the use of principles of war has not changed since the time of Sun Tzu (6th century BC); hence, these serve as timeless ethical backdrops for guiding the practice of warfare.

Cyclicism is a view that knowledge is produced and replaced in repetitious patterns of ebbs and flows. The institution remembers, forgets, and relearns. In domestic politics, the “strict constitutionalists” may see cycles to and from the values of the founding fathers over generations of Americans. As a military example, forgetting the US Army’s constabulary ethic in westward expansion in the 1800s had to be relearned. AirLand Battle doctrine circa 1982 had to be cast aside for relearning constabulary tasks in peace and counterinsurgency operations in the 1990s and into the 2000s. The integration of races in the US Armed Services in 1948 reveals a social integration cycle that repeats with the integration of homosexuals 60 years later...and so forth.

Anarchism sees ethics as “haphazard eventuations” that are “resistant to laws and regularities”⁶ (note that this is reminiscent of the first essay in this series and its description of Heraclitean epistemology). This view of ethics in some ways seems more aligned with the 2009 US *Capstone Concept for Joint Operations* states in future warfare “clean distinctions will rarely exist in reality; however, as often in the past, future conflicts will appear as hybrids comprising diverse, dynamic, and simultaneous combinations of organizations, technologies, and techniques that defy categorization.”⁷ Should we acknowledge situational ethics as adaptive means for survival?

⁵ For example, see Jack D. Kem, “The Use of the ‘Ethical Triangle’ in Military Ethical Decision Making,” *Public Administration and Management*, Vol. 11, No. 1, 2006, pp. 22-43.

⁶ Rescher, Nicholas, *Luck: The Brilliant Randomness Of Everyday Life* (NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995), p. 95.

⁷ Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Capstone Concept for Joint Operations*, January 2009, Version 3.0, p. 8.

As argued tangentially in other essays in this series, it seems the progressive view reflects the dominant ethic in US military institutions, particularly in the US Army (the principal agent of the US Armed Forces in becoming a doctrine-centric institution) and, speculatively, least so in the US Navy. Even in the face of highly volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) situations over the last nine years of war in Afghanistan, the quest for a technically rational approach to commander's understanding is expressed throughout doctrine in finding progressively better programmatic and analytic decision models (see Essay #6). The theory is we get better and better at what we do to the point that technical solutions will make moral reasoning less and less an issue.

Unfortunately, as the opening quote implies, the progressive-bound institution may inadvertently promulgate "administrative evil" in the sense that while the military may be technically acting "ethically correct" in the context of progressivism, it may mask necessary reevaluations. Reframing ethics thought to be unchallengeable in the institution are part of the reflexive, re-evaluative, design process. The case of the military strategy of attrition during the Vietnam War, for example, gave John Paul Vann pause when, in-the-moment, he witnessed as early as 1962 that "body counts" and an attrition warfare strategy would not be winning measures of effectiveness and performance.

The Unwritten Code of Compliance

Education philosopher Stephen Brookfield makes a critical point about compliance in his essay:

Assisting people to break out of their assumptive worlds...is highly problematic....Engaging in critical thinking is not a continuously joyful exercise in creative self-actualization. It is psychologically and politically dangerous, involving risks to one's livelihood, social networks, and psychological stability. In some cultures, people who think critically—who question accepted assumptions—are the first to disappear, to be tortured, or to be murdered in the event of a coup d'état.⁸

When Lieutenant Colonel Vann attempted to influence his chain of command and visiting policy-level decision makers to reframe operations and strategy, he was socially marginalized. Eventually, some began to view him as a troublemaker – who was neither a team player nor getting with the program. As a last resort, when Vann began to feed the press his alternative views, his whistle-blower actions were considered unacceptable by many in the institution.⁹ To be more effective during the Vietnam War, Vann had to leave the military service and become an activist in the comparatively radical US Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) program (what observers today might label a "whole of government" or interagency approach to complex warfare). One can only speculate, but the story seems to

⁸ Stephen Brookfield, "Using Critical Incidents to Explore Learners' Assumptions," pp. 235-250, in Jack Mezirow (Ed.), *Fostering Critical Reflection in Adulthood: A Guide to Transformative and Emancipatory Learning* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1990), p. 179.

⁹ An equally compelling Vietnam War story is that of Samuel Adams—a CIA analyst who bucked the institutional ethics of compliance to the point of being organizationally excommunicated when he insistently reported the enemy order of battle was significantly understated in intelligence summaries. See Sam Adams, *War of Numbers: An Intelligence Memoir* (South Royalton, VT: Steerforth Press, 1994).

indicate that a compliance oriented institutional ethic held primacy in the US Army—arguably alive and well in today’s context.¹⁰

The Paradox of Equity

James Pierce, in a recently published monograph, collected self-reported data on close to a thousand officers attending the US Army War College over a two year period. On average, the data indicates the officers viewed their leadership style and cultural preferences as oriented predominantly on clan values – that the “organization [should be] held together by loyalty and tradition . . . [and] . . .The organization [should] emphasize the long-term benefit of human resources development and attaches great importance to cohesion and morale.”¹¹ Speculatively, there seems to be a propensity for the military senior officer corps, when forced to choose, to embrace a culture of equity over a culture that requires a market-like competition of ideas. While at first blush, this may seem to be a commendable institutional ethic, especially in light of the importance of unit cohesion in battle. However, this ethic can be over-valued at the expense of the sometimes necessary deviance required for improvisation and innovation in the midst of wicked situations.

Institutional equity can be revealed in various ways, but and most obvious artifacts in traditional military organizations are the clarity of education, training and disciplinary “standards.” The drawback is that standards are expressly oriented on positivistic minimalism that there is a “best” way to do things, that is, if you meet them you can be promoted to the next level (rank, position, and so forth). Appropriately, another name for the institutional ethic of standardization is “homosocial reproduction.”¹²

Institutional politics is about “who gets what, when, and how.”¹³ The US military management of human resources is largely oriented on ensuring equity not unlike a socialist view of public order found in institutions of national government. For example, the author of this essay has been taken care of by the US military since birth. He was born in a US Army hospital, raised as an “Army brat,” commissioned after college, and will eventually be interred at the expense of Uncle Sam as an entitled veteran. The military has also created parallel hierarchies to ensure the “blue collar” noncommissioned officers share power with “white collar” commissioned officers (venture to say, this is a near-equal arrangement as NCOs occupy positions up- and down- the hierarchy). Equity is a strong ethic in the US military; notwithstanding, it is not necessarily a valuable competing ethic when it comes to the design philosophy associated with creative deviance—a principal source of innovation and improvisation needed in high VUCA operations, like those experienced by Vann, where problems are never really solved and the “interaction between ideas and alliances is ever-changing and never-ending.”¹⁴

¹⁰ There is some preliminary research evidence as well. William J. Davis, “The United States Army: A Values-Based Organization: But What Values,” is an unpublished conference paper, December, 2010 in which Professor Davis collected survey information of 40+ officers attending US Army Command and General Staff College and concluded, “. . .field grade Army officers overwhelmingly support the concept of following orders regardless of personal values”(p. 21).

¹¹ James G. Pierce, *Is the Organizational Culture of the US Army Congruent with the Professional Development of its Senior Level Officer Corps?* (Carlisle, PA: Letort Papers, 2010), p. 91.

¹² Suggested by Rosabeth M. Kanter, *Men and Women of the Corporation* (New York: Anchor, 1977).

¹³ Harold Lasswell, *Politics: Who Gets What, When, How* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1936).

¹⁴ Deborah Stone, *Policy Paradox: The Art of political Decision Making* (NY: W.W. Norton, 1997), p. 34.

The Construction of Ethics in Indeterminate Zones of Practice

Hopefully, in the previous essays of this series, it has been established that, in the face of high VUCA, a military practitioner cannot rely on inculcated institutional progressive forms of knowledge construction; hence, design serves as a sort of conceptual gateway to an anti-doctrine—inventing or discovering new meaning structures that may be counter to the ethical beliefs of the institution. Heifetzian creative deviance (or “imaginative irreverence” – apparent in the leadership of John Paul Vann) may create career-threatening dilemmas for the advocacy of reframing around alternative ethics that may result in whistle-blowing dilemmas or charges of insubordinate behavior.

Without being able to depend upon a positivistic, progressive knowledge associated with mission analysis (as described in Essay #2) and programmatic/analytic decision making (as described in Essay #6), the military professional must rely on a kind of reflexive ethical intuition (akin to embracing a “dissent in the ranks” strategy). Similarly, Jürgen Habermas calls for hermeneutic self-reflection (interpretation of the self in the context of “who we are and who we want to be”); in other words, the reflective military practitioner has to attempt question his/her own deep rooted values as well as the institution’s – those ethics that will serve as reified ethical justification for action.¹⁵ As it is implausible for people to self-examine the efficacy of their own evaluative habits, it is imperative to argue in a more public sphere, permitting others to reveal them and argumentatively challenge them (what Habermas sees as critical to communicative rationality, yet what the military traditionalist may see as “dissent in the ranks”). The critical dialogue (see Essay #4) required in design philosophy must include such ethical arguments and counterarguments in the participative context of groups, and inter-organizations, and international players. At the risk of sounding tautological, institutional dissent is important to reflective practice and design ethics; yet, it remains in conflict with institutional norms.

Conclusion

The ethics of creative deviance (associated with design philosophy and its ideal proponent, the reflective practitioner) may compete with the dominant US military institutional ethics of progressivism, compliance and equity (Figure 9-1).

¹⁵ Thomas McCarthy, “Practical Discourse: On the Relation of Morality to Politics,” pp. 51-72 in Craig Calhoun (Ed.), *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), p. 55.

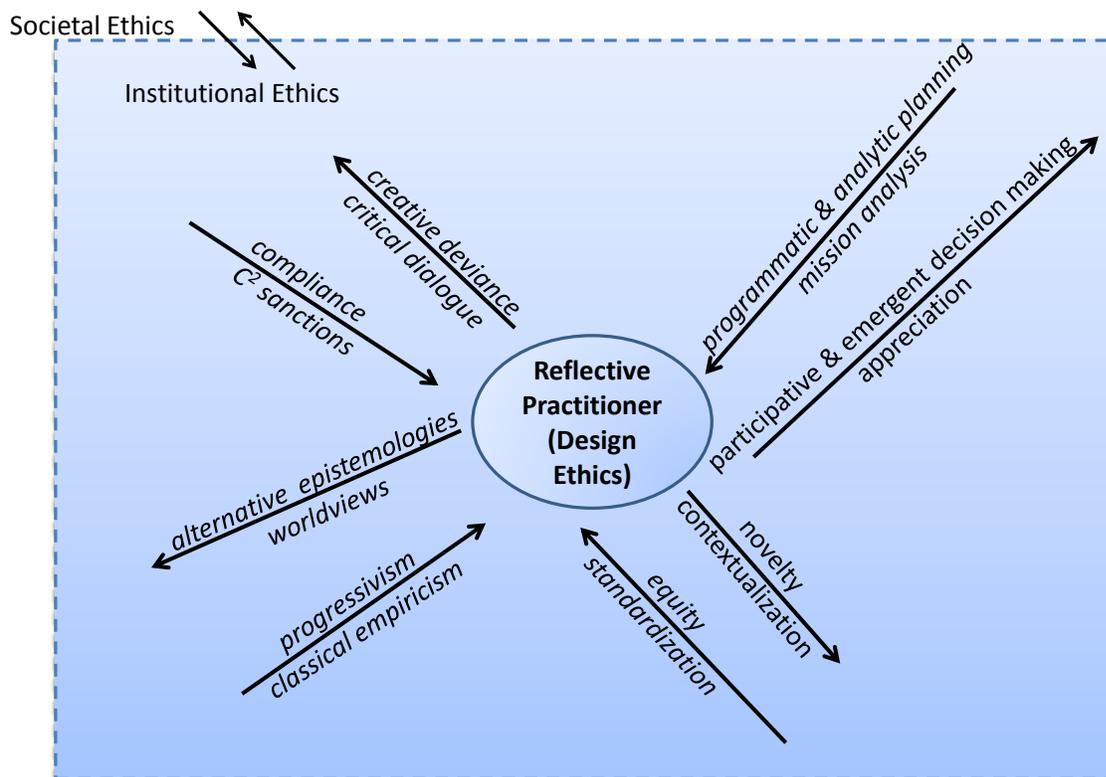


Figure 9-1. The Cross Pressures of Design and the Traditional Military Ethics

Given the social deviance that is essential to design, can the institution be confident it can instill design philosophy? Arguably, the institution will have a propensity to distort design philosophy so that the values of progressivism, compliance, and equality will remain strong, squelching creative deviance. Here it may be appropriate to speculate and summarize on the prospects for a military renaissance addressed in the first essay in this series:

How is the military profession constructed? We should continue to explore whether the US military is a profession when considering the monistic ontology and positivistic epistemology that dominate the institution. Technical rationality is trumping reflective practice when it comes to conceptualizing the profession of arms.

Are accumulations of knowledge possible in the profession? The answer is complex. If the institution becomes more reflexive in its pursuit of “doctrine,” it may find that doctrine may be unsuitable for high VUCA situations. Our best hope may be to encourage appreciative inquiry and action research across a wide range of heuristics in our officers who can call upon insightful metaphors to make new sense of novel, wicked situations. In that regard, design philosophy is no fan of doctrine – a doctrine-centric institution is too reductive and presents a monistic paradigm that is counterproductive to design-styled acting and customized ways of thinking. If we are to have a doctrine, make it more of an annotated bibliography of “essential” readings. Critical reasoning and creative thinking are, in practice, the “anti-doctrine.” And they should be.

How should we feel about- and relate to- the prospect of a born again profession of arms?

This author is pessimistic, at least in the short term. Design is likely be seen as a Quixotic ideal by institutionalized members; hence, those empowered by the institution will embrace only techniques and methods of design that do not conflict with technically rational approaches and the programmatic and analytic models of decision making. Those who embrace design philosophy of Heraclitus and can be reflexive toward Parmenidean philosophy may find themselves more useful outside the institution (as did John Paul Vann).

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