

# The Importance of Practical Wisdom for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Peace Operations

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## Abstract

*Peacekeepers engaged in contemporary armed conflict regularly confront ethical dilemmas and practical trade-offs. This article investigates the relevance of virtue ethics and, specifically, the virtue of practical wisdom in addressing these challenges and strengthening peace operations for the 21st Century. While virtue ethics has been applied to decision-making in several professional fields, including law and business, it has not received a great deal of attention within international relations, and specifically, in the field of peacekeeping. And yet, with its emphasis on context-sensitive judgment and social practices grounded in the moral qualities of the actor facing an ethical dilemma, virtue ethics arguably offers an important perspective to complement and conceptualise existing approaches to navigating the ethical dilemmas in contemporary conflict.*

## Introduction

Contemporary peacekeeping is hard. Over the past two decades, operating environments have become increasingly complex with the fragmentation and proliferation of armed groups, including those designated as terrorist organisations. In many contexts, peacekeeping missions are deployed with ambitious protection mandates in the absence of political frameworks, clear political

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roles, or support from host and member states. Local and global expectations of peacekeepers continually outstrip their resources. With these challenges, there has been a shift that appears to be little recognised in the literature and even, at times, in the practice of peacekeeping. It is a shift from ethical decisions being made primarily at the overarching institutional level to their landing squarely with individuals in the field. Peacekeepers today regularly confront moral dilemmas and practical trade-offs, particularly when it comes to the protection of civilians (PoC). Many of these dilemmas implicate deeper conflicts of values (for example, sovereignty and human rights; consent and impartiality).

A spectrum of approaches has emerged to address these tensions and encourage United Nations (UN) staff to 'do the right thing' with an emphasis on creating new doctrine, norms, institutional processes, and accountability measures.<sup>1</sup> Good judgment, however, often comes down to the question 'who decides' i.e., the blue helmet or civilian official who must interpret the mandate and operate within it. In short, it is about character. This fact is not lost on the UN. The High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations (HIPPO) identifies the 'quality of leadership as one of the most crucial factors in the success or failure of UN peace operations'.<sup>2</sup> The Dos Santos Cruz report highlights the importance of the peacekeeper 'mindset',<sup>3</sup> and the Secretary-General himself has under scored the importance of 'clarity of mind' and individual judgment.<sup>4</sup>

This article argues for the relevance of virtue ethics to contemporary UN missions. While virtue ethics has been applied to a number of professional fields, including law and business,<sup>5</sup> it has not received a great deal of attention from scholars of international organisations and international practices, and specifically in the area of peacekeeping.<sup>6</sup> And yet, with its emphasis on context-sensitive judgment and social practices grounded in the moral qualities of the actor, virtue ethics offers an important perspective to complement existing approaches to navigating the ethical dilemmas that peacekeeping and protection invariably entail.

The last decade has seen increased collaboration between philosophers and psychologists studying virtue and character. This budding area of research offers insights for peacekeeping.<sup>7</sup> For the purposes of this short article, focuses on the virtue ethics

tradition in political philosophy and, specifically, on practical wisdom, what Aristotle considered to be the ‘maestro virtue’, and the virtue which researchers recognise as critical to ethical expertise and then consider the role of institutions in cultivating character and the exercise of practical wisdom, and finally identify four priority areas for peace operations.

### **Why Virtue?**

Virtue and virtuosity share a common etymological root – the Latin *virtut* – which designates the excellences necessary to perform a valuable practice well. Virtue ethics is one of the three main approaches in contemporary moral philosophy. Unlike deontology, which judges action with reference to moral rules, or consequentialism which appraises the moral worth of behaviour by its consequences, virtue ethics emphasises the moral character of individuals and appraises action based on what is good.

Virtue ethics as a field of study is wide and diverse. Nonetheless, contemporary virtue scholars all locate themselves in some way relative to Aristotle. According to Aristotle, something is good when it does its function well. The function of humans—what distinguishes us from other beings is our ability to reason.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, the purpose of human life (what Aristotle referred to as the *telos*) is action in accordance with reason. Aristotle developed an ethics from this, specifying the virtues or character traits a person needs to develop to flourish. Over time, philosophers have added, and subtracted, from his list to focus on different character traits. Today, most regard honesty, courage, compassion, integrity, kindness, self-control, practical wisdom, gratitude, humility, and fortitude as core virtues.

### **Why Practical Wisdom?**

How do we know what’s ‘good’ and then how do we act on it, particularly when our choices may be circumscribed by external authority? For Aristotle, one virtue practical wisdom or *phronesis* stood out as the ‘maestro virtue’ without which none of the other virtues can be realized. Practical wisdom involves the knowledge and understanding of how to act in the right way.<sup>9</sup> It is essential because context matters. The right amount of any of virtues is context dependent – what Martha Nussbaum referred to as the priority of the particular.<sup>10</sup> As Kenneth Sharpe and Barry Schwartz

explain, “Is caution a strength? Yes, ‘look before you leap’. But change the context, and ‘she who hesitates is lost’.<sup>11</sup> As such, what is needed is the *wisdom* to know when and how to be cautious and, similarly, when and how to take risks while avoiding recklessness.

Practical wisdom comes about through sensitivity to context and the ability to perceive the morally salient features of a situation, including the moral outlooks of the other individuals or groups involved. It is a complex human characteristic or trait that includes the following components:<sup>12</sup>

- Perceptiveness and sensitivity to particularity; the ability to discern context and nuance.
- Prosocial skills of empathy and compassion; the capacity to understand what someone else is thinking and feeling. This requires good listening and the attendant traits of openness, humility, detachment, and patience that being a good listener entail. It also requires imagination.
- Self-awareness, including of one’s own emotional responses and blind spots, and the skill and will to undertake the self-reflection necessary to learn from experience and others.
- The ability to deliberate well with others, frame problems, and recognise and interpret the perspectives of others.

The complex, ambiguous and uncertain contexts in which peacekeepers are deployed make practical wisdom and related virtues more necessary. Peacekeepers regularly, must balance competing goods. Reflection, deliberation, emotional mindfulness, and know-how are critical to making difficult choices about when and how to act.

### **A Role for Institutions and Implications for Peace Operations**

Character and practical wisdom cannot, in a sense, be taught. They require experience, acquired through practice and processes of socialisation, as well as education that encourage certain traits and discourage others.<sup>13</sup> Institutions play a critical role in cultivating character and the development of flexible and open mindsets. As political scientist Maxwell Cameron explains, “Institutions influence the quality of our character and thus whether we perform our roles and offices well and achieve high standards of excellence in

our conduct not just the direction of our behaviour. But bad institutions can crush agency and destroy practical wisdom. They can do this by demoralising agents and corrupting their motivations, by crippling their capacity for judgment and deliberation, and by limiting their scope of action to pursue the aims intrinsic to their activities".<sup>14</sup>

A growing body of work integrates insights from virtue ethics with those in cognitive sciences and organisation theory for institutional design that encourages more ethical decision making.<sup>15</sup> Four areas are particularly relevant to contemporary and future UN peace operations.

First, is the importance of dedicated resources for sustained pre-deployment and in-mission training of all peacekeeping personnel as well as 'hands on' learning opportunities that approximate practice as much as possible? Rather than textbook learning, a virtue approach underscores the value of simulations that encourage improvisation and creativity ('thinking on the spot') as well as trial and error.<sup>16</sup> The space for trial and error is critical as it helps practitioners overcome their fear of making mistakes. As Kenneth Sharpe explains, through the creation of a safe space to 'get it wrong' participants learn 'to practice courage, the habit of facing their fears and working through them'.<sup>17</sup> This is of particular importance with PoC, given the need to avoid making mistakes in practice given the very real stakes. Furthermore, simulations and experiential modules should be accompanied by opportunities to immediately reflect individually and collectively. The practice of group debriefing is important in that it encourages practitioners to develop the social skills and habits needed to reflect and deliberate together. Recent innovations in training should be built upon and further strengthened through more intensive and consistent induction and context specific training, including tabletop exercises and simulations on crisis management, protection of civilians, and real-world ethical dilemmas.

Second, and related, is the value of ongoing managed learning through practice. Learning extends from training to practice and includes the space for discretion, strengthening deliberative processes, and commitment to developing contextual knowledge. Virtue ethics does not provide simple guidelines on how to resolve difficult situations. Two 'virtuous people', for example, may disagree

on what should be done in a particular instance. However, what it does to is emphasise the need for individuals and organisations to reflect and deliberate more intentionally, openly, and honestly about their purpose, and to provide reasoning in context for actions taken. Rather than evaluate action based solely on abstract rules or guidelines that are removed from the world of everyday experience, reflective questioning asks: “What were the agents trying to do, and were they trying to do it in the right way and for the right reasons? Did they deliberate well so that they could grasp the full meaning of the situation? Did they have the right experience, knowledge, and motivation for the task? Were they guided by a concern for the right ends?”<sup>18</sup> Prioritising a continuum of learning and knowledge accumulation also underscores the importance of practical issues such as hiring practices and the type and duration of contracts. Short-term deployment and a roster of frequently rotating experts can undercut the development of skill through practice as well as valuable context-specific knowledge.

Third, is an emphasis on motivational messaging and role models. Too often, the messaging about peacekeeping both internal and external to the UN—is negative, overshadowing and downplaying, the very real, and empirically substantiated, positive contributions and impacts of peacekeeping on violence mitigation. Communicating the value of peacekeeping is critical as it informs professional identities and has the power to shape individual motivations. Further, plenty of studies show that moral role models can significantly improve behaviour both through in-person interaction as well as through storytelling and narrative.<sup>19</sup> Who inspires peacekeepers and how? What examples of good peacekeeping and protection practice can be harvested and shared widely with staff at all levels? Not everyone has to agree on who is a role model for discussion of exemplars to be fruitful. Indeed, given the multitude of world views and moral positions that make up peacekeeping, consensus would seem unlikely. Rather, discussion, debate, and storytelling offer a point of departure, a platform that challenges people to articulate their moral positions and motivations.

Finally, a safe and supportive institutional environment is critical to continued learning and sound decision-making. The hardship

environments in which peacekeepers operate, the nature of their roles, and the ethical dilemmas that peacekeeping staff encounter in the field can be emotionally taxing and, in some cases, traumatic for individuals with negative implications for their well-being and mental health. Studies reveal higher rates of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as well as other mental health issues amongst people who have been deployed to UN peace operations relative to the general population.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, a recent report by the International Peace Institute found that despite new UN initiatives to strengthen mental health support and awareness,<sup>21</sup> the system of care offered to UN personnel in the field needs 'to be revamped and to be brought up to the level of hardship they face'.<sup>22</sup> Without adequate institutional support and care, staff may be reluctant to take calculated risk, act courageously, and learn from practice.

### **Conclusion**

The expansive goals of contemporary peace operations and the increasing complexity of operating environments have given rise to new challenges and ethical dilemmas. While the creation of new doctrine, norms, institutional processes, and accountability measures are essential to address these challenges, this article has argued for greater attention to the role of individual judgement and the importance of inculcating practical wisdom amongst staff at all levels of peace operations.

### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> See for example, United Nations, Human Rights Up Front Policy (2015); United Nations, Guidance Note on Human Rights Due Diligence Policy on UN Support to Non-United Nations Security Forces (2015); The Kigali Principles on the Protection of Civilians (2015); United Nations, The Protection of Civilians in United Nations Peacekeeping Handbook (2020).

<sup>2</sup> United Nations, Uniting Our Strengths for Peace—Politics, Partnership and People: Report of the High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations, UN Doc. A/70/95-S/2015/446, June 17, 2015, p. 82.

<sup>3</sup> United Nations, Improving Security of United Nations Peacekeepers: We Need to Change the Way We Are Doing Business, December 19, 2017, p.10.

<sup>4</sup> As quoted by Fabrizio Hochschild, Assistant United Nations Secretary-General for Strategic Coordination, "Improving Training for Senior Leaders in UN Field Operations" panel discussion at the International Peace Institute, New York, February 25, 2019.

<sup>5</sup> Justin Oakley and Dean Cocking, *Virtue ethics and professional roles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Barry Schwartz and Kenneth Sharpe, *Practical Wisdom: The Right Way to Do the Right Thing* (Penguin, 2010); Sandra Borden, *Journalism as Practice: MacIntyre, Virtue Ethics and the Press* (Routledge, 2013); Deborah J. Cantrell and Kenneth Sharpe, "Practicing Practical Wisdom", *Mercer L. Rev.* 67 (2015).

<sup>6</sup> Exceptions include: Guilherme Vilaca and Maria Varaki (eds.), *Ethical Leadership in International Organizations: Concepts, Narratives, Judgment, and Assessment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021); Jan Klabbers, "Controlling International Organizations: A Virtue Ethics Approach," *International Organizations Law Review* 8(2) (December 1, 2011), pp. 285–89; David Chan, *Beyond Just War: A Virtue Ethics Approach* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Kirsten Ainley, "*Virtue ethics*" in the *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>7</sup> See for example, Nancy Snow (ed.), *Cultivating Virtue: Perspectives from Philosophy, Theology, and Psychology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Christian B. Miller, *The Character Gap. How Good are We?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

<sup>8</sup> Ainley, *Virtue Ethics*, 2017. Aristotle (4th century BC/ 1999) *Nicomachean Ethics* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company). See also contributions to Nancy Snow (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Virtue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>9</sup> Schwartz and Sharpe, *Practical Wisdom*, 2010, pp. 7-9.

<sup>10</sup> Martha Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995).

<sup>11</sup> Barry Schwartz and Kenneth Sharpe, "Practical Wisdom: Aristotle Meets Positive Psychology" *Journal of Happiness Studies* 7 (2006), p.383.

<sup>12</sup> Schwartz and Sharpe, *Practical Wisdom*, 2010; Dilip Jeste, et al. "The New Science of Practical Wisdom", *Perspectives Biol. Med.* 62(2) 2019.

<sup>13</sup> Schwartz and Sharpe, *Practical Wisdom*, 2010; Maxwell Cameron, *Political Institutions and Practical Wisdom: Between Rules and Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

<sup>14</sup> Cameron, *Political Institutions*, 2018, p.158.

<sup>15</sup> Schwartz and Sharpe, *Practical Wisdom*, 2010; Bent Flyvbjerg, et al (eds.), *Real Social Science: Applied Phronesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); John Gibbs, *Moral Development and Reality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); Kenneth Sharpe, "Learning the Wisdom to Seize the Moment: How Negotiators Encourage the Learning of Practical Wisdom for Themselves and Others," *Negotiation Journal* 36.2 (2020).



<sup>16</sup> See for example, the International Peace Institute's Scenario-Based Training for Senior Leadership in Peace Operations, which includes a module on the Protection of Civilians.

<sup>17</sup> Sharpe, *Learning the Wisdom*, 2020, p.177.

<sup>18</sup> Campbell, *Political Institutions*, 2018, p.15.

<sup>19</sup> William Damon and Anne Colby, *The Power of Ideals: The Real Story of Moral Choice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); Linda Zagzebski, *Exemplarist Moral Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Hyemin Han et al. "Attainable and relevant moral exemplars are more effective than extraordinary exemplars in promoting voluntary service engagement" *Frontiers in Psychology* 8 (2017).

<sup>20</sup> Namie Di Razza, "Mental Health in UN peace operations: Addressing stress, trauma, and PTSD among field personnel" (New York: International Peace Institute, 2020); Jean Augustin Diégane Tine et al., "Étude des Facteurs de risque des états de stress post-traumatique (ESPT) chez les casques bleus sénégalais en mission de maintien de la paix au Darfour (Soudan)," *International Journal of Innovation and Applied Studies* 26(2) (2019); United Nations, "Staff Well-Being Survey Data Report," 2017.

<sup>21</sup> United Nations, "A Healthy Workforce for a Better World: United Nations System Mental Health and Well-Being Strategy," 2018; United Nations, "Mental Health Matters: A Healthy Workforce for a Better World," available at <https://www.un.org/en/healthy-workforce/>.

<sup>22</sup> Namie Di Razza, "Mental Health in UN peace operations: Addressing stress, trauma, and PTSD among field personnel" (New York: International Peace Institute, 2020), p.38.