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Virtue in Violence
The Moral Foundations of Military Character

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Introduction to the Paradox of Virtue and Violence

How does a society cultivate a military with the courage, strength, and resolve to confront a fierce and unyielding enemy while ensuring that it upholds the moral values it is charged to defend? This question exposes a central tension in the political and moral life of a democracy.

A free society, grounded in inalienable rights and the liberty to pursue happiness, expresses the human aspiration to flourish. Yet it cannot endure if individuals act solely on unbridled desire or unchecked self-interest. The preservation of freedom depends on restraint, obligation, and a willingness to subordinate personal interests to the common good. What motivates moral agents, and in rare cases moral heroes, to serve the well-being of others at profound personal cost, even at the cost of their own lives?

The soldier's life brings this question into sharp focus. Military service draws on duty, courage, loyalty, and sacrifice—virtues long regarded, from Aristotle to contemporary moral psychology, as essential to character and communal life. Yet exercising these virtues in war can involve acts that appear to transgress the moral boundaries they are meant to uphold. Killing in the name of justice and destroying in order to protect create tensions that bear directly on conscience and identity.

In "The Moral Equivalent of War," William James refers not to something as bad as war, but to something capable of fostering the virtues associated with it [1]. As a pacifist, he begins his essay by satirizing the military romantic view of war. He condemns its brutality and horrors and identifies the "carnivore within" as the source of human violence. Nevertheless, he concedes that "we must make new energies and hardihoods continue the manliness to which the military mind so faithfully clings. Martial virtues must be the enduring cement; Intrepidity, contempt of softness, surrender of private interest, obedience to command, must still remain the rock upon which states are built."

James also observed that "the martial virtues, though harsh, are the foundations of civic character." He

recognized that the disciplined capacities cultivated in military life, endurance, solidarity, and self-sacrifice, are not aberrations of moral life but among its most demanding expressions. The paradox, however, is that these virtues can be exercised through acts, such as killing enemy combatants and destroying military targets, that would ordinarily be morally impermissible outside armed conflict. War does not automatically render such actions permissible; even within it, they require justification and remain subject to strict moral limits. James's essay thus illuminates an enduring moral tension surrounding military violence: the seemingly contradictory possibility of "Virtue in Violence."

"If you have your why for life, you can get by with almost any how." [2]. A sense of calling, or purpose, overlaps conceptually with heroism. Three dimensions of calling—a transcendent summons, the alignment of one's work with a broader purpose in life, and motives and goals oriented toward the well-being of others—each provides a lens through which to explore heroism [3]. Military service as a career can reflect these dimensions, alongside a commitment to the maxim "liberty unguarded is liberty imperiled," even at the risk of one's life.

Patriotism involves concern for the well-being of one's community and fellow citizens, placing the common good above narrow self-interest. This commitment differs from exclusionary forms of nationalism that prioritize one's nation at the expense of others and contribute to conflict and division. Cosmopolitan patriotism combines attachment to one's country with respect for other nations, encouraging cooperation and reciprocal relationships. Practiced ethically, patriotism motivates citizens to improve their society, participate in democratic processes, and fulfill their responsibilities to their own community and to the wider world.

For example, the Ethical Warrior honor code emphasizes the role of the "protector of life": Whose life? Self and others. Which others? All others [4]. Hoban expresses this commitment in the context of Marine Corps service:

"We are not just warriors, we are United States Marine Warriors, and our core values of honor, courage and commitment reflect our uniqueness as Americans. Our warrior ethics have respect for human equality as the premise just as it is stated in our philosophical enabling documents, the Declaration of Independence. Our warrior ethics charge us to act differently than insurgents more respectful of all life killing only to protect lives and when necessary. The ethical warrior shows respect for the value of life, regardless of the relative values of culture or behavior even when cultures seem irreconcilable, conflict can often be resolved- and the killing stopped- if a deeper, more fundamental universal value can be activated mutually. That is the value of life as expressed by an acknowledgment of human equality" [5].

However, military service also entails the exercise of lethal authority, conduct that would ordinarily be morally impermissible outside armed conflict and that raises the concern James expressed through his image of the "carnivore within." Hoban articulates the tension between lethal force and the duty to protect:

"Let's not be naive, marines must and will close with and kill insurgent combatants. That is our job. However, the role of the ethical warrior is not only to kill but also to protect life. Whose lives must we protect ours and others. Which others, all others , if we can. We must protect even our enemies (as Marines are often called upon to do) if we can. Ethical warriors are defenders' protectors rather than killers. Young patriotic men and women joined the Marine Corps to defend their country not to become killers" [5].

This passage expresses neither bravado nor boastfulness. It acknowledges the lethal reality of war while insisting on an obligation to protect life. Military history records gratuitous violence and atrocities, underscoring the danger of treating lethal authority as unrestricted license. The difficult claim at the heart of "virtue in violence" is that virtue may reside in the protective purpose, disciplined judgment, and restraint governing the use of force. Lethal authority carries a corresponding obligation to exercise it within strict moral limits, including necessity and proportionality.

The U.S. Marine Corps Infantry Officer Course illustrates the military's recognition that the authority to use lethal force carries a corresponding obligation to constrain it. Tactical competence must be accompanied

by moral judgment, self-discipline, and accountability. Training officers to act decisively therefore also entails cultivating the capacity to recognize when restraint is necessary.

The course can be understood as an embodied form of Socratic education: fatigue, uncertainty, and responsibility for others challenge officers' assumptions and expose the limits of rehearsed answers. After-action reviews extend this process by requiring officers to examine their reasoning, acknowledge failures, and accept responsibility for consequences. Through this combination of experience and reflection, the course seeks to make ethical judgment part of leadership under pressure.

Viewed this way, military character formation acknowledges a central tension of command: those entrusted with lethal power must develop the internal restraints necessary to exercise it responsibly. Such training cannot guarantee ethical conduct, but it reflects an institutional awareness that legitimate authority depends on the disciplined limitation of force [6].

Individual soldiers are not exempt from motivations that can give rise to gratuitous violence. As described by Pinker and Baumeister, such motivations include predatory impulses, sadistic tendencies, desires for revenge or dominance, and adherence to political or ideological beliefs [4,7]. However, such motivations are associated with maladaptive neurobiological processes, particularly amygdala-driven responses that inhibit prefrontal cortical functions responsible for cognitive self-reflection, deliberative decision-making, and emotional regulation [8-11]. As such, they are inherently incompatible with strategic calculation and disciplined military judgment. Unchecked anger, a desire for revenge, status-seeking, and the enjoyment of others' suffering can undermine judgment, disrupt coordination, and contribute to unlawful or counterproductive actions. Military effectiveness therefore depends on the capacity to regulate emotions and subordinate personal impulses to lawful orders, professional judgment, and operational objectives. Moreover, at the interpersonal and group levels, these emotional states can diminish leadership effectiveness, limit opportunities for promotion, weaken unit cohesion, and erode esprit de corps.

Hugh Thompson Jr.'s intervention at Mỹ Lai illustrates the tension between loyalty to fellow soldiers and fidelity to military ethics. On March 16, 1968, while American troops—including men led by Lieutenant William Calley—were murdering Vietnamese civilians, Thompson landed his helicopter between threatened villagers and American soldiers. He directed his crew to protect the civilians, even against American fire if necessary, and arranged their evacuation [12]. His actions affirmed that loyalty to comrades cannot override the obligation to protect noncombatants.

By confronting fellow soldiers at considerable personal risk, Thompson demonstrated the moral courage to resist wrongdoing within his own ranks. His intervention illustrates how a commitment to protecting others can outweigh pressures to conform or remain silent. As Skitka observes, "moral convictions can protect against obedience to potentially malevolent authorities" [13]. Thompson's courage lay not simply in holding strong convictions, but in acting on them to uphold the ethical obligations that others had abandoned.

Viewed through Sowell's framework, discussed below, the massacre underscores the constrained vision's insistence that human fallibility requires enforceable limits on power [14]. Thompson upheld those limits when other soldiers abandoned them. Yet his intervention also demonstrates why institutions need independent moral judgment: obedience and group cohesion cannot guarantee ethical conduct when leadership itself fails. The contrast is therefore not simply between an "unconstrained" Calley and a "constrained" Thompson. Rather, it exposes the tension between institutional authority and individual conscience, showing that military ethos requires both disciplined restraint and the moral courage to oppose wrongdoing within one's own ranks.

Since Vietnam, the American military has increasingly emphasized ethical training and the cultivation of core virtues and values as constraints on the immense lethal authority entrusted to service members. Rather than relying solely on technological superiority or combat effectiveness, military doctrine has sought to reinforce moral judgment, discipline, restraint, and respect for noncombatants. Pinker highlights this evolution by noting that during the height of the anti-Taliban bombing campaign in Afghanistan in 2008, the U.S. Air

Force adhered to humanitarian protocols and earned praise from Human Rights Watch for its "very good record" of minimizing civilian harm. He further cites political scientist Joshua Goldstein, who observed that policies of smart targeting had dramatically reduced civilian casualties in Kosovo and during both Iraq wars, and pointed to the use of armed drones against Taliban and al-Qaeda targets in Afghanistan and Pakistan as evidence of a broader effort to apply lethal force within increasingly stringent ethical constraints. Such developments reflect the military's post-Vietnam commitment to embedding moral values and professional virtues into the exercise of lethal authority [4].

The warrior's moral mission is also a moral trial. Soldiers must reconcile the use of violence in defense of the community with the preservation of their own humanity. Meeting this demand requires more than adherence to external codes such as jus in bello, the principles governing conduct in war. It requires phronesis, or practical wisdom, through which individuals learn to judge situations marked by moral ambiguity and tragic constraint.

The paradox of virtue and violence reveals a broader feature of moral life: virtue requires disciplined engagement with conflict. Military service binds individual character to collective purpose, placing opportunities for courage and self-sacrifice alongside grave moral risks.

"A Seal can engage in a horrific firefight and then turn around and calmly and politely help an old lady across the street. Be aggressive enough to kill the enemy but immediately calmed down enough to not scare the little old lady. You will be the man who is mentally tough enough to operate in horrific chaos, then immediately transitioned to tranquility, all without mentally breaking. He can effectively transition from hypermasculine aggression to gentle caretaker, he is both a warrior and a gentleman" [15].

The question, then, is whether people can be formed in ways that keep them oriented toward the good even when they must use violence. A complete reconciliation of virtue and violence may be neither philosophically nor psychologically plausible. The enduring challenge is to defend a society while preserving the moral commitments that make it worth defending.

"A tribe including many members who, from possessing in a high degree this spirit of patriotism, fidelity, obedience, courage, and sympathy were always ready to aid one another, and to sacrifice themselves for the common good, would be victorious over most other tribes; and this would be natural selection. At all times throughout the world tribes have supplanted other tribes, and as morality is one important element in their success, the standard of morality and the number of well-endowed men will thus everywhere tend to rise and increase"[16].

The underlying question is how we learn to heed the "better angels" of our nature:
"A complete to this question requires understanding the essential, inexorable influence of culture on the basic biological processes at hand: how the physical and social environments we inhabit shape our views about, and treatment of, the other beings we encounter during our lives, and how our culture may ultimately enable us to expand our capacity for compassion and altruism" [17].

The Warrior Virtue Translation Problem

The "warrior virtue translation problem" can be clarified through Samuel P. Huntington's concept of the "ideological constant." In The Soldier and the State, Huntington argues that a persistent structural tension exists between liberal democratic society and the military profession because they are organized around fundamentally different norms [18]. Liberal society emphasizes individual liberty, pluralism, skepticism of authority, and personal autonomy, whereas the military depends on discipline, hierarchy, obedience, collective identity, and the organized use of force in defense of the state. This tension, Huntington contends, is not historically contingent but an enduring feature of democratic civil–military relations, requiring continual negotiation rather than resolution.

Following research linking variants of the MAO-A gene to aggressive behavior, media coverage popularized the label "warrior gene." This framing used military imagery to simplify a complex biological association, suggesting that violence is an innate characteristic of the warrior. In Scientific American, Horgan criticized this sensational treatment [19]. This quotation captures his

criticism of exaggerated claims linking a single gene to violent behavior. "In many, many studies [the warrior gene] appears implicated in behaviors that look like they're related to physical aggression or some kind of conduct disorder" [19]. This quote illustrates how military references can shape public understanding of scientific findings and reinforce assumptions about soldiers' biological predisposition toward violence. Such a characterization unfairly stigmatizes soldiers and warrants a response that challenges the stereotype and clarifies the limits of the scientific evidence.

This divide echoes longstanding concerns among the American Founders, who were wary of standing armies because of their association in Europe with monarchical power and threats to republican governance. Over time, this caution has contributed to a broader cultural ambivalence within segments of American intellectual and civic life about the moral status of military institutions. In certain periods, particularly during strong antiwar movements, moral opposition to war has extended beyond policy critique to encompass negative judgments of soldiers themselves. Universities and intellectual elites have often served as focal points for this critique, further widening the cultural distance between civilian and military communities.

Empirical research in moral psychology reinforces this account. Studies by Hanne M. Watkins and Geoffrey P. Goodwin demonstrate a "fundamental asymmetry" in moral judgment: evaluations of individual soldiers are strongly shaped by prior beliefs about the justice of the war they fight [20]. As a result, even soldiers who adhere to rules of engagement are often judged as morally compromised if the war itself is perceived as unjust. These findings suggest that civilian moral evaluations are not neutral assessments of conduct (jus in bello), but are filtered through prior ideological commitments and intuitive biases. This dynamic sustains the translation problem, obscuring the moral structure of disciplined military virtue and reinforcing the gap between civilian perception and the lived ethical framework of the professional soldier.

Traditional just war theory distinguishes jus ad bellum, the justification for going to war, from jus in bello, the moral constraints governing its conduct, including proportionality and civilian protection. Revisionist theorists challenge this separation, arguing that soldiers' moral permission to fight depends partly on the justice of their cause. A traditionalist objection is that this places unreasonable demands on soldiers who must assess political responsibility amid limited information, immediate danger, and fierce combat. These practical limits support clear, shared restraints on warfare; an enemy's brutality does not itself remove them [21,22].

The emphasis on right intention, restraint, and accountability also invites a virtue-ethical interpretation of jus in bello. Ethical conduct under conditions of violence requires dispositions that support judgment under pressure. This resembles Aristotle's phronesis, or practical wisdom, which develops through experience and habituation [23]. Distinguishing legitimate targets, restraining excess, and acting proportionately require more than knowledge of rules; they require the capacity to apply those rules when fear, anger, or loyalty makes doing so difficult. This is an interpretation of the tradition's formative implications, not a claim that war necessarily produces virtue.

The Tragic Vision of Human Nature

Selfish behavior is constrained by individual conscience and concerns about harm and fairness, as well as by interlocking physical, psychological, cultural, and institutional mechanisms. Military service is one institutional setting in which these mechanisms operate.

An Integrated Moral Psychology

Understanding these constraints requires a moral psychology that examines the full range of mechanisms through which diverse cultures regulate selfishness.

Such an account integrates the "outside-the-head" elements studied by anthropologists and sociologists, including institutions and social practices, with "inside-the-head," brain-based explanations. It also considers how these mechanisms evolved [24].

Institutions and Social Practices

Thomas Sowell's *A Conflict of Visions* offers a framework for understanding disagreements about politics, morality, and war. It distinguishes two underlying orientations: the constrained and unconstrained visions [14]. Haidt and Pinker praise Sowell's work and draw on this framework in their accounts of morality and human nature [24,25].

Sowell defines a "vision" not as a fully reasoned theory but as a deep, often implicit set of assumptions about human nature and social reality that precede and shape reasoning itself. As he puts it in A Conflict of Visions: *"Visions are the foundations on which theories are built."* More fully, "visions… are a pre-analytic cognitive act. It is what we sense or feel before we have constructed any systematic reasoning that could be called a theory much less deduced any specific consequences as hypotheses to be tested against evidence. A vision is our sense of how the world works, and they determine what we consider possible, necessary, or desirable.

Furthermore, "Visions are indispensable but dangerous but s precisely to the extent that we confuse them with reality itself. What has been deliberately neglected may not in fact turn out to be negligible in its effect on the results. That has to be tested against evidence".

The tragic and utopian visions thus begin with different assumptions about human limits and the possibility of overcoming them. Their disagreement about war follows from these starting points: whether conflict is an enduring condition to be managed or a problem that can ultimately be solved.

The constrained vision begins from a sober assessment of human nature. It assumes that human beings are inherently limited—morally imperfect, self-interested, and only partially rational. Because of these constraints, social order depends less on ideal intentions and more on evolved institutions, traditions, and practices that channel behavior toward stability and cooperation. In this view, war is a tragic but sometimes unavoidable feature of human existence. The use of force is not seen as a moral failure per se, but as a necessary instrument for preserving order and protecting against aggression. Accordingly, the constrained vision emphasizes discipline, hierarchy, and the cultivation of virtues—such as courage, loyalty, and restraint—that enable individuals, particularly soldiers, to act ethically under conditions of conflict. War, while regrettable, is governed by norms (e.g., rules of engagement and just war principles) that reflect an attempt to impose moral limits within an imperfect world.

In Sowell's usage, the term "trade-offs" means that achieving one valued good necessarily requires giving up, limiting, or risking another—because human capacities, knowledge, and resources are finite. There are no perfect solutions, only choices among competing goods and costs.

For example, a military may adopt strict rules of engagement to minimize civilian casualties (a moral good), but doing so can increase risk to its own soldiers and potentially reduce operational effectiveness. Alternatively, loosening those constraints may improve battlefield success and troop safety, but at the cost of greater harm to noncombatants and diminished moral legitimacy. A "trade-off" is the recognition that both values cannot be maximized simultaneously; prioritizing one entails accepting costs to the other.

By contrast, the unconstrained vision rests on a more optimistic view of human nature and potential. It assumes that through reason, education, and moral progress, individuals and societies can overcome historical limitations and approach more just and humane forms of social organization. From this perspective, war is not an inevitable condition but a preventable failure—often the result of flawed institutions, unjust power structures, or insufficient moral development. The unconstrained vision tends to place greater faith in abstract moral reasoning, universal principles (such as human rights), and the possibility of designing systems that reduce or eliminate the need for violence. As a result, it is often more critical of traditional military institutions and more inclined to question the moral legitimacy of war, particularly when it appears inconsistent with higher ethical ideals.

Applied to war, these visions yield different responses. The constrained vision emphasizes disciplined moral formation in the face of tragic necessity; the unconstrained vision emphasizes moral and institutional transformation to remedy preventable injustice.

Classical Accounts of Moral Formation

Plato and the Unconstrained Vision

Plato can be read as exemplifying what Sowell calls the *unconstrained* vision. In this view, human reason—at least in its highest form—can grasp moral truth directly and organize society accordingly. Plato's ideal of the *philosopher-king* reflects confidence that those with sufficient intellectual and moral insight can transcend ordinary human limitations and design a just social order.

Social problems, from this perspective, are largely the result of ignorance, and are thus, in principle, *solvable* through knowledge, rational planning, and moral clarity. The emphasis falls on intentions, ideal justice, and the authority of those who "know." Constraints such as tradition, evolved institutions, or dispersed knowledge are seen as obstacles rather than safeguards [26].

Aristotle and the Constrained Vision

Aristotle, by contrast, can be read as aligning with Sowell's *constrained* vision. He begins from a more modest estimate of human rationality and moral consistency. For Aristotle, ethical life is not the application of abstract perfection but the cultivation of phronesis within the limits of human fallibility. Social order emerges not from top-down design but from habituation, custom, and the gradual development of virtue within communities. Rather than seeking ideal forms imposed by reason alone, Aristotle emphasizes the importance of experience, tradition, and the stabilizing role of institutions. Problems are not fully "solvable" in a utopian sense; they are instead managed through trade-offs, with an awareness of unintended consequences [23].

Comparing the Two Visions

Plato (unconstrained): trusts in reason to *perfect* society; prioritizes ideals and the insight of the wise.

Aristotle (constrained): trusts in experience to *guide* society; prioritizes prudence, limits, and evolved practices.

This distinction helps frame the argument for "virtue in violence." The reading of Aristotle offered here accommodates the tragic conditions of war, in which decisions involve uncertainty, competing goods, and irreversible consequences. It emphasizes moral formation through habituation, discipline, and cohesion. The reading of Plato, by contrast, points to the risk of overconfidence in rational judgment detached from lived experience—a concern also directed at more abstract, revisionist moral theories of war.

Moral Cognition and Human Nature

Thomas S. Kuhn's The Structure of Scientific Revolutions describes how challenges to an established paradigm can lead to a new framework for inquiry [27].

Kuhn's account offers a way to consider changes in the study of moral cognition, where findings from several disciplines have challenged assumptions about the independence of reason from emotion and social life.

Consilience and the Unity of Knowledge
An Interdisciplinary Account of Military Virtue

Wilson's concept of consilience links principles from different disciplines within a shared explanatory framework [28]. Applied here, it brings philosophical accounts of virtue into conversation with research on moral cognition and social behavior.

Freud on War and Human Nature

Freud's account of war neurosis and his reflections in "Why War?" parallel Thomas Sowell's constrained—or tragic—vision of human nature [29]. Both emphasize the limits of reason and the need to manage enduring human impulses rather than expect their elimination.

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud explored how traumatic experiences overwhelm the mind's protective "stimulus barrier." Soldiers' recurring traumatic dreams challenged his view that mental life primarily seeks pleasure and avoids distress [30]. He interpreted repetition as an attempt to master overwhelming experiences, an insight that informed his account of repetition compulsion and, more speculatively, the death drive. War neurosis thus exposed the limits of conscious control under extreme stress. 'Men are not gentle creatures who want to be loved… they are, on the contrary, creatures among whose instinctual endowments is to be reckoned a powerful share of aggressiveness" [31].

In his exchange with Albert Einstein, Freud extended this concern to collective violence. He argued that war cannot be explained solely by political structures: aggression is also rooted in human instinct. Law restrains violence through collective force, while emotional bonds and cultural development help redirect destructive impulses. Among sovereign nations, the absence of an effective central authority makes these restraints especially fragile.

This outlook resembles Sowell's tragic vision, in which social order depends on institutions that accommodate

persistent human limitations. For Freud, Eros—the drive toward connection—and cultural development counter aggression without abolishing it. Peace therefore depends on strengthening institutions, shared identifications, and human bonds.

Freud's guarded hope rests on managing conflict rather than overcoming human nature. Read alongside Sowell, his work presents civilization as a precarious achievement requiring continual restraint, cooperation, and effort. This supports comparison with Sowell' : peace requires managing persistent human aggression rather than expecting its elimination: "there is no likelihood of our being able to suppress humanity's aggressive tendencies" [31].

Yet, Freud was remarkably prescient in suggesting that future scientific developments would yield a more complete understanding of human nature.

"The deficiencies in our descriptions would probably vanish, if we were already in a position to replace the psychological terms with physiological or chemical ones… We may expect (science) to give the most surprising information and we cannot guess what it will return in a few dozen years of questions we have put to it. They may be of a kind that will blow away the whole of our artificial structure of hypothesis" [30].

Over the past several decades, evolutionary biology, cognitive psychology, and behavioral genetics have challenged influential assumptions about human nature. Pinker organizes his critique around three ideas: the blank slate, which denies innate psychological structure; the noble savage, which idealizes human goodness before social influence; and the ghost in the machine**,** which treats mind or will as independent of biological constraint [25]. In his account, evidence of cognitive limitations, partial altruism, and competing loyalties challenges these views. This interpretation is consistent with Sowell's tragic vision, which emphasizes human limitations, trade-offs, and institutions that channel self-interest toward cooperation. It also offers a psychological perspective on Huntington's account of the tension between liberal society and the military profession [14,18,25].

"We believe that virtue theories are the most psychological sound approach to morality in dealing with our innate nonmoral, asocial egotistical tendencies. [32]. Specifically, "… we link our view of moral and maintenance with virtue theory, an ancient approach that is consistent with the insights of many modern perspectives. In doing so, we are extending our exploration of the possibilities of virtue theory, which we began in the previous article Haidt and Joseph [32]. We are not proposing that virtue ethics is the best normative moral theory. We speak only descriptively, and we note that there is a growing consilience between philosophical writings on virtue and emotions, empirical research on moral functioning, and cognitive science, a consilience that suggests that virtue theory may yield deeper insights into the architecture of human social and moral cognition [33].

Jonathan Haidt's *The Righteous Mind* offers a contemporary account of this relationship between human limitations and moral life. His research emphasizes rapid, intuitive processes shaped by evolutionary history, alongside moral foundations and the cohesion of groups. Human beings, in this account, are socially embedded and emotionally responsive, and their moral communities often conflict. These themes align with Sowell's tragic vision and its emphasis on institutions that support cooperation despite human limitations. Haidt's synthesis places this vision within a broader, interdisciplinary account of moral psychology [24].

'Ultimately our moral sense or conscience becomes a highly complex sentiment, originating in social instincts, largely guided by the approbation of our fellowmen, ruled by reason, self-interest…and confirmed by instruction and habit"[16].

Haidt's social intuitionist model of morality provides a research-based "functional definition": "Moral systems are interlocking sets of values, virtues, norms, practices, identities, institutions, technologies, and evolved psychological mechanisms that work together to suppress or regulate selfishness and make cooperative social life possible" [24]. He goes on to say: "Virtues, on this understanding, are closely connected to the intuitive system. A virtuous person is one who has the proper automatic reactions to ethically relevant events and states of affairs, for example, another person's suffering, an unfair distribution of a good, a dangerous but

necessary mission. Part of the appeal of virtue theory has always been that it sees morality as embodied in the very structure of the self, not merely as one of the activities of the self. Even Aristotle supposed that in developing the virtues we acquire a second nature, a recement of our basic nature, an alteration of our automatic responses" [34].

Wartime conditions can severely restrict opportunities for deliberation. As Clausewitz observes, "circumstances press for immediate decision, and allow no time to look about for fresh data [35]. This observation underscores the importance of developing sound judgment before combat and invites consideration of Aristotle's account of practical wisdom and virtue. Aristotelian virtue ethics is particularly well suited to such circumstances because it emphasizes the development of character through habituation and the exercise of practical wisdom (*phronesis*). Ethical preparation can cultivate dispositions that guide action when prolonged reflection is impossible [23]. Practical wisdom enables individuals to recognize morally significant features of particular situations and judge what appropriate action requires.

Aristotle's doctrine of the mean further explains how courage avoids both cowardice and rashness: the virtuous response is appropriate to the circumstances, rather than an arithmetic midpoint between extremes [23]. Consequently, "virtue ethics provides an important foundation for military ethical decision-making, helping soldiers interpret and apply moral rules under pressure" [36].

Contemporary findings in moral psychology and neuroscience offer higher-order evidence relevant to moral theories grounded primarily in abstract reasoning. First-order evidence directly supports a moral claim; higher-order evidence concerns the reliability of the processes through which such claims are reached. Jonathan Haidt and Selin Kesebir describe how emotional processes shape learning, attention, memory, decision-making, and social judgment. Research by Antonio Damasio, Haidt, Joshua Greene, Daniel Kahneman, and Matthew Lieberman likewise situates moral reasoning within intuitive, emotional, and socially conditioned processes that can precede conscious deliberation. These findings challenge the assumption that moral reasoning operates as an independent, purely objective system [37-41].

Cognitive unconscious encompasses mental processes that influence perception, judgment, and action outside conscious awareness [40]. It provides a framework for understanding how moral responses can arise before deliberate reflection, although unconscious processing is not exclusively emotional. Haidt's social intuitionist model proposes that moral judgments often begin with rapid, emotionally charged intuitions, with conscious reasoning subsequently providing justification. This helps explain why virtuous conduct cannot depend on good intentions alone: it also requires habits, ethical commitments, and institutional constraints that guide responses when fear, anger, or group loyalty might otherwise distort judgment.

Military culture offers concrete examples of these supports. The U.S. Army teaches loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, integrity, and personal courage during Basic Combat Training, while its leadership doctrine emphasizes empathy, discipline, ethical reasoning, and leadership by example (Center for the Army Profession and Leadership U.S. Army, n.d.) [42]. Ethical case discussions and decision-making exercises provide opportunities to apply these commitments to difficult situations. Repeated practice can help make appropriate responses more readily available—a process better described here as habit formation than habituation [43]. Applied to military ethics, this suggests the value of repeatedly rehearsing decisions such as withholding fire when a target is uncertain, protecting a surrendered enemy, or challenging unlawful conduct. These are illustrative applications of habit research, rather than proof that repetition alone produces virtue. Training must remain coupled with reflection, responsible leadership, and accountability so that both automatic responses and deliberate decisions remain subject to moral and legal constraints.

Taken together, this work invites scrutiny of the reasoning processes emphasized in deontological and utilitarian frameworks. It also strengthens the psychological case for virtue ethics, which attends to the social, emotional, and practical conditions under which moral judgment develops.

Robert Wright on Reasoning and Self Interest

"The proposition here is that the human brain is, in large

part a machine for winning arguments, a machine for convincing others that its owner is in the right and-thus a machine for convincing its owner of the same thing. The brain is like a good lawyer; given any set of interest to defined, it sets about, convincing the world of their moral and logical worth, regardless of whether they in fact have of either. Like a lawyer, the human brain wants victory, not truth; And, like a lawyer, it is sometimes more admirable for skill than for virtue" [44].

David Hume on Reason and Passion

"Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of passion, and can never pretend to any other office other than to serve and obey them" [45].

These findings challenge accounts of moral judgment that assume reasoning can operate independently of intuition, emotion, and social context. Virtue ethics, with its emphasis on habituation, character formation, and practical wisdom, offers a framework responsive to those conditions. The argument here is that this psychological fit strengthens the plausibility of virtue-based accounts; it does not, by itself, settle their normative claims or refute deontological and utilitarian alternatives.

Roy Baumeister's research connects classical virtue ethics with contemporary psychology through self-regulation: the capacity to control impulses, emotions, and behavior in the service of longer-term commitments. His account treats self-control as a capacity developed through practice, paralleling Aristotle's emphasis on habituation. The "strength model" of willpower proposes that self-control is both limited and developable, although its empirical support requires qualification in light of replication research [46,47]. James Coan's social baseline theory adds a relational dimension, explaining how social connection can reduce the burden of regulating threat and effort. The familiar assurance "I got your back" captures this experience of mutual support:

"The advantage which disciplined soldiers have over undisciplined hordes follows chiefly from the confidence which each man feels in his comrades. Obedience… is of the highest value, for any form of government is better than none. Selfish and contentious people will not cohere and without coherent nothing can be affected. A tribe rich in the above qualities which spread and be victorious over other tribes"[15].

"Self-sacrifice", a term frequently associated with military service but often used so broadly that it obscures the personal meaning of sacrifice in war. Self-sacrifice is commonly portrayed as giving one's life for one's country—an abstract ideal framed around patriotism or ideology. Although these commitments can be meaningful, emphasizing them alone risks overlooking the immediate human relationships that motivate soldiers to protect one another.

Research has supported empathy-altruism hypothesis using a variety of methodologies. Sociobiologists have argued that empathy is a key motivator for heroic action, and that empathic behavior helps groups survive even when individuals sacrifice their own lives for the greater good. "As the literature on heroism demonstrates, moral purpose is at the heart of heroic behavior, and the heroic empathy is at the heart of moral purpose" [48]. In addition, research linking sensitivity to another person's fear with empathy and compassion offers one way to understand this interpersonal dimension of self-sacrifice [8-11,17,41,49]. Affective empathy has been depicted as an "other-oriented emotional response elicited by the congruent welfare of someone else" [50].

Affective empathy arises through a largely automatic "bottom-up" process in which individuals first share or mirror the emotions they observe in others. Decety and Lamm describe emotional sharing as a form of "bottom-up information processing," whereby the perception of another person's emotional state automatically activates corresponding affective representations in the observer [51]. This process is thought to involve the activation of mirror neuron systems that simulate the observed emotional experience [52]. This is an automatic process that occurs before conscious awareness and thus is largely uncontrolled by higher thought processes. This automatic form of empathy may have physiological effects, including heart rates and breathing patterns and may influence emotional states as well [53,54]. Heroic behavior risking one's life can be seen as the ultimate end of this altruistic, self-sacrificing continuum [48]. "They had the ability to step aside of their own pain, put aside their own fear, and ask how can I help the guy next to me they had more than fist of courage and physical strength. They also had a heart large enough

to think about other" [55].

E. O. Wilson's theory of eusociality provides a biological and evolutionary foundation for understanding morality and character formation. Wilson argued that human beings evolved as highly cooperative social organisms whose survival depended on group cohesion, mutual aid, and self-sacrifice for the collective good [56]. From this perspective, moral behavior is not merely a cultural invention but an adaptive outcome of evolution. Traits such as loyalty, courage, fairness, and altruism emerged because they enhanced the survival and success of groups competing for resources and security. Character formation can therefore be viewed as the refinement and social cultivation of these biologically rooted predispositions, transforming innate social instincts into stable virtues that support both individual flourishing and collective welfare.

This evolutionary account is reinforced by the work of Frans de Waal, whose studies of primates demonstrate that many foundations of human morality predate human civilization. De Waal observed behaviors among chimpanzees and bonobos that resemble empathy, reconciliation, reciprocity, cooperation, and concern for group harmony [57]. These findings suggest that the roots of virtue are embedded within evolved social emotions rather than derived solely from rational deliberation. Such evidence aligns closely with Jonathan Haidt's social intuitionist model, which argues that moral judgments arise primarily from intuitive emotional responses, with reasoning often serving as a post hoc justification [58]. Together, Wilson and de Waal provide evolutionary support for Haidt's claim that morality emerges from deeply ingrained social instincts shaped through natural selection.

"In other words, we are not hypocritical fooling everyone when we act morally: we are making decisions that flow from social instincts older than our species, even though we add to this uniquely human complexity of a disinterested concern for others and for society as a whole" [57].

Following Hume, who saw reason as the slave of passion, Haidt has called for a thorough reevaluation of the role of rationality in moral judgment. He argues that most justification appears to occur post hoc—that is, after moral judgments have been reached through rapid, automatic intuitions.

Within this framework, military values may also be understood as an extension of evolved moral tendencies associated with group protection and collective survival. Throughout evolutionary history, the defense of kin and community was critical to group persistence. As a result, virtues such as loyalty, honor, duty, courage, and self-sacrifice became highly valued because they promoted the security and continuity of the group. The willingness to employ violence in defense of others can therefore be interpreted not as a contradiction of virtue but as a specialized expression of protective moral instincts. In this sense, military ethics channels primal evolutionary drive toward the defense of tribe and community into disciplined forms of service and sacrifice, supporting the argument that certain forms of violence, when constrained by moral purpose and virtue, arise naturally from humanity's evolved social nature.

An evolutionary account also reveals a central challenge for military character formation: solidarity within a group does not necessarily produce justice toward those outside it. Loyalty and mutual protection can sustain courage and sacrifice, but they can also encourage exclusion, hostility, and the protection of comrades from legitimate accountability. Military virtue therefore requires more strengthening group attachment. It requires cultivating practical judgment, self-command, and moral courage so that loyalty remains accountable to justice and protective action remains proportionate to its purpose. On this interpretation, character formation develops our capacities for cooperation while teaching us when to resist the impulses and pressures of our own group.

This distinction is particularly important when considering violence. Explaining why human beings evolved capacities for collective defense does not establish when the use of force is morally justified. Protective intentions must be evaluated alongside the means employed, the foreseeable harms, and the rights of those affected. A mature military ethos therefore expresses itself through both the willingness to confront danger and the discipline to exercise restraint. Protecting civilians, treating prisoners humanely, and refusing

wrongful conduct demonstrate that military character can extend moral concern beyond the boundaries of comradeship.

The same framework helps distinguish duty from supererogation. Military institutions cultivate courage and selfless service as professional commitments, but exceptional acts of voluntary sacrifice may exceed what those commitments reasonably demand. Such actions can express the highest aspirations of military character without becoming compulsory standards for every service member. An ethical military culture must therefore preserve room to honor extraordinary sacrifice while recognizing the moral limits of what it may require.

These perspectives help explain how military training functions as a system of moral formation. Repeated exposure to stress, structured routines, and accountability can develop the capacity to restrain destructive impulses and sustain ethical conduct under pressure. Baumeister's account of violence as shaped by meaning as well as impulse also helps explain how military institutions seek to direct aggression through professional norms, the law of armed conflict, and unit cohesion. Rules of engagement (ROE) translate principles of *jus in bello* into operational requirements that guide judgment and conduct. Their ethical significance lies in joining the capacity to use force with a disciplined commitment to restraint.

This account also highlights vulnerabilities. Disruptions to relationships, routines, and shared purposes that support self-regulation may contribute to diminished self-control, loss of purpose, and an increased risk of moral injury and identity fragmentation, particularly during the transition to civilian life.

Moral foundations theory complements this perspective. Haidt examines how communities shape moral intuitions, while Baumeister examines the self-regulation needed to act on commitments under stress. Together, they suggest that virtue depends on both a supportive moral community and the cultivated capacity to act responsibly under pressure.

Baumeister and Sowell converge on the problem of human limitations. Both accounts suggest that moral knowledge alone is insufficient: people must also be able to restrain impulses, regulate emotions, and act responsibly under pressure.

Baumeister's account of self-regulation offers a psychological parallel to Sowell's tragic vision. Sowell emphasizes limits on rationality, virtue, and self-control; Baumeister examines how failures of regulation can contribute to harmful conduct. Fatigue, fear, humiliation, group pressure, and moral disorientation may weaken restraint. This comparison helps explain why moral formation requires both personal capacities and institutions that support them.

Self-Control as a Moral Capacity

'Self-command is not only itself a great virtue, but from it all the other virtues seem to derive their principle lustre" [59].

Baumeister and Exline describe self-control as central to the practice of virtue. "Morality is a set of rules that enable people to live together in harmony, and virtue involves internalizing those rules. Insofar as virtue depends on overcoming selfish or antisocial impulses for the sake of what is best for the group or collective, self-control can be said to be the master virtue" [60].

In this comparison, Sowell explains why societies need systems of constraint, while Baumeister helps explain the capacities individuals need to act within them. Together, their accounts suggest that examining moral failure requires attention to both institutional conditions and personal regulation.

This synthesis explains some moral failures in war as breakdowns in the capacities and institutions that sustain restraint. Violations of jus in bello reveal the fragility of those constraints, consistent with the tragic vision. "Violence is largely a problem of Self-Control" (Pinker, 2011, 592). Baumeister provides a psychological account consistent with Sowell's philosophical warning: without disciplined character, institutional restraint, and realistic expectations of human weakness, moral norms alone cannot prevent evil. "Our willpower has made us the most adaptable creatures on the planet, we are rediscovering how to help one another use it. We're learning, once again, that willpower is the virtue that sets our species apart and makes each one of us strong" [55].

Darwin situated self-command within an evolutionary account of social and moral development. In Chapter IV of The Descent of Man, he described this capacity as strengthened through habit and instruction, enabling individuals to practice virtues essential to their community's welfare [16]. In Chapter V, he extended this account to the evolution of human intellectual and moral capacities through social life, arguing that cooperation and concern for others helped communities flourish, while habit, education, reason, and public opinion further reinforced moral development [16]. Darwin links failures of moral conduct to the "weak power of self-command," which he suggests develops through sustained habit, instruction, and religion [16]. Applied to military life, this perspective emphasizes the role of training, discipline, and ethical education in cultivating restraint and guiding behavior.

Like Baumeister's work, Philip Zimbardo's research connects virtue ethics with the moral formation of military character, contributing to the argument for "virtue in violence." Best known for the Stanford Prison Experiment, Zimbardo argued that situational forces can rapidly shape behavior, often toward cruelty or moral disengagement. In his later work, particularly The Lucifer Effect and the Heroic Imagination Project, he advances a complementary thesis: individuals can be systematically prepared to resist destructive situational pressures through the cultivation of prosocial dispositions, moral awareness, and disciplined self-regulation. "For many heroes, engaging heroically may have more to do with the individual's examination of their own deeply held standards for behavior and that despite profound reservations and fear about the actions they are about to take, these internalized standards are so inviolable as to compel action even in the face of peril" [61]. This emphasis on preparing people to act responsibly under pressure aligns with Aristotelian conceptions of virtue as habituated excellence. In military contexts, where extreme conditions heighten situational pressures, Zimbardo's work underscores the necessity of training, professional norms, exemplary leadership, and unit cohesion to cultivate virtues such as restraint, loyalty, courage, and moral judgment (phronēsis). When internalized as stable traits, these capacities can support ethical conduct in combat (jus in bello) and help carry military commitments into civilian life.

Read with the methodological limitations discussed below, Zimbardo's work provides a rationale for treating virtue formation as central to sustaining moral agency within and beyond the morally complex environment of war. His account emphasizes how authority, group norms, dehumanization, and institutional practices can weaken personal responsibility and make harmful conduct appear acceptable or obligatory [62]. Applied to military ethics, this suggests that good intentions and professed values require reinforcement through practiced habits of restraint, recognition of others' humanity, and the moral courage to question or resist unlawful conduct. Virtue formation involves developing the capacity to recognize an ethical demand and act on it when fear, loyalty, or pressure from others makes doing so difficult.

Franco, Blau, and Zimbardo's analysis of heroism complements this argument by emphasizing action undertaken for others or in defense of moral principles despite personal risk [61]. In military settings, such action might include protecting a vulnerable civilian, intervening against the mistreatment of a prisoner, or reporting misconduct despite anticipated disapproval from comrades. These examples illustrate how courage and loyalty require ethical direction: commitment to one's unit must remain compatible with responsibility for those affected by its actions. Institutions support this capacity when leaders model restraint, training rehearses difficult ethical decisions, and accountability makes principled intervention possible.

These implications should not be mistaken for experimental proof that virtue training prevents abuse. The methodological problems surrounding the Stanford Prison Experiment limit the causal conclusions that can be drawn from it, while Franco and colleagues offer a conceptual analysis rather than a direct test of virtue formation [61,63]. The defensible argument is therefore that cultivating moral agency requires attention both to personal character and to the institutional conditions that sustain—or undermine—its expression.

Military Ethos and the Formation of Moral Character

The argument developed throughout *Virtue in Violence* returns to a central proposition: military character is cultivated through a way of living. Its formation depends on repeated practice, moral reflection, dependable

relationships, and institutional expectations that teach people to exercise force responsibly. Training develops more than technical competence. It shapes how individuals perceive their obligations, respond to fear, treat others, and exercise judgment when the consequences of action are grave. David Brooks captures this formative understanding of military life:

"Military character is predicated on the premise that great individuals are made, not born, and they are made through training. Change happens from the outside in. It is through the exercise of drill that a person becomes self regulating. It is through the expression of courtesy that a person becomes polite. It is through the resistance to fear that a person develops courage. It is through the control of facial expressions that one becomes sober. The act precedes the virtue" [64]

From antiquity to modernity, the cultivation of good character has remained a central moral aspiration: a lifelong endeavor to give integrity to our actions, wisdom to our choices, and purpose to our lives.

In Book II of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle explains that character develops through repeated actions and habituation, which shape virtuous or vicious dispositions (952). These states of character determine how well or badly we respond to emotions such as fear and anger; character therefore concerns our established way of responding to emotions, rather than merely experiencing them. In chapter 6, Aristotle defines moral virtue as "a state of character concerned with choice, lying in a mean," explaining that this mean is relative to us and determined by reason as a person of practical wisdom would determine it.

For MacIntyre, character is the enduring pattern of dispositions through which a person acts, chooses, and gradually gives shape to a life (2007, 38). It takes form through participation in shared practices, relationships, and moral traditions, where individuals learn what is worth pursuing and what it means to act well. Through the cultivation of virtues, these commitments acquire depth and steadiness, guiding conduct through changing circumstances. Character thus unfolds through the narrative of a life: each choice draws on what has come before while helping to shape the person one is becoming. The virtues provide continuity within that unfolding story, sustaining the pursuit of a good life even when its direction is difficult to discern (MacIntyre, 2007).

Military ethics is therefore illuminated by virtue ethics, which attends to the moral qualities of the person as well as the rightness of particular actions. Laws, rules, and customs remain essential to military professionalism, but compliance alone cannot exhaust its ethical demands. Rules establish necessary standards of conduct; military service also calls for courage, sound judgment, selflessness, and, at times, sacrifice beyond what formal obligations can reasonably require. The profession seeks to cultivate people who consistently strive to do what is right, even when doing so is difficult, dangerous, or personally costly.

This aspiration includes what moral philosophers describe as supererogatory acts: morally praiseworthy deeds that exceed the call of duty. Depending on the circumstances and the obligations involved, risking one's life for comrades, enduring exceptional hardship to protect others, or subordinating personal interests to a legitimate mission may express this dimension of service. Such conduct cannot be fully explained by obedience alone. Its moral significance also depends on the character, purposes, and judgment of the person who acts.

Aristotle's account helps explain why outward conduct and the character of the person acting must be considered together. Ethical action expresses cultivated dispositions such as courage, loyalty, integrity, temperance, and justice. These dispositions influence what people notice, how they understand a challenge, and how they respond under pressure. Their development serves both individual and communal ends. When people aspire to moral excellence and undertake worthy actions, they contribute to their own flourishing and to the common good. A community that cultivates justice and responsibility can also strengthen the conditions under which liberty, equality, and collective welfare flourish. Virtue is thus a personal achievement with consequences for the wider social world.

Military training provides a practical setting in which these claims can be examined. Loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, integrity, and courage acquire substance through repeated conduct: maintaining equipment on which others depend, reporting an error

despite embarrassment, treating subordinates fairly, and exercising restraint under pressure. Whether these practices develop virtue depends on their purposes and on the culture that sustains them. Training can cultivate responsibility, but it can also reinforce conformity, concealment, or unquestioning obedience. Its moral value cannot be inferred from its intensity or effectiveness alone.

The demands of military life nevertheless make it a distinctive setting for the development and exercise of courage. As Adam Smith writes:

"War is the great school both of acquiring and exercising this species of magnanimity. Death, as we say, is the king of terrors and the man who has conquered the fear of death is not likely to lose his presence of mind at the approach of any other natural evil…" [58].

The ethical significance of such steadiness depends on how it is directed. Aristotle's account of habituation explains how repeated actions can become enduring dispositions: people become just by doing just acts. Yet fully virtuous action also requires knowledge, deliberate choice, and stability of character [23]. A recruit may initially inspect equipment because an instructor demands it. As the recruit recognizes that another person's safety depends on the inspection and chooses to perform it for that reason, compliance can mature into conscientious responsibility. Practical wisdom, or *phronesis*, enables the person to judge what particular circumstances require [23]. Military character must therefore combine practiced steadiness with the capacity to recognize when a familiar response is inadequate.

Contemporary research on habit formation helps explain aspects of this process while also clarifying its limits. Wood and Rünger describe habits as learned responses automatically activated by familiar contexts [43]. Drawing together behavioral, cognitive, and neuroscientific research, they explain how repetition in stable circumstances strengthens associations between environmental cues and responses. Conscious goals often initiate behavior, while habits help maintain it, sometimes even after the original reward becomes less desirable. Habits and deliberate decision-making operate together: habitual responses provide efficient defaults, while conscious control allows people to adjust or override them when they have sufficient motivation and capacity.

This relationship matters especially under stress, which can increase reliance on both beneficial and unwanted habits. People may also mistake frequent behavior for evidence of strong intention, overlooking the environmental cues that sustain their actions. Changing behavior consequently requires attention to context. Disrupting familiar cues can reduce unwanted habitual responses, while repeating desired actions with consistent cues and appropriate rewards can establish useful routines. Older associations may nevertheless persist, helping explain a return to previous behaviors. These findings support the importance of practice in military training, but they do not establish that repetition alone produces moral character. Automaticity must remain connected to ethical understanding and judgment [43].

Haidt's moral foundations theory helps explain how military culture gives repeated practices emotional and communal force. Loyalty and authority can support solidarity, respect for leadership, and commitment to shared obligations, while care and fairness direct attention to suffering and just treatment [65]. Their interaction reveals an enduring tension. Loyalty may sustain sacrifice for comrades while also encouraging silence about their wrongdoing; respect for authority may enable coordination while discouraging necessary challenges. Military education must therefore cultivate loyalty and obedience within a wider commitment to human dignity and accountable service. Reporting misconduct can express fidelity to the profession's purposes even when it provokes immediate disapproval.

Wilson places these competing tendencies within a broader account of human nature:

"In human society, the virtues of honor, duty and self-sacrifice are always battling counter impulses towards selfishness and cowardice, and from this crucible of opposing forces comes culture itself. In summary, the human condition is an endemic turmoil rooted in the evolutionary process that created us. The worst in our nature coexists with the best, and so it will forever be, to scrub it out, if such were possible, would make us less than human" [56].

Coan and Sbarra's social baseline theory adds an account of the relationships that support people in confronting such demands [66]. Dependable social relationships help regulate perceived risk and effort. Applied to military training, this perspective suggests why shared burdens, reliable leadership, and mutual assistance may enable personnel to face difficult situations. By keeping commitments and supporting a struggling teammate, personnel experience trust in practice. Yet cohesion does not by itself establish virtue: dependable relationships can also sustain groups pursuing harmful ends. The theory helps explain why character formation occurs within relationships while leaving open the ethical question of what those relationships encourage people to do.

Baumeister's analysis of violence likewise shows why moral conviction and professional pride require critical examination. His account identifies instrumental gain, threatened egotism, idealism, and sadism as sources of harmful conduct. For military character, the dangers of wounded pride and moral idealism are especially significant: injured pride may encourage retaliation, while commitment to a supposedly righteous cause may be used to justify cruelty. Training must therefore teach personnel to acknowledge mistakes, accept correction, and question claims that worthy objectives excuse harmful means. Courage and honor acquire moral value when joined to restraint and accountability. Confidence in one's own goodness cannot substitute for examining one's conduct (Pinker, 2011) [67].

Zimbardo's situational perspective extends this examination to the institutional environment. Roles, authority, and organizational systems can influence harmful behavior, making leadership practices, incentives, and responses to misconduct essential concerns of military education. An institution undermines its instruction in integrity when it rewards misleading reports or punishes candor. Although the Stanford Prison Experiment has serious methodological limitations and cannot establish that situations inevitably overwhelm character, the broader question of how institutions shape conduct remains indispensable [62,63]. Ethical responsibility rests with individuals, but institutions help create the conditions in which responsible action is supported or discouraged.

Together, these perspectives explain why military character must be cultivated through practice, relationships, reflection, and institutional expectations. Aristotle illuminates the development of dispositions and practical judgment; Wood and Rünger explain mechanisms of habit formation; Haidt identifies moral commitments through which communities organize belonging; and Coan and Sbarra clarify the importance of dependable relationships [43]. Baumeister and Zimbardo, in turn, identify dangers arising from destructive motives and enabling environments. Together, these accounts support training that repeatedly requires truthful reporting, fair treatment, responsible dissent, and restraint, accompanied by reflection on reasons and consequences. Within *Virtue in Violence*, military character consists in the learned capacity to act decisively while remaining answerable for the purposes, means, and human consequences of force.

Zimbardo closes his own examination of harmful conduct by returning to the possibilities of heroism and human connection:

"And so, the parting message that we might derive from our long journey into the heart of darkness and back again is that heroic acts and the people who engage in them should be celebrated. They form essential links among us, they forge our Human Connection. The evil that persists in our midst must be countered, and eventually overcome, by the greater good in the collective hearts and personal heroic results of Everyman and Everywoman. It is not an abstract concept, but, as we are reminded by the Russian poet and former prisoner at Stalin's Gulag Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn: 'The line dividing good and evil cuts through the center of our human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart'" [62]

The interdisciplinary argument developed here also requires a distinction between first order and higher-order evidence. First-order evidence bears directly on a claim; higher-order evidence concerns the reliability of the beliefs, reasoning, or evidence used to assess that claim. It can alert people to possible errors in their own cognitive processes [68]. Research on intuition, loyalty, threatened pride, and institutional influence can therefore prompt scrutiny of moral confidence without independently settling what is right. Understanding why

a judgment feels compelling is relevant to assessing it but does not establish its truth.

Virtue ethics gains plausibility from an interdisciplinary framework that connects moral formation with accounts of intuition, prosociality, habit, and social relationships. This convergence reflects Wilson's conception of consilience: different fields can contribute to a more integrated understanding of human conduct. Principles governing conduct in war, including restraint and discrimination, require people capable of applying them under pressure. Research on moral cognition helps explain how these capacities may develop and how they may fail. Descriptive findings alone, however, cannot establish the moral legitimacy of lethal authority or determine when force is justified [5,24,25].

The resulting "warrior moral ecosystem" can cultivate loyalty, courage, and self-sacrifice under conditions of shared risk. Its ethical value depends on whether these dispositions serve legitimate purposes and remain subject to restraint and accountability. Virtue in violence consequently remains a demanding moral possibility. Military communities must prepare people to act decisively while preserving their responsibility for what they do, why they do it, and whom their actions affect.

This possibility must be understood against the persistent tensions within human nature. Wilson's account suggests that our best and worst tendencies coexist within an evolved inheritance. Honor, duty, courage, and self-sacrifice emerge in continuing tension with selfishness, fear, and cowardice. From these competing impulses, culture takes shape. On this view, eliminating our darker tendencies entirely, if that were possible, would also transform the conditions under which some virtues are exercised. The ethical task is to understand and regulate these tensions within a recognizably human life [56].

This brings the argument back to the military's circumscribed use of force within a profession committed to service and self-sacrifice. Marsh's work draws attention to human capacities for aggression alongside empathy, compassion, and self-control [17]. These capacities are grounded partly in evolved processes that operate outside conscious awareness, while their expression is shaped by social environments. Relationships and institutions can strengthen and direct the potential for virtue. In military life, professional norms and the warrior ethos can cultivate courage, loyalty, discipline, and selfless service.

Marsh also emphasizes the importance of self-control in regulating impulses. Its expression can develop across the lifespan and varies across social and historical settings. The question is how individuals and communities learn to heed what Pinker (2011) calls the "better angels of our nature." As Marsh emphasizes, answering this question requires understanding how culture inevitably shapes the biological processes at work: how our physical and social environments influence the way we perceive and treat other beings, and how culture can expand our capacity for compassion and altruism [15].

Norbert Elias approached the development of self-control historically and sociologically. In The Civilizing Process, first published in 1939, he traced long-term changes in European manners, emotional expression, and the regulation of aggression. Growing social interdependence and the consolidation of state authority, he argued, increased pressures to anticipate consequences and restrain immediate impulses. Over generations, external constraints became internalized as habits of self-restraint. His account describes historical changes in patterns of conduct rather than an experimentally demonstrated psychological mechanism. Elias later reaffirmed the relationship among state formation, social interdependence, and self-regulation in Power and Civilization [69].

Applied to military life, these perspectives suggest that disciplined conduct depends on more than resisting impulses during a crisis. Values education, repeated practice, exemplary leadership, shared expectations, and systems of accountability all help make restraint an ordinary feature of professional conduct. Habit research supports the narrower proposition that repeated responses in recurring contexts can become increasingly automatic. It does not demonstrate that repeated conduct necessarily becomes virtuous. The ethical content of training matters as much as its intensity because self-control can serve humane or destructive purposes. Military discipline must therefore remain anchored in lawful conduct, protection of the vulnerable, and personal responsibility.

Wilson, Marsh, Elias, and the literature on self-control converge on an understanding of human beings as possessing capacities for aggression and compassion, selfishness and self-sacrifice. Culture, institutions, and moral education influence which tendencies are cultivated, reinforced, and expressed. For the military profession, the challenge is to discipline the capacity for violence through self-control, ethical restraint, and service to purposes beyond the self.

Pinker expresses this dual possibility directly: "With violence as with so many other concerns, human nature is the problem, but human nature is also the solution" [25]. The capacities for empathy, courage, altruism, and self-control are themselves part of human nature. Cultivating them enables individuals and societies to regulate aggression and selfishness. From the perspective developed here, virtue expresses human possibilities that must be educated, practiced, and sustained.

The virtue tradition also offers an account of the relationship between morality and self-interest. Moral obligations can appear to place the welfare of others in opposition to individual well-being, especially when they demand sacrifice. Virtue ethics challenges the assumption that these interests are always fundamentally opposed. Human beings flourish through the development and exercise of virtues, so moral excellence contributes to the quality of their own lives as well as to the lives of others. Virtues benefit both those affected by virtuous conduct and those who possess and practice them.

This understanding is central to Aristotle's account of the good life and is further developed within MacIntyre's (2007) discussion of virtue. On this view, virtue is constitutive of flourishing rather than merely a tool for securing external rewards. The exercise of reason, practical wisdom, courage, and justice realizes human capacities and gives substance to the idea of living well. Moral excellence belongs within an account of human well-being, even though virtuous action may involve loss, hardship, or profound sacrifice.

MacIntyre's account in *After Virtue* provides a framework for understanding the central problem of *Virtue in Violence*: how the cultivated capacity to use force can serve morally worthy purposes. For MacIntyre, virtues are acquired qualities that enable people to achieve the goods internal to shared practices, the forms of excellence realized through performing those activities well. Applied to military service, this perspective suggests that professional excellence must encompass responsible judgment, protection of others, and restraint alongside technical proficiency. Courage, justice, and honesty help ensure that military competence serves these purposes.

MacIntyre's distinction between practices and institutions also illuminates the dangers within military culture. Institutions sustain practices but necessarily pursue external goods such as power, status, and resources. These pursuits can corrupt the activities they support. In military life, an emphasis on promotion, reputation, or organizational success can displace truthful reporting and ethical responsibility. Virtue enables personnel to resist these pressures: loyalty may require reporting misconduct, courage may require challenging an improper order, and justice may require protecting people whom one's comrades regard with hostility. These are applications of MacIntyre's framework rather than claims he makes specifically about military service.

His account further places professional conduct within the unity of a whole human life and an inherited moral tradition. Military character must therefore connect the demands of service with the person's broader responsibilities to others. A warrior ethos remains ethically credible when its understanding of excellence is open to examination and correction. Within *Virtue in Violence*, virtue does not make violence good merely because a disciplined or courageous person employs it. It sustains the judgment needed to assess whether force serves a legitimate purpose, whether its means are defensible, and when restraint or refusal is required (MacIntyre, 2007).

Military service brings this tension into sharp focus. Soldiers understand that they must place the welfare of others above their immediate interests and, in extreme circumstances, risk or sacrifice their lives for their comrades, a legitimate mission, and their country. The virtue tradition understands such actions through the character and purposes they express. Courage, loyalty, honor, and selfless service can contribute to a life of meaning and excellence, while acts beyond strict

obligation may benefit the community and embody an individual's deepest moral commitments. This does not remove the cost of sacrifice; it explains why that sacrifice can possess moral significance beyond a calculation of personal advantage.

Smith's account of the soldier's profession captures the enduring public recognition of such commitments: "It is this habitual contempt of danger and death which ennobles the profession of a soldier, and bestows upon it, in the natural apprehensions of mankind, a rank and dignity superior to that of any other profession. The skillful and successful exercise of this profession, in the service of their country, seems to have constituted the most distinguishing feature in the character of the favorite heroes of all ages" [59].

The moral standing of military service ultimately depends on the purposes and judgment that direct this willingness to confront danger. Character development serves professional effectiveness, but its significance extends to the flourishing of individuals and the welfare of the communities they serve. Human nature contains both the capacity for violence and the resources for its moral regulation. Military education must cultivate those resources through practices that join courage to restraint, loyalty to justice, and discipline to responsible judgment. Understood in this way, military character is a way of living in which the capacity to use force remains inseparable from responsibility for its exercise [69-80].

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