

Why Real Ethics and True Wisdom are Keys to Keeping Intelligence Agencies Guardians of the People, Instead of Persecutors of the People

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Abstract. Keywords = Ethics, Wisdom, Intelligence Professionals, Analysis, Collection, Operations D-f.

The quintessential missions of a Special Agent are to protect the people, and innocence as a concept.

Protecting the state is also important, of course. If you do not, you won't be employed as an intelligence professional. But it is vital to remember which comes first, and that governments can change from protectors of the people to persecutors of them quickly. Eastern Europe had such vivid experiences with this problem during the last century that its current guardians should be models to the world. Protecting innocents is our eternal mission, and when governments go bad they often lose sight of this distinction.

To be a truly **Special** Agent one must **always** remember that the people come first and be loyal to them **first**, while also serving the state that employs and empowers you. States are your paycheck and pension so serve them well, but ... keep priorities as indicated. That could be the end of philosophic discussion, but this issue comes up practically in careers because decay is eternal. Graft grows. Corruption appears spontaneously. There is a little dictator in every politician's heart, and truly **Special** Agents never forget these problems. Thus an important question for the career professional is, "What missions would I refuse to do, **and why**?" Then, how does one refuse effectively? We will ask other hard questions here.

Intelligence professionals serve missions assigned by states in daily work, whether collectors, analysts, operators or support staff. They are expected not to ask big questions unless they really 'need to know.' But today we face civilization level crises, so the world needs Special Agents with global vision. How can "global vision" coexist with the secrecy so essential to many intelligence operations?

An important check on state hubris is a strong professional ethos rooted in the security services, but known more broadly. This should be supremely idealistic, deeply courageous, and grounded in **WHY** the people must always come first. You are their guardians – do not let any state oppress them! The rest of this paper will try to show how "real" ethics and "true" wisdom, or **aspirations to such ideals**, can help with cultivating an intelligence community ethos for the Third Millennium of the Common Era.

Introduction

What are "Real Ethics?" What is "True Wisdom?" If the answers to questions like these were easy, the world would have less problems. But analysts must often assess difficult problems so I will do my duty. "Real" ethics to me are the codes one carries in one's heart. Why? Because these prevail at moments of truth, when agents in the field must make decisions of life and death, sometimes in seconds with limited recourse for consultation. All the rule books in the world cannot cover every contingency. And no set of laws or regulations can decide in the blink of an eye who is innocent or evil in the chaotic fog of combat. Yet sometimes soldiers must decide, and fast. Intelligence professionals are much like soldiers, devoted to protecting their people and state from all enemies foreign and domestic, and willing to sacrifice their lives if necessary for the good of greater communities. The most **Special** Agents are loyal to humanity.

Intelligence professionals in the Third Millennium should be more than ordinary soldiers, because the threats to civilization today are complex, and often armored by elaborate deceptions. “Terrorism” and “Weapons of Mass Destruction” are obvious challenges, each cloaked with the best deceptions their creators can devise. Organized crime afflicts every nation, deeply, grievously, under complex covers and often protected by officials whose duty is the opposite of their deeds. Yet even these problems are simple compared with several others.

How can one protect a nation against the masters of international finance when bad bankers can bankrupt a country overnight with false securities? How does one attack climate change, a very non-traditional threat, when energy transnationals spend millions on propaganda declaring global warming a myth? How does one defeat corruption of governance, which cripples so many efforts to solve so many other problems, when bad leaders use their powers to keep the people in the dark? How does one protect “whistle blowers” who try to reveal such corruptions, when bad leaders prosecute the whistle blowers instead? How can Special Agents reveal and neutralize the false prophets of “religion” who urge their followers to violence while wrapped in religious clothing and quoting scriptures all the time? How can one defeat such problems without making enemies of whole religions, governments and the many good banks and businesses that exist next to the greedier, corrupt ones? These are very difficult questions to answer. But it is a duty of Special Agents to try, because bad bankers, industrialists, politicians and preachers can do far more damage to the people than ordinary criminals.

True Wisdom helps, but what is that? Wisdom is a quality of intelligence fused with ethics and deep understandings of both human nature and of the behavior of organizations such that ‘the wise’ can tell how things once set in motion will turn out. That is not easy. Unintended consequences are a perennial problem of governments, and are especially pernicious in the murky, deceptive world of intelligence affairs. But wisdom, like beauty, is very much in the eyes of beholders, and opinions vary enormously. I say, avoid trying to define ‘wisdom’ and cultivate it instead. This is introduction; now for some details.

How Wisdom Differs from Knowledge in National Security Intelligence Systems

The spectrum from data to information to knowledge to understanding to wisdom is important for intelligence professionals anywhere because their most common job is to distill vast volumes of data into very concise forms of much higher quality for the policy makers they advise. Therefore I commend this topic to anyone who would be an intelligence officer of any kind. But in this short paper I will focus on the quality called “wisdom” and how ethics, real ethics, is essential to that.

It is customary to start with definitions, but there can be no consensus on that for words like “wisdom.” In fact, just defining the meaning of “intelligence” consumes whole papers in journals like the CIA’s “Studies in Intelligence” (1). In intelligence affairs where propaganda is abundant, he who controls a definition often controls an argument, and definitions can be very fickle.

Observe how the US government recently “changed” the meaning of the word “torture” in order to violate solemn treaties and conventions. As though any government or attorney can really change the meaning of things known for millennia. That decision was extremely unwise because it sacrificed many long term strategic strengths, like cooperation with allies, information sharing, and a modest reputation of respect for rule of law and human rights that took generations to create. All were sacrificed for scraps of intelligence of trivial and transient value. So I will discuss wisdom a bit without definition.

In the modern world of rapidly changing, interdisciplinary threats, even basic concepts like the meanings of “national security” have been reexamined. Traditional models of national security have been almost 100% military, but modern threats are not. The UN has promoted a concept called “human security” that tries to go beyond that start, to notice things like “food insecurity,” presence or lack of affordable health care, education, energy, “environmental security” and such (2).

George Christian Maior, former Ambassador and current Director of the Romanian intelligence services wrote about these challenges for the Kennedy School at Harvard in 2011 (3):

“Nowadays new risks such as the financial crisis, natural disasters, nuclear dangers as the ones now present in Japan, growing food insecurity, environment pollution or dangers to energy supplies are affecting national security and citizens’ life as much as traditional threats if not even more. How should intelligence communities be prepared to deal with such threats that are difficult, if not impossible, to predict and to prevent? **In this respect, strategic knowledge relies on the ability to respond to the question of where national security starts and where it ends in the 21st century.**”

When struggling with such issues in 2003, I wrote a ‘think piece’ for the intelligence studies section of the International Studies Association (4) where I concluded:

“Wisdom has a longer time horizon than either intelligence or knowledge. It spans a greater scope of concern, and reflects a set of values infused into knowledge that include compassion as a core component. It requires a deep understanding of human nature, because it is mainly called upon during crises of human affairs. All the rest is details that can distract from these cardinal truths.”

So, longer time horizon, greater scope, values infused especially **compassion** and for guardians, **courage**, and some undefined, mystic like “understanding of human nature.” How do such concepts fit with most bureaucracies? Not very well. In fact, intelligence bureaucracies can be among the most difficult, because of their traditional obsession with secrecy and focus on worst case scenarios (5). You need look no further for evidence of dysfunction than to observe how intelligence bureaucracies treat whistle blowers even when those are exposing serious problems in the most judicious ways they can.

This is why I claimed in the beginning that a critical question every intelligence professional should answer for themselves is “What missions would I question or even refuse to do, and why?” This gets to the essence of who you are, why you exist, things that are at risk at moments of truth, in addition to whatever the state is concerned about. Unfortunately, bureaucracies often ask people to do immoral or stupid things and intelligence bureaucracies are no exception. In fact, some aspects of “intelligence” are necessarily ‘dirty business’ chosen usually as a less evil option than enduring some worst case scenario.

Professionals must discuss worst case scenarios seriously; military history is full of them coming true and peoples being exterminated. So someone must watch out for them (you) and be prepared to cope with them (you) even to die confronting them if necessary (you, and me). But balance on such topics is essential, lest you drive yourself into varieties of paranoid paralysis or worse, paranoid action.

This is where the ‘longer time horizon’ and ‘greater scope’ that wisdom surveys is helpful. Broader views generate better options. This is where the **courage** mentioned earlier is essential, because you must be prepared to face the ‘worst case’ in the blink of an eye with action, sometimes deadly action. But **compassion** is also essential, because you must remember that the field of battle is often littered with innocents, and that your information is always incomplete and sometimes is completely wrong. So rash action is exceedingly unwise unless the enemy is unambiguously in your eyes.

Remember that intelligence, even genius, are not the same things as wisdom. Nazi scientists were often brilliant but evil, precisely because they followed and served an evil national command. Nazi generals were, with some exceptions, dedicated and competent men. Many died trying to preserve their country when the national command became insane. Discerning the difference between good and evil is among the hardest tasks that wisdom faces. What to do when leaders go nuts is another. That difficulty is compounded by the secrecy and deception in military operations and especially in intelligence affairs.

If you are on the analytic side instead of operations, a particular evil may come to you that you must be aware of from the beginning to end of your career. That is “politicization” of intelligence products by overbearing or irredeemably ignorant policy makers. Remember as I mention this, that you are NOT the policy maker unless you have been elected or appointed to such a position. You are an ADVISOR to policy makers who make those ultimate decisions. But all too often, ambitious politicians have taken advantage of this power imbalance to insist on “intelligence” that confirms their biases or career goals.

Well that is a delicate situation for the serious analyst, because he or she must be extremely devoted to truth and courageous enough to “speak truth to power” even when power is very unhappy about that. At

the least, this advisor can be ignored thereafter, which is considered a fate near death for those with career ambition. But it can get worse, as the fate of professionals who told Ceaușescu truth during his decline exemplify. A truly **Special** Agent must find ways to educate his sovereign even about very difficult things, or to survive blowing whistles if the boss is not educable.

Politicians tend to operate on very short timelines. Their scope of responsibility may be vast, but their scope of interest is usually focused on preserving power against domestic contenders, (~ 75 %+) or they won't be the commander who needs to be educated about some extremely difficult situation. So they tend to want to get things done quickly, visibly or secretly, and they want intelligence systems to help them. Wisdom wants to get the right things done, properly. These are not identical frames of reference, but it is the business of advisors to help the commander make the best decisions for the people and the state. The great Chinese educator General Sun Tzu had much to say about that in about 500 BCE.

“Secret operations are essential in war; upon them the army relies to make its every move.”
(6, Ch. 13: 23)

“Generally, in war the best policy is to take a state intact; to ruin it is inferior to this. To capture an enemy's army is better than to destroy it; to take intact a battalion, a company or a five-man squad is better than to destroy them. For to win one hundred victories in one hundred battles is not the acme of skill. To subdue the enemy without fighting is the acme of skill.” (6, Ch. 3:1-3).

“If not in the interests of the state, do not act. If you cannot succeed, do not use troops. If you are not in danger, do not fight. A sovereign cannot raise an army because he is enraged, nor can a general fight because he is resentful. For while an angered man may again be happy, and a resentful man again be pleased, a state that has perished cannot be restored, nor can the dead be brought back to life. Therefore the enlightened ruler is prudent and the good general is warned against rash action. Thus the state is kept secure and the army preserved.” (6, Ch. 12: 17-19).

There is a reason Sun Tzu is still published and read millennia after most of the generals and emperors who hired him have been forgotten. Sun Tzu was wise; the others were merely intelligent or powerful. We should all aspire to that virtue during these difficult times for responsible nations.

Finally, a few words about “collecting” intelligence or wisdom. Obviously a large part of official intelligence involves gathering information about potential enemies and threats, then analyzing that mass of information into useful distillates that can help policy makers. The policy people may then make better speeches, better laws, or task operators to act upon the world in some way, from propaganda to bribery to assistance to prosecution, or any of the thousand other options in their bags of tradecraft.

Well you can collect data easily, but it is very difficult to collect intelligence, and gathering wisdom is a truly Sisyphean task. It is more productive to try to grow such things slowly. You can gather tin cans or videos, and you can sort them in a thousand ways. But you cannot “collect” real wisdom, only data. REAL intelligence and genuine wisdom have to be cultivated, and they both involve refined abilities to throw out noise and to integrate meaning at least as much as to gather all the information that you can.

Aristotle thought that wisdom was a virtue. To Aristotle “intelligence” was an innate human capacity to acquire knowledge. Knowledge, however, was an acquired grasp of reality “the way it is” not just the way we wish it to be. And “wisdom” was an intellectual virtue, an acquired habit of reflection that perfects raw intelligence into something more useful and far more broadly based. Finally, both the Greeks and the ancient Hebrews had a healthy fear of hubris, which is an occupational hazard of both high political leaders and very smart people. Presumably those would include you. Be warned: hubris is extremely corrosive to intelligence, to wisdom, and to all the other virtues.

How “Real Ethics” Can be Cultivated: Core Values, Codes and “God”

The shortest path to “real” ethics is a good relationship with God, but what “God” is, what “God” wants and whether “God” is even a meaningful concept are topics of eternal dispute. Some think they know for sure, but none persuades consensus. And almost all evidence is testimonial. So I will spend some

words on conventional ideas, like rule-based versus utilitarian ethics, and how to create a professional “ethos” in the hearts of individuals. Then I will return to the paradox of religious evils, like “holy” war, the ultimate oxymoron. But I repeat that when chaos prevails and danger is everywhere, rules written on paper carry very little weight. Whether you think you have a soul that actually endures beyond death and will be judged by something that animates the universe matters more. Those who do are prudent.

Western philosophers tend to divide “ethics” into three forms, rule-based (or deontological), utilitarian (where consequences matter more) and “virtue ethics” like Aristotle wrote about. Professionals of intelligence should be familiar with all three because they will certainly encounter each. Even the most daring Special Agent is supposed to obey some rules, if not those of their target country. Bureaucracies grow rules spontaneously, like bread grows mold. You won’t be deployed unless the bureaucracy thinks it has SOME control over you. But bureaucracies do not have either souls or consciences.

So in addition to ordinary laws, and extraordinary exemptions from law that are often written for spies and intelligence organizations, some will try to create codes of ethics specific to their craft or “Core Values” cherished by their groups. For examples, the U.S. Air Force core values are “Integrity, Service and Excellence” and U.S. Army core values are “Loyalty, Duty, Respect, Selfless Service, Honor, Integrity, and Personal Courage.” We will set aside for now all questions about dropping bombs on targets thousands of kilometers away from the person pushing the button, or beating someone to death in a prison in Afghanistan trying to get information they may or may not have. Core values must be very short, a list of words, almost always of universally positive and generally admired virtues.

Codes of Ethics tend to be longer, but still concise. For example, American doctors often swear to obey some version of the Hippocratic Oath during training. And if they want to belong to large professional groups like the American Medical Association they must also agree to uphold the AMA’s “Principles of Medical Ethics.” U.S. Attorneys have a similar set of mid-level codes called the “Rules of Professional Conduct.” Such codes often include some reference to “obey all laws” bowing to those far more detailed rule books that governments create.

The U.S. intelligence community has been struggling to professionalize off and on since it was created, for which some code of ethics is required. But it has also been bedeviled by an unending torrent of tasks considered more important, and by other stresses of dealing with corrupt politicians and real worst cases daily. Jan Goldman, formerly with the National Military Intelligence College, now director of the FBI’s graduate programs has been a pioneer in that Sisyphean task (7). Dr. Goldman has been replaced at what is now called our National Intelligence University by retired Army Colonel and J.D. Christopher Bailey who is doing the best he can to keep the ethics ball rolling in the heart of our declining global hegemon.

This has been and remains a very difficult birthing process for reasons already noted, but also because different Presidents often have extremely different ideas about what is moral to begin with. What Presidents want they tend to get, and they are the prime customer of our entire intelligence community. Every employee quickly learns that there are boundaries one can press, and others that just vaporize your career. Elder Romanians can no doubt tell you vivid stories about Romanian examples from the past.

Having watched this process from intimate positions for a long time I offer these observations.

1. Codes are good, but take much longer to create than most suppose. It took our doctors and our lawyers over a century each, and it may take our spies longer due to the extreme conditions they work under and unusual problems they work on. We hope they succeed before someone blows up the planet.
2. For a code to work well, it must be grown organically, not totally imposed from above. More than half of the value of these codes is the effort expended on discussing what they should be. So whatever code you might create, this is something mid-career people should strive to improve on, or at least to dissect as a normal part of professional development.
3. Be wary of the lawyers even though you want some present. There should be real correlations between “law” and “ethics codes.” But when governments go “bad” the law decays also. And attorneys often like to make the simplest things horribly complicated, which guts a key point.

To work well codes should be clear, concise and emotionally compelling. Philosophers have the same vice. No one can argue the meaning of a single word for millennia like philosophers.

4. A sage from Latin America told me that “ethics begin where laws end.” Concise, and true as far as five words can be. Latin America has experienced a vast transition much like Eastern Europe, when military governments were replaced by more democratic forms. Therefore many Latins have thought hard about how to create intelligence organizations that truly serve their peoples instead of serving mainly a thin ruling class by surveilling and oppressing political opponents. That is the #1 question for intelligence communities today, far more important in the long run than “terrorists,” a demon *du jour*. A review of the process of democratization of intelligence organizations, most Latin but a few European, is being edited now by Peter Gill of the UK (8).
5. All the wise words of a million sages, a thousand presidents, and your personal boss may be less instructive at critical moments than memory of your mother or grandmothers. Remember them when contemplating words about morality, and you may find more durable answers.

Back to “God” for a moment. It is difficult for me to imagine growing up in a country where religion was suppressed, and it may be difficult for you to imagine a country like mine where religious enthusiasts are everywhere and come in 1000+ varieties, roughly half crazy. The most zealous from many traditions truly believe that “God” wants their personal children to occupy the entire earth. Put too many of those folks in the same place and something like war or genocide is much too likely.

You may read 100 books on “intelligence” and never see the word “God.” So I must write about that as one human to another, with only a tiny focus on the special needs of **Special** Agents. There probably is a God, poorly understood by the organized churches. The churches are sincere, but hobbled by idolatry of words written by tribal men long dead, who could only write in the terms and languages of their time. After them came many editors, not all pure of heart. **Special** Agents observe that religious conflicts are a big cause of wars and violence on this earth, even though all the prophets spoke about peace as a prime objective. So this paradox is important to war forecasters and similar specialists.

What should matter to any human who deals with life and death issues are the questions of afterlife and judgment. There are rumors these occur. There is even some evidence of the scientific sort that can be contemplated, like systematic study of Near Death Experiences by physicians, or reports from remote viewers trained and deployed by the US Army, DIA and CIA over 20 years. Set aside the misguided “war” between science and religion – that is a distraction. One example is alleged contradiction between evolution and religion, fought over generations but solvable with nine words provided by my Ukrainian genetics professor Theodosius Dobzhansky. “Evolution is God’s way of creating life on earth.”

There probably is a God, and what you do in this life **MATTERS**, whatever you believe or not. If you intend to be a Special Agent for any country on earth today you have duties that transcend the commands of your superior officers. Our planet is in trouble; our civilizations endure incredible stress. Yet any moron with the “best” of special weapons could kill billions if he knew how to deploy one precisely.

So. In addition to your duties to your people and your state, I say that you have some duty to care about human survival as well, even if you don’t work on that every day like me. We all do simple things each day, but we also all have higher responsibilities. If you have no faith in any God, then promote human survival for your children. God has plenty of work to do without dealing with you. Protect all children, because they are all precious. Protect the concept of innocence, because without it the noblest warriors can become mere mercenary killers. But if you are working on laws or codes or regulations related to intelligence operations, do not forget God. **IT** is the short path to ethics in challenging circumstances.

The Really Hard Cases in One Page: Torture, Murder and Worse

Philosophers and attorneys are fond of arguing extremely hypothetical cases until the sun grows cold. But **Special** Agents must be prepared to make life or death decisions in the blink of an eye with serious consequences for many people. So I will try to illustrate here interaction between rule based, utilitarian and virtue ethics with one of those bizarre, hypothetical cases.

Assume some “terrorist” or criminal genius has acquired a weapon that could blow up the entire planet, and for reasons comprehensible only to her has hidden it and set it to detonate within one day. This is an extreme version of classic ‘ticking time-bomb’ scenarios. The terrorist is in your custody, but will not talk except to babble rationalizations. She is an 80 year old grandmother of ten with an otherwise lovely record of compassionate, productive life. Remember, time is short and certainty scarce.

Relevant questions are:

- a) Should you torture her to try to find out where her weapon is?
- b) Might you torture or kill her grandchildren, one by one before her eyes, to get that information?
- c) Might you order a nuclear detonation over your main city, in hopes of destroying the weapon before it kills the entire earth?
- d) Should you offer her the bribe of anything she wants forever if she will tell you what you need to know? What if she says yes, but lies?
- e) Other options? Generating options for hard hypothetical cases can help in training for real cases.

Well rule based behavior says that you must follow due process of law no matter what, in which case the world might blow up while the bureaucracy spends time and money in its normal sluggish ways. No torturing Grandma much less murdering her utterly innocent grandchildren. But kiss the earth goodbye.

Utilitarian ethics calls for the greatest good for the largest number (of people). Grandma’s needs are tiny compared with the whole planet. So by that philosophy you might do anything to terrorist Grandma or even to her children if you think that will save the planet. Some practical problems. Torture seldom provides accurate answers quickly if at all. Do you know for sure that Grandma really is your terrorist or that such a weapon even exists? And who are you to label innocent children mere “collateral damage?”

Faced with dilemmas like these, the truly **Special** Agent will think hard about creative, ‘out of box’ solutions. In the end, he or she will choose the least evil option capable of protecting the people, or as many people as possible. Agents will need moral courage, more rare than physical courage, because they should be prepared to face a judge and jury to explain why they broke laws of God and Man in order to save the world. Agents should not be asking governments to break laws themselves, or to make special laws giving police immunity from accountability. If they do this they will enable the very police-state they are supposed to protect their people from. If you do so, believe me, corrupt states will find reasons to torture mere political opponents by calling such opponents “terrorists,” and democracy may die.

Finally, never forget that in daily work on normal problems you are supposed to obey the law and your superiors at all times. This was an extreme, hypothetical case for teaching. There is no Grandma terrorist threatening to blow the whole world up. Whatever you do in whatever bizarre crisis that comes, you are accountable to our Creator who has heard every rationalization there is for human misbehaviors.

Conclusions

Teaching ethics is a teacher’s nightmare. Even if you have a nice, tight, right sized code that is only a couple of pages long, try to get modern students to memorize that! Having failed once, try to get them to care. Remember, they must care deeply so ethics will be expressed when fear is sharp and chaos great. With ethics, knowing the rules is trivial compared with having the courage and insight to go in the right direction at the right moment in the excruciating circumstances of time urgent, life and death decisions.

Teaching wisdom; what is that? One can pile up quotes from sages and make your students read them (I recommend including some female sages from the modern era). For example, Cristiana Matei observed that in the great transition from communism, reform of Romanian security institutions was critically dependent on a newly independent and fiercely engaged public media (9, 10). We hope those critical independents endure, because evil powers have always tried to buy or bully publishers. The decline of independence among America’s “major” media is a big reason for our failure to solve many other problems of governmental decay today. And “God” may bless the Internet, but our intelligence groups and operators were there first. Wisdom helps us to separate truth from fiction, and good from evil.

Is there a line you will not cross? This is the line you must know intimately, because in the heat and chaos of combat it distinguishes heroes from terrorists and madmen, not decisions by bureaucracies.

38 more pages of commentary on Ethics for Intelligence Professionals can be found in Chapter 44 of the Oxford Handbook of National Security Intelligence (11). There one can find reference to the classic Just War Theory and clinical opinions on thorny issues like torture, targeted killings, when to switch from rule-based behavior to utilitarian calculations, and when choosing the lesser of evils among a set of ugly options is the best that one can do. But that chapter can be summarized much more concisely.

The primary duty of all intelligence professionals during these difficult times is to protect their peoples and their state (in that order) from a vast and metastasizing set of threats to innocent life and public order, in the worst cases even to human survival itself. The 20th century of the Common Era brought us many examples of intelligence systems that turned on their own peoples to serve corrupted governments. Therefore a quintessential challenge for modern intelligence professionals is how to keep your own government from becoming so corrupted that it becomes a danger to your own people. Good luck!

Among all these complex challenges, the easiest to understand is protecting the children who are our common future and as innocent as the dawn.

Be professionals, and protect them! Learn what you can about ethics and wisdom along the way.

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