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Making the Right Decision

A Proposed Army Decision-Making Model

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Ethical choices may not always be obvious decisions between right and wrong.

—Army Doctrine Publication 6-22,
Army Leadership and the Profession

Who thinks about making decisions? Most people don't, they just make them. Often, the moral ramifications of daily decisions are trivial. (Should I wear a red or a green shirt today?) Or frequently, the answer to a decision is so morally obvious that decision-making occurs without a second thought. (Should I steal my neighbor's car or drive my own car to work?) However, not thinking about decision-making works until it doesn't. That is, it may work in daily self-evident decisions that Army professionals are generally engaged in, but there are times when these same professionals must stop and think through the ramification of their decision. There are times when the right decision is not evident. These are decisions that often pit competing values against each other and can include moral ambiguity.¹ This article proposes an updated Army decision-making model that combines both current doctrine as well as past insights to help the Army professional make the right decision (see figure 1).

Why an Ethical Decision-Making Model?

Why does the Army professional need an ethical decision-making model? The simple answer to this question is rooted in the concept of the Army profession. The Army defines the profession as “a trusted vocation of Soldiers and Army civilians whose collective expertise is the ethical design, generation, support, and application of land power; serving under civilian authority; and entrusted to defend the Constitution and the rights and interests of the American people.”² For the purposes of this article, the key word in the definition is *ethical*. It is not enough for soldiers to collectively design land power, they must ethically design it. It is not enough for soldiers to simply generate or support land power, they must ethically generate and support it. And, finally, it is not enough to simply apply land power, soldiers must ethically apply land power. At its extreme in combat, the application of land power leads to killing but should never involve murder. While every murder is a killing, every killing is not a murder.

The difference between these two words and concepts involves ethics. And while it is true that most decisions are not made in combat, the little daily decisions that Army professionals make train them for the bigger decisions that they may one day make. Army professionals need to make the right decisions in the right way during times of peace as well as during times of war. The Army professional may not think about making decisions every day, but there are days when they must think very hard about the decisions they are going to make. And when those days come, a model is needed.

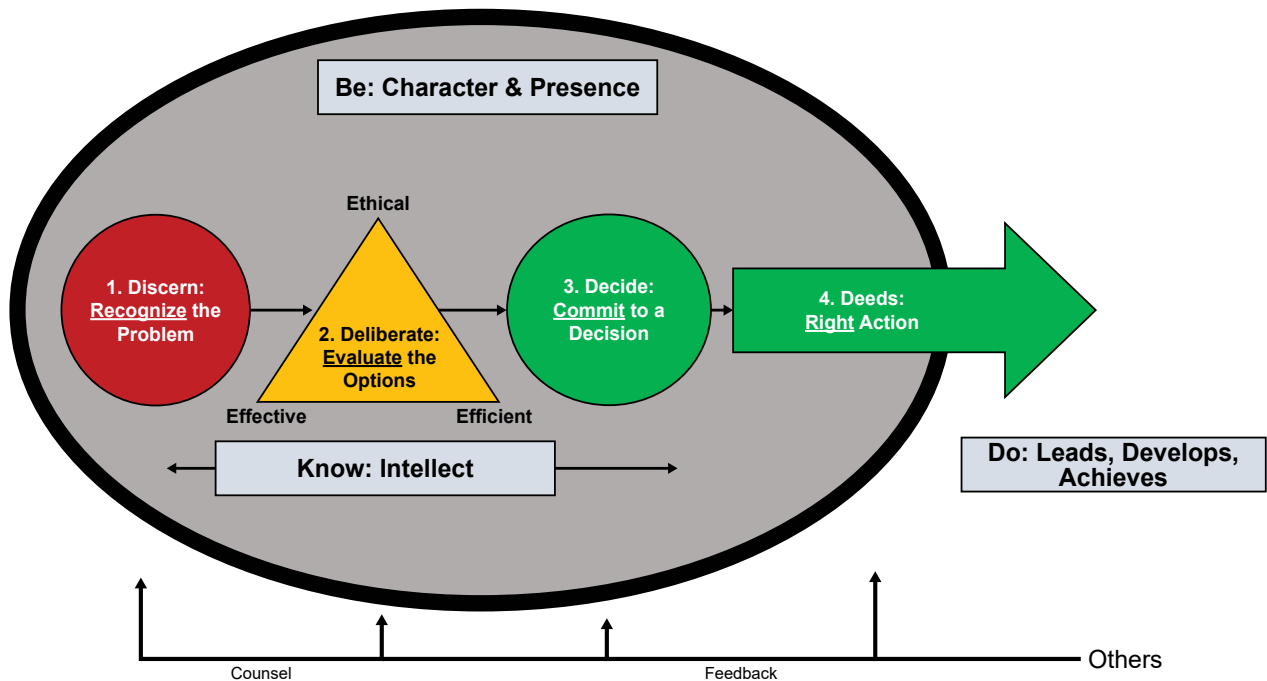
What Ethical Framework Does the Army Currently Utilize?

After discussing the need for ethical decision-making, it is helpful to review what the Army currently utilizes as an ethical decision-making framework. The doctrinal short answer is, “very little.” Within Army doctrine there is no ethical decision-making model.³

What is in doctrine, found in Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession*, is a section entitled “Ethical Reasoning.” In this section, doctrine states,

Leaders use multiple perspectives to think about ethical concerns, applying them to determine the most ethical choice. One perspective comes from a view that desirable virtues such as courage, justice, and benevolence define ethical outcomes. A second perspective comes from a set of agreed-upon values or rules, such as the Army Values or Constitutional rights. A third perspective

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(Figure by modified by author. Other variations of this model have been used at the Maneuver Center of Excellence, the Command and General Staff College, and the Institute of Religious Leadership. The first recent formulation of this model seen by the author was by Anthony Randall in "Applying Mission Command to the Army's Crucible of Character Development," *The U.S. Army Chaplain Corps Journal*, CY19 Edition, 53–60)

Figure 1. Proposed Army Decision-Making Model

bases the consequences of the decision on whatever produces the greatest good for the greatest number as most favorable. Leaders able to consider all perspectives applicable to a particular situation are more likely to be ethically astute.⁴

When faced with a tough decision, the Army calls for leaders to think about virtues, rules, and consequences. In addition to this paragraph, doctrine points to the Army Ethic as the standard by which professionals ought to live by. This ethic defined "is the set of enduring moral principles, values, beliefs, and laws that guide the Army profession and create the culture of trust essential to Army professionals in the conduct of missions, performance of duty, and all aspects of life."⁵ While imploring the need to inculcate the Army Ethic, doctrine does not elaborate or explain any further.

The only other official Army-wide publication that discusses ethical decision making at any length is the Chaplain Corps' Department of the Army Pamphlet (DA PAM) 165-19, *Moral Leadership*. In this

document, Appendix C, "An Ethical Framework within Design Methodology," takes its guidance from ADP 6-22's three perspectives approach and expands it. The framework includes

- (1) understand the situation or environment;
- (2) define the situation or problem;
- (3) develop an approach (considering different ethical lenses/paradigms/models);
- (4) consider and evaluate biases/assumptions;
- (5) decide on a course of action and implement; and
- (6) continuously assess situation, problem, and approach.⁶

This framework, as stated in the title, emphasizes the Army design methodology and utilizes the three perspectives listed in ADP 6-22. The next appendix in DA PAM 165-19, Appendix D, lists a ten-step ethical decision-making framework based on the Joint Ethics Regulation.⁷ The final appendix, Appendix E, "An Ethical Reasoning Model within the Military Decision-Making Process," once again reiterates the three perspectives from ADP 6-22 as well as introducing a four-step model. This

model includes the steps “recognize the conflict,” “evaluate the options,” “come to a decision,” and “act.”⁸ This summarizes what the Army has recently published in its current doctrine and related publications.

Why Is the Current Framework Insufficient?

It should come as no surprise to many who think deeply about ethical decision-making within the Army context that the current framework is insufficient for the difficult decisions Army professionals are required to make. Part of the insufficiency is simply a lack of depth in doctrine on the topic. While the need for character is stated and the ideal of the Army Ethic is affirmed, doctrine lacks anything but a cursory nod to how it is accomplished. Additionally, when the Chaplain Corps published DA PAM 165-19 to clarify moral leadership, the pamphlet simply included a patchwork of lightly detailed possibilities to use as a framework for ethical thinking. The only commonality of all the frameworks point back to the three perspectives model referenced in the “Ethical Reasoning” section in ADP 6-22, which is problematic.

Several key issues underly the exhortation for soldiers to utilize the three-perspective framework when thinking about ethical reasoning. The first and most obvious issue with using these three perspectives is that doctrine is very vague on what they mean and how to utilize them. It is one thing to tell a soldier that he or she must consider virtues, rules, and consequences, but it is entirely another thing to explain what that means and how it ought to be applied. These perspectives are not intuitive or self-evident in their current doctrinal wording. A second issue with the current ethical construction is that the concepts are very profound. Each one of them represents an ethical system that has spanned hundreds—and in the case of virtue ethics, thousands—of years with tomes of written work and explanations. Doctrine implies that someone reading that specific section would understand what the systems are and how to apply them correctly. A third and related issue is that if the systems, or perspectives, as doctrine calls them, are applied properly, the outcome or potential solutions may very well be different depending on the system utilized or variables applied.⁹ Thus, one would then have to analyze and prioritize each of the outcomes in relation to the other to

determine the appropriate solution to the ethical problem. A final and more problematic issue with the current construction is that it forces one to look away from other more explicit doctrine that informs ethical decision-making, the previously mentioned Army Ethic. The three perspectives do not explicitly take the ethic into account but immediately turn the attention of the soldier in an ethical dilemma, focusing them into the deep end of the philosophical pool instead of toward the Army Ethic. At best, the current formulations and instructions on ethical decision-making are muddled and unclear, and at worst, are unhelpful or irrelevant to most of the force due to a lack of understanding.

Where are the Seeds of the Proposed New Model?

While the current framework is insufficient, there are fortunately seeds of excellence within doctrine and Army publications to assist in building a new and helpful model. The first salvageable piece comes from DA PAM 165-19, which lists a fourfold model of decision-making. Specifically, as currently stated, these steps are,

- a. Recognize the conflict.** The first step in moral and ethical reasoning is to be able to see the true nature of the ethical challenge as well as the values, beliefs, and virtues that are in tension and what is at stake.
- b. Evaluate the options.** Like the MDMP, the individual leader or Soldier who understands what the conflict is will begin to develop various ways, or COAs, that can resolve the challenge in an ethical, effective, and efficient manner. In this step, the three lenses (rules, outcomes, and virtues) interpret and evaluate the potential courses of action (COAs) for ethical resolution.
- c. Come to a decision.** The Soldier must decide the best COA to resolve the ethical challenge in a manner that is in line with the moral principles of the Army Values and is ethical, effective, and efficient.
- d. Act.** The final step is where the reasoning process culminates with action. One must decide to act, and act despite risk, challenges, and potential adversity. The person must accept responsibility for taking the action and its results.¹⁰

These provide a great starting point in ethical decision-making. The four concepts within this framework are simple and yet profound. This model appears to have been adapted from moral psychologist James Rest's work on moral development. In his model, Rest suggests four psychological components determining moral behavior:

- (1) Moral Sensitivity: Interpreting the situation
- (2) Moral Judgement: Judging which action is morally right/wrong.
- (3) Moral Motivation: Prioritizing moral values relative to other values.
- (4) Moral Character: Having courage, persisting, overcoming distractions, implementing skills.¹¹

Again, the adapted work is both simple enough that it can be easily trained within the force and yet has depth to process ethical decisions that may need further thought.

The next salvageable piece comes from an older doctrinal manual, Army Doctrine Reference Publication (ADRP) 1, *The Army Profession*. In it, Army doctrine explicitly outlined a definition for the word "right." Doctrine stated that "a decision or action is right if it is ethical ..., effective ..., and efficient."¹² The "three e's" were defined in ADRP 1 as this:

- Ethical: Consistent with the moral principles of the Army Ethic.
- Effective: Likely to accomplish its purpose, accepts prudent risk.
- Efficient: Makes disciplined use of resources.¹³

Today's doctrine has incorporated the "three e's" in a variety of areas. For instance, when discussing expectations for current Army professionals, doctrine states,

The ethical, effective, and efficient accomplishment of the mission is the core of the Army ethic. Army professionals accomplish the mission as a team of Soldiers and Army civilians contributing their best effort, doing what is ethical, effective, and efficient to the best of their ability, and always striving for excellence.¹⁴

Additionally, the Army references the "three e's" when discussing the necessity of being an honorable servant, one of the three roles of an Army professional.

Doctrine states that "Army professionals communicate with candor and tact, seek shared understanding, and demonstrate courage by doing what is ethical, effective, and efficient despite risk, uncertainty, and fear."¹⁵ Also, with regard to being a competent Army professional, doctrine outlines that "they make ethical, effective, and efficient decisions and take appropriate actions to the best of their ability in all aspects of life."¹⁶ These examples, among others, make clear that an Army professional cannot be right unless he or she considers what is ethical, effective, and efficient. Thus, if one were to use the fourfold model as an overall framework, the "three e's" would be appropriate to use in evaluating the options as opposed to the three perspectives.¹⁷

A final salvable doctrinal piece to add to the model relates to the Army Ethic. The ethic was referenced by the "three e's" but focused on the moral principles of the ethic. While this is appropriate, that idea encompasses only half of what the ethic represents. Again, the Army Ethic is "the set of enduring moral principles, values, beliefs, and laws that guide the Army profession and create the culture of trust essential to Army professionals in the conduct of missions, performance of duty, and all aspects of life."¹⁸ The ethic informs all Army professionals that every decision must take both the moral (moral principles, values, and beliefs) and the legal (laws) aspects and ramifications into consideration.¹⁹ Thus an ethical decision, based on the Army Ethic, is one that reflects both moral and legal deliberation. An ethical decision is what an Army professional ought to do (morally) and will do (legally) and vice versa—that is ought not to do and will not do both morally and legally. With this basic understanding, doctrine sketches the key regulatory and moral principles or documents that ought to be considered when applying the Army Ethic, which are graphically portrayed in figure 2.²⁰

These twenty-two principles, rules, or documents assist in forming the moral and legal foundation for the Army Ethic. Knowing and applying the Army Ethic assists an Army professional in the ethical requirement of the "three e" framework. Now we are ready to put the model together for further explanation.

What Is the Model?

As portrayed in figure 1, the four steps of the DA PAM 165-19 are utilized and renamed: discern, deliberate, decide, and deeds, representing what occurs at

Foundations of the Army Ethic		
Applicable to:	Legal Motivation of Compliance	Moral Motivation of Aspiration
Army profession <i>Trust</i> <i>Honorable service</i> <i>Military expertise</i> <i>Stewardship</i> <i>Esprit de corps</i>	United States Constitution United States Code Uniform Code of Military Justice Executive Orders Treaties, Law of Land Warfare	Declaration of Independence Universal Declaration of Human Rights Just War Tradition (Jus ad Bellum) Army culture of trust Professional organizational climate
Trusted Army professionals <i>Honorable servants</i> <i>Army experts</i> <i>Stewards</i>	Oaths of Service Standards of conduct Directives and policies The Soldier's Rules Rules of engagement	Natural moral reason – Golden Rule Army Values Soldier's and Army Civilian Corps creeds Justice in War (Jus in Bello)
The <i>Army ethic</i> , our professional ethic, is the set of enduring moral principles, values, beliefs, and applicable laws embedded within the <i>Army culture of trust</i> that motivates and guides the Army profession and trusted <i>Army professionals</i> in conduct of the mission, performance of duty, and all aspects of life.		

(Figure from ADP 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession*, 1-7)

Figure 2. Foundations of the Army Ethic

each step. Each of the steps are color coded for easy remembrance. Red means stop. Therefore, when a soldier is confronted with an ethical dilemma, one where they recognize a problem that needs a deeper decision made, the soldier ought to mentally stop and think through different courses of action. The next step, or deliberate phase, is where evaluating the options occur. This is colored amber to remind the decision-maker to proceed with caution as they work through the options. These options ought to include the “three e’s,” asking oneself if the proposed solution is ethical, effective, and efficient (see figure 3).

A suggestion with this step is to start with the idea of effective. If a solution is not going to be effective, that is achieve the appropriate result, then it ought to be discarded. Once the effectiveness of a course of action is established, the question of ethicality ought to apply. Using the moral and legal framework of the Army Ethic ought to inform the ethicality of a decision. If a decision is not ethical, it ought to be discarded. It may be noted that while there might be some flexibility

in defining the effectiveness of solutions, there ought never be any decision that minimizes the ethicality of that decision. Finally, the question of efficiency, or the disciplined use of resources, ought to be asked about the decision to be made. When making a decision using the “three e’s,” a leader is essentially thinking through the ends, ways, and means of each tough decision. The ends reflected in the effectiveness of a decision, the efficiency in the ways and means of the decision, and the ethicality in all three. Army professionals make the right decision when considering what is ethical, effective, and efficient.

And while it should be obvious, it must be stated that these three categories are aspirational in nature. That is, the right answer ideally ought to be 100 percent ethical, 100 percent effective, and 100 percent efficient. And yet, as any leader knows, in the real world, not all the categories can or will be fully met. This is where context, a calibrated moral compass, clear guidance, and critical thinking are vital. While not easy, the criteria are simple and assist a leader in the formulation of

separate courses of action for decision, which is the next step.

The next color is green, which means go. This represents that once the deliberation step has occurred, the leader must decide what to do. He or she must commit to a decision and act on it. Military action often takes courage, both physical courage as well as moral courage. Leaders must not only act individually but also act to ensure that their decisions and the decisions made by those above them are being communicated to others for action as well.

This decision-making model is inherently nested within the Army leadership requirements model of Be, Know, and Do.²¹ For instance, the decisions that people make are made within the context of who they are. The Army calls these attributes. Attributes are defined as “characteristics internal to a leader” that “affect how an individual behaves, thinks, and learns within certain conditions.”²² Specifically, the essence of a leader, or “Be” component, relates to character, which is “the moral and ethical qualities of a leader,” and presence, the “characteristics open to display by the leader and open to viewing by others.”²³ These both form the background context of all decision-making while the intellect, or the “Know” component, is the decision-making processing center for the individual.²⁴ Finally, the “Do” component, which includes leads, develops, and achieves, relates to the actions of the individual both while decisions are being made and afterward. The Army leadership requirements model is portrayed in figure 4.²⁵ The final aspect of the new graphical portrayal of this decision-making model is the inclusion of other’s counsel and feedback. Doctrine reminds leaders that “every member of the Army profession, military or civilian, is part of a team and functions in the role of leader and subordinate.”²⁶ This means that decision-making is not done in a vacuum. Each Army decision-maker is linked to other decision-makers who are in turn linked to even more decision-makers. This is because the US Army is a team that is made of up many teams. Thus, all Army professionals need both counsel and feedback, which occur both formally and informally within and across the institution. It is only when leaders are both self and organizationally aware with the help of counsel and feedback that right decisions can be made and fully comprehended.

Evaluate the Options

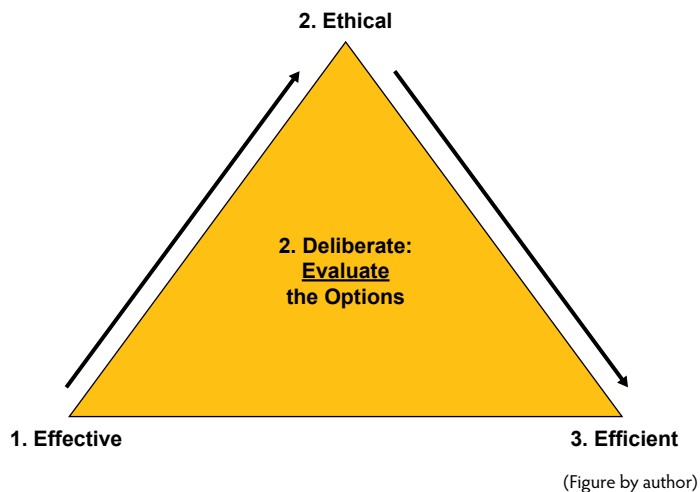
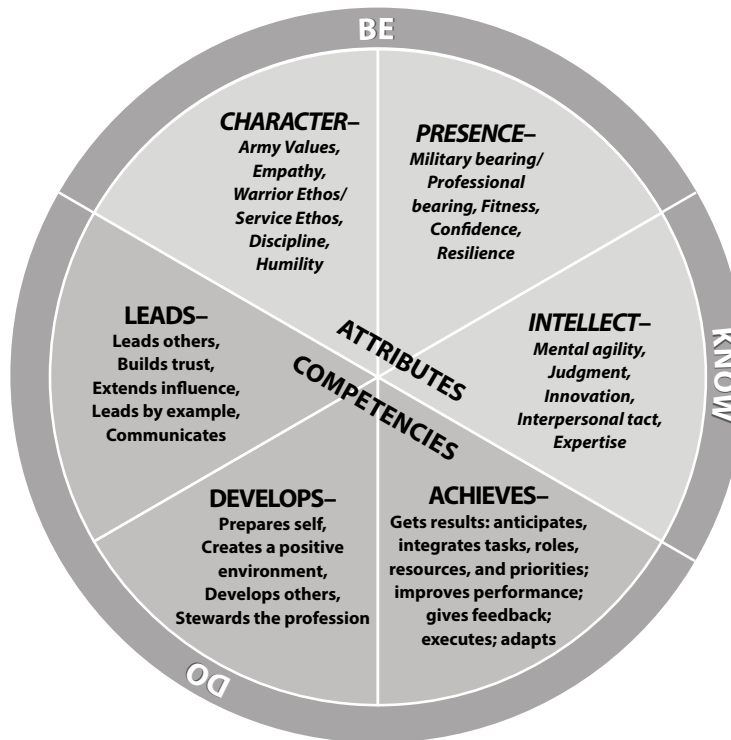


Figure 3. Evaluate the Options

How to Use the Model?

The useability of this model, or any model, starts with education and then continues in training. Soldiers do what they are trained to do, and their training is informed by their education. Thus, in the institutional Army, this model and the concept of intentional ethical decision-making ought to be introduced and taught. Once soldiers have seen the model and have a basic understanding of ethical decision-making requirements, they must train the concepts as a part of the operating force. That is, ethical decision-making ought to be incorporated into regular training events, because the old mantra is true: soldiers fight how they are trained.

An example of this might be a unit that conducts a range. This is a standard operation that trains soldiers in the mechanics of lethality with their assigned weapons systems. A unit could have an ethics station either before or after the firing line asking soldiers questions or talking through combat-related vignettes to get the soldiers thinking not merely about lethality, the application of land power, but the ethics of lethality. It is one thing to teach a soldier how to shoot and yet quite another to teach them whether they *should* shoot. Whether on a range, at an urban terrain training site, or during a combined-arms exercise, ethical decision-making ought to be part of the preparatory instruction, presented within the training in the form of ethical dilemmas, and covered



(Figure from ADP 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession*, 1-15)

Figure 4. The Army Leadership Requirements Model

in the after action review process along with lethality. Having a model is good, but education and training on the model is necessary for it to be deployed when it is truly needed. Soldiers must be able to individually and organizationally apply land power, but as Army professionals, they must do it ethically.

Conclusion

Most people do not think about making decisions until they have a difficult one to make. However,

Army professionals often face difficult situations and must make correspondently difficult decisions. Thus, Army professionals must consider ethical decisions-making ahead of making those decisions. And when they deliberate about making decisions, they must do so with clarity and brevity to make the right decisions at the right time. Army professionals must rethink how they reflect on making decisions and consider a new doctrinally based model to use in the process. ■

Notes

Epigraph. Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession* (US Government Publishing Office [GPO], 2019), 2-7.

1. The Department of Command and Leadership at the Command and General Staff College teaches a lesson titled, "Ethical Dimensions of Organizational Leadership," which frames ethical conflicts as "right vs. right" dilemmas. This means that someone is struggling with a decision between two competing positive values or virtues, which creates a moral dilemma. While I do not disagree, I propose the opposite is usually true. It often appears that many

leaders stop when they are confronted with two perceived wrongs with which they must decide between. The struggle is against violating a deeply held value or belief. This "perceived wrong vs. perceived wrong" dilemma also pits two competing values or virtues against each other for leaders to work through.

2. ADP 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession*, xi.
3. ADP 1-01, *Doctrine Primer* (US GPO, 2019), v. Army doctrine consists of ADPs, field manuals, and Army techniques publications.
4. ADP 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession*, 2-7.
5. ADP 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession*, 1-6.
6. Department of the Army Pamphlet (DA PAM) 165-19, *Moral Leadership* (US GPO, 2020), 20.

7. DA PAM 165-19, *Moral Leadership*, 22–23.
8. DA PAM 165-19, *Moral Leadership*, 24.
9. It must be further stated with regard to virtues, rules, and consequences that these represent an overall ethical system that is an umbrella term for many subethical systems within them. There is not simply one rule-based, consequence-based, or virtue-based solution—there could be many under each category.
10. DA PAM 165-19, *Moral Leadership*, 24.
11. James R. Rest, "Background Theory and Research," in *Moral Development in the Professions*, ed. James R. Rest and Darcia Narvaez (Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1994), 23.
12. Army Doctrine Reference Publication (ADRP) 1, *The Army Profession* (US GPO, 2015 [obsolete]), 2-7. This formulation for right is currently affirmed in the newest version of Army Regulation 600-100, *Army Profession and Leadership Policy* (US GPO, 2025), 20.
13. ADRP 1, *The Army Profession*, 2-7.
14. ADP 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession*, 1-8.
15. ADP 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession*, 1-10.
16. ADP 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession*, 1-11.
17. It could be argued that the "three e's" include the three perspectives. For instance, a virtue- and rule-based perspective

are both assumed under the ethical criteria. For example, a virtue-based standard would assume moral norms and behaviors while a rule-based standard would assume legal and regulatory requirements. Also, a consequence-based perspective is presupposed under the categories of effective and efficient.

18. ADP 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession*, 1-6.
19. For an in-depth discussion on the breakdown of the Army Ethic, see Jared Vineyard, "Exegeting the Army Ethic: The Two Questions Army Professionals Should Ask Themselves," *Infantry Magazine* 110, no. 4 (Winter 2021-2022): 8–12, https://www.benning.army.mil/infantry/magazine/issues/2021/Winter/pdf/3_Vineyard.pdf.
20. ADP 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession*, 1-7.
21. ADP 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession*, 1-15.
22. ADP 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession*, 1-16.
23. ADP 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession*, 1-16.
24. ADP 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession*, 1-16. The Army states that the intellect is "the mental and social abilities the leader applies while leading."
25. ADP 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession*, 1-15.
26. ADP 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession*, ix.