

Eric-Hans Kramer  
Tine Molendijk *Editors*

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# Violence in Extreme Conditions

Ethical Challenges in Military Practice

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Reflection on violence in extreme conditions is essential for the military organization. At the Netherlands Defence Academy, moreover, our future officers receive their training, which makes a reflection on the topic particularly relevant for our academy. Desiree has put this theme on the map within the academy, but we firmly intend to continue working on it. The enthusiasm of the authors to contribute to this book underscores that it is a fruitful theme that can be approached integratively from many angles. Therefore, this book not only looks back at Desiree's merits, but we cast a glance at the future in which we hope to continue and advance our research and education on this violence in extreme conditions.

Breda, 2022

Eric-Hans Kramer  
Tine Molendijk

# Contents

<b>Introduction</b> .....	1
Eric-Hans Kramer and Tine Molendijk	
<b>Multi—and Interdisciplinary Reflections on Violence and Military Ethics</b>	
<b>Language and Violence</b> .....	17
Paul van Tongeren	
<b>Military Trauma and the Conflicted Human Condition: Moral Injury as a Window into Violence, Human Nature and Military Ethics</b> .....	29
Tine Molendijk	
<b>Exploring the Relevance of the Systems Psychodynamic Approach to Military Organizations</b> .....	43
Eric-Hans Kramer, Max Visser, and Matthijs Moorkamp	
<b>Recent Cases and Developments</b>	
<b>Instrumental Morality Under a Gaze: Israeli Soldiers' Reasoning on Doing 'Good'</b> .....	59
Erella Grassiani	
<b>Soldiers as Street-Level Bureaucrats? Military Discretionary Autonomy and Moral Professionalism in a Police Perspective</b> .....	73
Teun Eikenaar	
<b>The Future of the Comprehensive Approach as a Strategy for Intervention</b> .....	87
Marenne Jansen and Eric-Hans Kramer	

## **Some Answers to Current Challenges**

<b>Contemporary Just War Thinking and Military Education</b> .....	101
Lonneke Peperkamp and Christian Nikolaus Braun	

<b>Educating for Restraint</b> .....	119
Peter Olsthoorn	

<b>The E-Word (Emotions) in Military Ethics Education: Making Use of the Dual-Process Model of Moral Psychology</b> .....	131
Edgar Karssing	

<b>The Dutch Approach to Ethics: Integrity Management in the Military</b> .....	145
Miriam Carla de Graaff and Claire Zalm	

## **Epilogue**

<b>‘Moresfare’ and the Resilience Paradox: Ethics as the Terra Incognita of Hybrid Warfare and Its Challenges</b> .....	157
Desiree Verweij	

<b>Concluding Reflections</b> .....	175
Tine Molendijk and Eric-Hans Kramer	

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# Introduction



Eric-Hans Kramer and Tine Molendijk

‘You know what the issue is with the military academy? Nobody ever talks about violence’. This observation, made by Désirée Verweij at the beginning of this millennium, initiated the development of a particular approach to military ethics. This approach eventually found its way into various educational programmes and research projects with considerable success. What is so special about this observation? Why should a seemingly offhand remark in hindsight be brought forward as a defining moment in the development of the chair in military ethics at the Netherlands Defence Academy, which was held by Désirée Verweij for more than a decade? Is it even true? It might seem unlikely that the very topic that is ignored at the military academy is violence. After all, the potential confrontation with violence in extreme conditions is a distinctive feature of military practice. In this introduction, we reflect on Désirée’s observation and the questions it triggers in order to show why it can bring together a broad array of authors with backgrounds in different fields, such as philosophy, ethics, anthropology, psychology, organization science and law, around the topic of ‘the confrontation with violence’. Interdisciplinary explorations of this theme have been at the core of the work of Désirée, who held the chair in military ethics at the Netherlands Defence Academy from 2008 to 2021. The contributions in this book celebrate her achievements and seek to keep important themes in the spotlight.

So, is violence really never talked about at the military academy? To start with, we should emphasize that Désirée’s observation was aimed at the academic programmes, not necessarily at the military training that is also part of officer education. Furthermore, violence is of course talked about in various curricula. Military practice is a reference point for bringing coherence to the different academic programmes and research projects. Particularly the interplay between academic theory and military

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practice establishes the relevance of both education and research at the Netherlands Defence Academy. Yet, Désirée's point was that violence is primarily talked about in a specific way. As one of the organizations that executes the state's monopoly of force, the military organization is expected to use violence in a technical and instrumental way. It is the instrumental application of force that defines the legitimacy of military practice. Topics such as 'air power', 'hybrid challenges', 'doctrinal developments', 'behavioural engineering', 'human enhancement', 'legitimacy', 'technological innovation', 'collateral damage' and the like are certainly part of everyday conversation. However, Désirée's point was that a one-sided emphasis on the instrumental application of force and the technical rationality that accompanies it is limiting and might turn attention away from the brutal reality that is also part of the military profession.

Violence is a constitutive element of this brutal reality and plays a critical role in various ways, and in various guises, in military practice. As an organization that operates in extreme conditions, the military organization may be confronted with the destructive behaviour of individuals, organizations and societies. The military may be confronted with abuses of power and aggression, as well as with the consequences of such behaviour, such as human suffering and anxiety. Moreover, the military organization may trigger violent and destructive behaviour within its own ranks, and may create the conditions in which trauma in individual service members can develop. This explains why violence forms a point of orientation for ethical reflection on military practice, and it is the reason why Désirée's observation at the beginning of this millennium was significant. It also shows why such a perspective might be generative of a multitude of different disciplinary perspectives that can add specific themes and arguments. Furthermore, it shows why keeping an open mind to different perspectives in order to bridge and connect them is important to Désirée's approach. This volume therefore specifically aims to bring together a broad array of authors around this theme.

## **Désirée Verweij's Philosophical Position in Relation to Ethics and Violence**

How does Désirée's own position as a philosopher connect to this theme of military practice and violence? As an important disclaimer for what follows, it should be emphasized that this is our own reconstruction, which we have developed by working together with Désirée and discussing these issues over the past years. There is no doubt that she would bring up several counterpoints to what we are laying out here, but we have deliberately chosen not to consult her for this reconstruction. After all, who would like to comment on a text that is written in celebration of one's own achievements? Any misrepresentations are therefore our responsibility.

Strongly influenced by Sigmund Freud, Friedrich Nietzsche and Hannah Arendt, Désirée is inclined to look for ambiguity; for ways in which people are in internal conflict, specifically because military ethics, which focuses on ethical reflection in

an organization that is entrusted with executing the state's monopoly of force, is inevitably confronted with people's ambiguous and paradoxical relationship with violence (Verweij, 2007). This is directly related to Nietzsche's reflections on the topic (Verweij, 1999, translation EHK, TM): 'Because according to Nietzsche it is not at all clear what we are, but we are certainly no unity. We are a collection of "wills" says Nietzsche, and these "wills" are continuously in conflict. The "I" we are talking about is continuously changing'. To Désirée, the ambiguous nature of human beings is an existential foundation that informs her perspective.

In what specific way have Freud, Nietzsche and Arendt been inspirations to Désirée's philosophical position in relation to ethics and violence? Below, we discuss different themes that relate to these inspirations and that relate to contemporary discussions of military practice and violence. We discuss the way that they informed Désirée's position and the way that they are currently relevant to educational and research programmes at the Netherlands Defence Academy. We do not wish to claim that Désirée is a Freudian or a Nietzschean. Too much valid critique is available on, for example, Freud, and the different debates have become too elaborate to attribute Désirée's outlook to a single reference point. Typical for Désirée's style is that, without denying and dismissing critique, one may appreciate valuable insights that can be found everywhere, but for her particularly in Nietzsche, Freud and Arendt. This signifies an empirical attitude according to which multiple inspirations can be used to develop a sophisticated array of perspectives on a subject of study.

## *A Critical Perspective on Morality and Violence*

Arguably, Désirée's most important guiding principle for military ethics was that any productive discussion on military practice and violence starts by avoiding moralization: 'ethics is not political correctness'. This guiding principle is inspired by the views that Nietzsche and Freud developed on the nature of morality and its connections with violence and aggression. In Nietzsche's case, this was developed out of a critique on Christianity, while Freud developed his views out of a critique on a suffocating Victorian atmosphere in Vienna. Their critical analyses inspired Désirée's view that prevalent moral principles should also become a subject for discussion in moral education. Inspired by Arendt, the essence of moral education is therefore critical thinking, which is particularly important in a military academy focused on the serious business of executing the state's monopoly of force.

How do Nietzsche and Freud view morality and how do they relate morality to violence? Furthermore, why should they be considered particularly relevant in the first place? For a philosopher interested in violence, the obvious reason to be inspired by Freud is his account of the ego as being at the mercy of unconscious impulses. Aggression is one of those impulses, as is Eros. In correspondence with Einstein on 'Why war?', Freud claims the following with respect to aggressive impulses (1933, p. 45): 'With the least of speculative efforts, we are led to conclude that this instinct functions in every living being, striving to work its ruin and to reduce life to its

primal state of inert matter'. It is against the background of this postulate of primitive impulses that Freud's ambivalent perspective on morality emerges. Unbridled expression of primitive impulses would make social life pretty much impossible, and, in Freud's scheme, they are kept in check by repression and sublimation. In the same correspondence with Einstein, Freud postulates that violence is a force that is constitutive of society (1933, p. 29):

Brute force is overcome by union, the allied might of scattered units makes good its right against the isolated giant. Thus we might define 'right' (i.e. law) as the might of a community. Yet it, too, is nothing else than violence, quick to attack whatever individual stands in its path, and it employs the selfsame methods, follows like ends, with but one difference: it is the communal, not individual, violence that has its way.

In this view, the rule of law rests on violence, as it depends upon the collective force to overpower individual outbursts of primitive violent impulses. The Super Ego or moral conscience occupies a crucial position in these processes, but as Freud also explains to Einstein, moral conscience has an aggressive quality that is turned inwards. Before Freud, in *Ecce Homo* Nietzsche claimed about conscience that (2007, p. 79): '[...] it is the instinct of cruelty, which turns inwards once it is unable to discharge itself outwardly. Cruelty is here exposed, for the first time, as one of the oldest and most indispensable elements in the foundation of culture'. Whereas Nietzsche worked in the latter stage of his active life towards possible ways to re-evaluate values, and so to prevent nihilism, the Freudian position remains fundamentally ambivalent (Rieff, 1979, p. 343):

Happiness can never be achieved by the panaceas of social permissiveness or sexual plentitude. Order can never be achieved by social suppression or moral rigor. We are not unhappy because we are frustrated, Freud implies; we are frustrated because we are, first of all, unhappy combinations of conflicting desires. Civilization can, at best, reach a balance of discontents.

For Désirée, it has never been about whether aggressive impulses—or the opposite forces of Eros—are to be regarded as innately biological, a consequence of socialization or an entirely social construct. Her agenda was not focused on developing a particular philosophical anthropology. The point for her is the empirical observation that individuals, beneath a veneer of espoused moral excellence, are far less civilized than they seem, or, rather, that individuals embody both peaceable and belligerent forces. And that is a point that matters for a military organization tasked with executing the state's monopoly of force. Understanding how psychosocial dynamics influence the situations in which 'the monopoly of force is applied' is therefore crucial for the military profession in terms of understanding the dynamics within military organizations themselves and within the environments in which they operate. This is psychosocial in the sense that it requires an individual-focused understanding of how certain tensions may induce violent behaviour, as well as an understanding of such dynamics in groups, organizations and society.

## *Nihilism and Moral Judgment*

A typical initial reaction that Désirée would encounter in workshops for military personnel who had been deployed on missions in Afghanistan, Iraq or Bosnia was scepticism and resistance. They had expected the professor in military ethics to point out their moral shortcomings and hold moralistic lectures about proper behaviour. However, by focusing on their experiences, on the dilemmas they experienced and their struggles in confronting those dilemmas, the atmosphere would soon turn around. In other workshops, Désirée would reflect on ‘the enduring appeals of battle’, of which ‘the delight in destruction’, postulated by Glenn Gray (1998), is one which typically fascinates students. However, as valid as it might seem from an academic point of view, and as effective as it might be for capturing the attention of students, one might ask if it is actually sensible to promote critical reflection on morality in a military organization that is involved in the serious business of executing the state’s monopoly of force. Notwithstanding the fascination of students, it could be asserted that critically discussing the ethical principles underlying military deployment might undermine the very basis for its legitimacy.

This relates to the important issue of nihilism. One might believe that a critical view on morality and promoting critical reflection can provoke the nihilistic view that dismisses the idea of morality altogether. A nihilistic view on morality might lead to an idea that ‘anything goes in the reality of violent conflict’ and that is ‘just the way it is’ in military practice. Such a perspective would be disastrous for an institution such as a military that is founded upon legitimacy. Désirée took up the theme of nihilism in her inaugural lecture (2008). She discussed *Heart of Darkness*, a novella by Joseph Conrad that was the basis for the movie *Apocalypse Now* (1979) directed by Francis Ford Coppola. Central to the movie is a Colonel Kurtz, who experiences great internal conflict in the course of his tour. The theme that Désirée picked out of both works is that of morality being experienced as a burden—as something that makes one powerless—in violent conflict, which in Colonel Kurtz’s case led to the desire to be rid of it. Désirée asked her audience if the feelings of Kurtz might be understandable: ‘are we not better off without moral judgment?’ To answer this question, she turned to Hannah Arendt, who was fascinated by the question as to why some rejected the morality of the Nazis and some did not. Arendt’s straightforward answer was that those who did kept thinking for themselves (2003, p. 31):

The precondition for this kind of judging is not a highly developed intelligence or sophistication in moral matters, but rather the disposition to live together explicitly with oneself, to have intercourse with oneself, that is, to be engaged in that silent dialogue between me and myself which, since Socrates and Plato, we usually call thinking. [...] In this respect, the total moral collapse of respectable society during the Hitler regime may teach us that under such circumstances those who cherish values and hold fast to moral norms and standards are not reliable: we now know that moral norms and standards can be changed overnight, and that all that then will be left is the mere habit of holding fast to something. Much more reliable will be the doubters and skeptics, not because skepticism is good or doubting wholesome, but because they are used to examine things and to make up their own minds.

This quote indicates that Arendt shares the critique on civilized morality. Arendt emphasizes that one of the gruesome facts of the Nazi terrors was that they occurred within a legal framework. Moral and legal frameworks may therefore not only repress aggressive impulses but also legitimize violence. Questioning existing norms and standards, fortunately, will not automatically release our repressed impulses. Instead, it will help to critically examine the relationship between our norms, standards and impulses. In her inaugural lecture, Désirée emphasized that the kind of dialogue Arendt advocated actually prevents rather than creates the nihilism of Colonel Kurtz. As Désirée stated in *The Dark Side of Obedience* (Verweij, 2004, pp. 156–157):

We need soldiers and officers who can obey in the Nietzschean sense, that is to say, who have developed inner discipline, which implies that they are also able to obey to themselves, that they can listen to themselves, in the way Socrates described. The inner dialogue, the ability to think, can confront them with the virtues - of which compassion is one - which they have been taught to cherish. This implies that they will know when and how to obey and at the same time be compassionate, and in acting that way, they will put into practise the precise intention of the code of conduct.

In Désirée's view, such an attitude is the best possible path to moral judgement, also in adverse conditions.

## ***Violence and Truth***

Désirée's guiding principle that any productive discussion on military ethics starts by avoiding moralization implies that ideas that at first instance appear counterintuitive are not just taken into account but also might trigger important insights and might shed light on particularly significant dynamics. As the discussion above reveals, this principle is related to Nietzsche, Freud and Arendt who, despite differences, come together in a critique on civilized morality and an emphasis on the central importance of critical thinking and honesty. An example of a counterintuitive idea with generative potential is that of a particular kind of 'truth' that can be found in the confrontation with violence. This particular idea emerges in Freud's *Reflections on War and Death*, written after World War I. Establishing that for Freud moral inflation induces moral depression, Rieff (1979, pp. 312–313) describes this theme as follows:

Though war may seem to the cultured as a "regression", some regressions may be therapeutic. War drew away the superficialities of culture; it "has the advantage of taking the truth more into account, and of making life more tolerable for us again." War and revolution (they amount to the same thing, for Freud, since both have this regressive character) were natural therapies for the over-civilized as psychoanalysis was an artificial one (quote in original).

Freud signifies that aggressive impulses not only emerge when repressions and sublimations fail to function properly, they may also emerge as the result of repression itself. Rieff calls this therapeutic aspect of war an eccentric and apocryphal theme in Freud's work, but his critique on culture is certainly not.

While to some the idea of a kind of truth that can be found in the confrontation with violence might seem far-fetched at best, there is a particular connection

between this perspective and contemporary perspectives on military trauma. Robert J. Lifton (1973) pointed out that many veterans were disillusioned and shocked by how moral authorities reacted to their reflections on their experiences in battle. When they confronted moral authorities (officers, priests, psychologists) with doubts about the things that they had done ('Am I a war criminal?'), they found that these authorities strongly rejected their questions ('You are a hero!'). Lifton observed that instead of experiencing such counterstatements as uplifting, veterans could experience them as disillusioning. They began to question both the moral quality of these authorities and the broader culture that they represented. To the veterans, they revealed a 'counterfeit universe'—a universe of moral betrayal at the core of civilized morality. In that sense, there is a particular kind of truth to be found in the confrontation with violence. Lifton observed a particular sensitivity to hypocrisy in veterans. The idea that the confrontation with violence might reveal a kind of 'truth' also emerges in contemporary research on moral injury (Bica, 1999; Molendijk, 2021) and has been an important principle in the research programme that Désirée established.

The foregoing indicates that the particular 'truth' that the confrontation with violence may reveal further underlines the importance of talking about violence. The confrontation with the brutal reality of military deployment provides important input that can help to either validate or criticize moral and legal frameworks that were used to legitimize the use of force. Therefore, talking about violence is a key aspect in the legitimate use of force, while at the same time it is often the most controversial one.

## ***Bureaucracy and the Banality of Evil***

The previous discussion relates to a further relevant perspective on violence. This is the influence of bureaucracy, and this explains Désirée's interest, perhaps a somewhat unconventional one for a philosopher, in organizational structure. Arendt's theme of 'the banality of evil' and its relationship to totalitarian tendencies in bureaucracies constitutes Désirée's main inspiration with regard to this issue. What triggered the idea of 'the banality of evil' was Arendt's observation that behind one of the main perpetrators of the Holocaust, Adolf Eichmann, was not a manifest monster but an appallingly average man. She saw Eichmann, whose trial in Jerusalem she attended, as a bureaucratic operative that concentrated on following the rules. Realizing she had implicitly expected that Eichmann's 'evil' would expose itself as overtly monstrous, she found the idea that 'evil' might be banal even more shocking.

This led her to criticize bureaucracy as an organizational form that creates 'a rule by nobody'. In *On Violence* (1970, p. 80), Arendt discussed the tyrannical characteristics of bureaucracy:

the greater the bureaucratization of public life, the greater will be the attraction of violence. In a fully developed bureaucracy there is nobody left with whom one can argue, to whom one can present grievances, on whom the pressures of power can be exerted. Bureaucracy is the form of government in which everybody is deprived of political freedom, of the power



to act; for the rule by Nobody is not no-rule, and where all are equally powerless we have a tyranny without a tyrant.

The idea Arendt expresses here is that bureaucratic rule by nobody can produce tyrannically violent results as an aggregate effect of rule-following agents who operate as cogs in a machine and are alienated from the very processes they contribute to. Not coincidentally, Ulrich Beck (1995) called bureaucracies ‘systems of organized irresponsibility’. Bauman (1989) took the critique on bureaucracy even further. His position is explained by De Swaan (2015, p. 41) as follows:

according to Bauman, the civilizing process, in its drive toward evermore pervasive rationality, is essentially a two-sided phenomenon. It not only promotes humane and lawful modes of social existence, but also facilitates the “rationalization” of the unrestrained use of violence, devoid of any moral calculus or ethical inhibition.

Désirée’s critical perspective on ethics in military organizations takes into account the risk of the rationalization of immoralities. At the same time, she is careful not to overstate this point. As an interdisciplinary-minded philosopher, she takes critiques that reveal that Arendt’s view tends to overlook other important factors involved in the production of ‘evil’ seriously. Mandel (2002, p. 279) considers the banality perspective an oversimplified situationist account; that is, it overstates the significance of the influence of the immediate environment. Furthermore, the idea that Eichmann was a mere banal rule follower was criticized by Stangneth (2014) on the basis of historical evidence. In fact, Eichmann had been quite a fanatical Nazi. Similarly, De Swaan (2015) emphasized that, being a member of the top of the Nazi hierarchy, Eichmann would have been the opposite of a banal rule follower. However, while he shares the critique on oversimplified all-explaining situationist accounts, he does emphasize the importance of situational conditions for explaining violent behaviour and he is not prepared to put aside the influence of bureaucratic structures (2015, pp. 22–23):

Arendt’s thesis on the “banality of evil” does not stand critical scrutiny, certainly not as applied to Adolf Eichmann or other Nazi leaders, nor for that matter to the rank-and-file killers. Her model might, however, fit the countless minor middlemen of the Holocaust: the administrators in the civil registry who passed on the names of the prospective victims, the local police who rounded them up, the engineers who transported them in cattle cars, the contractors who built the gas chambers and supplied the extermination camps [...] most of them, indeed, were in some sense banal.

This insight poses a major problem for the armed forces. The bureaucratic character of the military organization as one of the organizations that executes the state’s monopoly of force is the very foundation of its legitimacy. The critique on the potential corruption of this organizational form is therefore both highly significant and deeply problematic for the military. This point about the dangers of ‘the rule by nobody’ can be connected to contemporary discussions about autonomous weapons. Emphasis is placed upon the importance of establishing ‘meaningful human control’ in such weapon systems (Ekelhof, 2019). Yet, Arendt’s views about bureaucracy indicate that there is something terrifying about such control when it is organized in bureaucratic systems that are ‘ruled by nobody’, while the nature of the weapon