



The Forge: Lives in Leadership Podcast - Australian Defence College

SHOW NOTES

Episode Summary, Highlights and Full Transcript

SEASON 01: EPISODE 07

Guest: Professor David Whetham (Part 2)

Host: BRIG John Fenwick



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Lives in Leadership explores leadership in demanding environments, featuring insights from experienced practitioners drawn across Defence, government, industry, and academia. Through sharing compelling stories and perspectives, the podcast explores military leadership, ethics, culture, and service in the Profession of Arms. The podcast focuses on insights in joint and integrated appointments at the operational and strategic level. It complements existing single-service professional military development platforms.



S01E07 – Professor David Whetham – Part 2 – Episode Summary

Duration: 28 minutes

Key themes: Military Ethics, Ethical dilemmas, victory with humanity, human-machine interface, moral courage, just war tradition, AI ethics, command climate.

Overview: In this second part of the conversation, Brigadier Fenwick continues his discussion with Professor David Whetham about military leadership and ethics.

Key Discussion Topics:

Ethical Training & Decision Making The integration of ethical dilemmas into collective training exercises in the UK military

The distinction between ethical challenges (with a clear right answer) and ethical dilemmas (competing demands with no perfect solution)

The importance of ethical preparation and "muscle memory" for battlefield decision-making

AI Ethics & Technology How the UK is approaching AI regulation through policy rather than black letter law, using responsible AI principles.

The socialisation of AI ethics principles into the defence developer community

The challenges of understanding AI confidence levels and avoiding "machine bias" in military decision-making

The importance of maintaining healthy uncertainty and caution when using AI tools



Ethics as Strategy, Not Impediment Addressing the misconception that ethical constraints hamper military effectiveness

How ethical conduct contributes to achieving political objectives and long-term conflict resolution

Nelson's principle of "victory with humanity" as the essence of military ethics

Reasonable Challenge & Leadership Culture The concept of "reasonable challenge" emerging from the Chilcot Inquiry

How leaders must create cultures where legitimate concerns can be raised

Understanding challenges as improvements to the plan, not personal attacks

The discussion emphasises that military ethics isn't about being soft—it's about refining the military instrument to achieve its objectives while maintaining humanity and caring for service members who must return to society.

Memorable Quotes

On the essence of military ethics: *"Military ethics is entirely compatible with winning. It is basically victory with humanity. That's what it's about."*

On the danger of over-relying on AI: *"I think uncertainty actually fulfills a very important function in military planning and execution. And that is, it introduces caution. That caution is not a bad thing when you're talking about the military. Caution is a good thing."*

On ethical dilemmas: *"An ethical challenge is where there is a right answer and you just need to work out what it is versus an ethical dilemma where you are faced with basically competing demands and you are going to have to break one of your commitments... A genuine dilemma means that you have to do wrong, to do right."*



About the Guest

Professor David Whetham is Professor of Ethics and Military Profession in the Defence Studies Department at King's College London, where he serves as Director of the King's Centre for Military Ethics. With over two decades of experience in the field, he coordinates military ethics education for between 2,000 and 3,000 British and international officers annually at the UK's Joint Services Command and Staff College.

A founding member of the European Chapter of the International Society for Military Ethics (EUROISME), Professor Whetham has maintained extensive ties with the Australian Defence Force, most notably serving as an Assistant Inspector General for the Afghanistan inquiry into allegations of war crimes—work for which he received a Chief of Defence Force commendation. His current research spans organisational culture, leadership development, and the ethics of emerging technologies, including human augmentation, human-machine teaming, and the use of remotely piloted aircraft in casualty evacuation. Professor Whetham's career reflects a deep commitment to practitioner-focused scholarship, emphasising that academic work in military ethics must serve those who face its challenges in the field rather than existing solely within academic discourse.



Resources & References

[King's College London - Defence Studies Department](#)

[King's Centre for Military Ethics](#)

[UK Joint Services Command and Staff College](#)

[Centre for Defence Leadership and Ethics \(Australia\)](#)

[Australian Defence College](#)

[International Society for Military Ethics - European Chapter \(EuroISME\)](#)

[OSCE - Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe](#)

[Defence Science and Technology Laboratory \(DSTL, UK\)](#)

[Brereton Report - Afghanistan Inquiry \(Australia\)](#)

[Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide \(Australia\)](#)

[EuroISME Annual Conference](#)

[McCain Institute](#)

[AI Military Ethics UK](#)

[Chilcot Inquiry](#)



S01E07 – Professor David Whetham – Part 2 – Time Stamped Highlights

1:10 Ethical challenges have right answers, while ethical dilemmas involve competing demands where you must do wrong to do right

2:33 Ethical training builds muscle memory so responses become automatic rather than requiring deliberation under fire

6:05 The UK regulates AI through policy and responsible AI principles rather than black letter law

10:51 The AI Military Ethics UK tool uses a knowledge tree structure to socialise ethics principles into the developer community

15:40 Machine bias risks treating AI as a magic solution that eliminates the fog of war when uncertainty serves an important cautionary function

18:53 There's no evidence that abandoning ethical restraint makes militaries more effective at achieving political objectives

20:25 True success means conflict resolution where the enemy no longer wants to fight, not just conflict termination

22:23 Military ethics is entirely compatible with winning and represents victory with humanity

23:32 Reasonable challenge from the Chilcot Inquiry establishes how to create cultures where critical concerns can be safely raised

25:35 Leaders must understand that appropriate challenges aren't personal attacks but attempts to improve mission success



S01E07 – Professor David Whetham – Part 2 – Full Transcript

[00:00:00] **Dr Lucas Marie:** Welcome to Lives in Leadership. This podcast is dedicated to promoting thoughtful and strategic conversations about military leadership, ethics, culture, and service in the profession of arms within the Australian Defence Force. In this episode Brigadier John Fenwick continues his discussion with Professor David Whetham.

[00:00:28] **BRIG John Fenwick:** Are you finding in the UK that there are ethical dilemma problems starting to be put more into collective training? We are certainly trying to do a little bit more of that here in Australia. Are you seeing that at all in the UK or anywhere else?

[00:00:45] **Professor David Whetham:** I very much am. It's starting to be better understood. They have tried to do it with many of the, it was called OPTAG (Operational Tactical Advisory Group) pre-deployment training, for a very long time in the UK, and I've seen the type of dilemmas that deliberately placed into those pre-deployment trainings and they can be very, very effective.

I'm just in the process of assisting with a new judgmental training tool that Sandhurst have been developing and I know from that, that a series of ethical challenges and some dilemmas, and I'll draw the difference between an ethical challenge and a dilemma there is that an ethical challenge is where there is a right answer and you just need to work out what it is versus an ethical dilemma where you are faced with basically competing demands and you are going to have to, break one of your commitments or requirements to be able to do anything. A genuine dilemma means that you, you have to do wrong, to do right almost. That there is no clear right answer there and those type of scenarios have been baked into those training serials, which are being developed right at the moment.



So, yes, I think this is a good thing. And I don't think it is just for the sake of it either. I think it's important to get people used to ethical reasoning. It's not because we're expecting somebody to go through an ethical checklist when they are faced with a dilemma right in front of them, right now. When there's incoming fire. Do you do X or Y? What should you do? Let's sit down and have a have a think through. That's not what I'm advocating and that's what far too many people think. That's what it's all about. It's about preparing in advance so that you, you already know, you were thought about the type of situations that you are likely to be faced with.

It won't be exact, but you will already have got, you will have already thought through what would be an appropriate response to similar type situations. You've already done the heavy lifting if you like. It's already almost part of your muscle memory at that point and that's what we're talking about. The type of deliberative processes that you can apply in a staff planning exercise are very different from what you are likely to be needing to apply in a deployed operation. But though those are two types of, ethical decision making preparation, and we can do both of them, we can prepare our people for both of those and we can do it well.

[00:03:35] **BRIG John Fenwick:** Yeah, absolutely. And I think, if I think to Stephen Coleman's comments on this and the difference between a test of integrity and a test of ethics and the reason to understand why they might be different is because you use different tools to address them.

[00:03:53] **Professor David Whetham:** Yep.

[00:03:54] **BRIG John Fenwick:** In particular where we come to for moral courage, when you've got a test of integrity, I think they're really worthwhile.

So when you've been doing this work with the British Army, I think it was with the judgment and decision tool. Is there anything built into that, that is a deliberative rehearsal type practice, the kind of thing that Marcus Aurelius used to talk about?



[00:04:20] **Professor David Whetham:** So the way we built into the way that the tool is designed is that there's you're presented with the challenge and then there is a very, very quickly afterwards there is a discussion and interaction process where you are supposed to deliberate on what you did, why you did it, and whether or not you think that that was the right thing to do.

And that, that is a facilitated conversation with somebody who's is familiar with the serial and, also broader military ethics principles and hopefully has some practical operational experience to draw from as well, because that is what makes that combination so powerful. Simply being told by an academic, what would the right answer is not the way forwards there. It's that operator's experience knowledge that will bring it to life for our young officers who don't have that experience. So, yes, that's very much part of what is recognised as best practice in that area.

[00:05:24] **BRIG John Fenwick:** Yeah, that's excellent. I haven't seen it too much brought into the actual practice. So we do after-action reviews and so on for group activities, but we haven't really institutionalised a practice for individuals to do the same thing particularly as they address ethical dilemmas.

I might just come back to something you talked about before around what you are seeing in the ethics of technology and human machine interfaces and how we make decisions about what we allow a machine to do and what a human must do whether there's oversight and so on. Are they the sorts of things you're exploring in that regard?

[00:06:05] **Professor David Whetham:** Yeah, very much so. One of the challenges that we have. One of the many challenges that we have is from the UK perspective, our AI, we are not going down the black letter law route much the same as Australia and I believe the US as well, and most of our European partners. Rather than seeking to regulate it in law, we're looking at how to do it through policy.



So, introducing responsible AI principles, for example, and then expecting developers to provide us with tools that recognise and incorporate those responsible AI ethics principles. Whether this is the right route or the wrong route. The position that the UK's argument is that the law of armed conflict, for example, is technologically agnostic. It doesn't care what tool you are using there are rules and if you have to comply with them whether it's informed, whether it's informed by AI or a person it, it doesn't matter the rules, the law is technologically agnostic. Now, whether or not you agree with that, this is the way that things are happening.

So, how successful is this going to be? I think if it can be baked into the procurement process, which is what we're starting to see now, where you have to demonstrate that you have taken into account, for example, human centricity or responsibility or accountability. How you have incorporated that into your design principles and then the design process. If we are demanding that developers do this, otherwise you will not get the contract, that is a way of shaping the development of a whole range of technology, because that's a big old market if all of those countries are taking a similar approach.

So even if it isn't a legal requirement. If you are not going to get the contract, if you don't adhere to these broadly complimentary policies they might use slightly different words, but they're all of the AUKUS Alliance, for example, we're all trying to ask for similar things. I've got some optimism that will give us products where ethics and law are not bolted on at the end of the process. They're baked into the design assumptions and the design process all the way through.

So, one of the projects I've been involved with is the socialising of AI ethics principles into the developer community. So, these are the startup businesses who are AI startups and defence startups who are meeting the demand of modern defence. And the people who are designing the products are incredibly clever people - very, very bright STEM graduates. The bright, shiny people and they're very impressive to work with and they will solve problems. If you give them a problem, they'll solve it, and they will solve it in an incredibly innovative way, and they'll solve it very quickly, but they'll tend to solve it in a straight line.



[00:09:27] **BRIG John Fenwick:** Yep.

[00:09:28] **Professor David Whetham:** Here is a solution to your problem rather than ever asking, should we solve it in this way? Is this an appropriate way to solve it? So, what would the socialisation of the broader AI ethics principles, but also where they come from so they, they haven't come from nowhere. They come from things like the values and standards of the British Armed Forces. They come from the idea that the just war tradition permeates our understanding of the use of force in international affairs both at a state level and at an individual level. But none of this is necessarily assumed knowledge from somebody with a STEM background.

So, we did hundreds of interviews with, the developer community as well as the practitioner community as part of this last piece of work and we realised that we couldn't just introduce the AI ethics principles, the responsible AI ethics principles without also introducing the fact that wider defence is an incredibly, it has values permeated throughout it and they needed to understand that before they could understand where the AI responsible AI ethics principles came from. So that was part of that effort.

And you can look it up right now. Anybody can look up that tool that the whole idea was that it would be publicly available and it's "AI.militaryethics.UK" and it revolves around the idea of a knowledge tree with the roots being informed by wider defence values, the trunk itself with the responsible AI principles and the leaves of how you would take those principles, break them down into their individual ideas, and then what they would look like when you try to apply them in practice. And then the fruit, which is case studies of existing AI products that have successfully navigated the challenges of the, of ethical risks that particular technology needs needed to address.

So again, it's quite groundbreaking in the idea that you're not expecting every single company to solve every single problem. They can draw on best practice. The idea is sharing, look, if this is accepted as an industry best way of solving this particular question. For example, how to ensure accountability with this model. Who or what can you point at and say they are responsible for the outcome of this type of decision?



If there is an appropriate answer to that, then being able to share it so that other people can understand what good looks like, seems to be a pretty good idea to me. So that's what this, that this particular tool is designed to do. And one of the things I particularly like about it is because it is predominantly an online tool, it continue to adapt and evolve and get better and more relevant and more useful as it goes forward.

[00:12:18] **BRIG John Fenwick:** So that's about AI in the pieces of equipment and so on, largely the technology that we use. And you've done some work on decision making practices and so on for, for military officers. I can see a time where a military decision maker will have a staff in front of them, much as they do today with an intelligence officer and an engineer and so on but also an AI of some form helping inform their decision and I have a theory that we understand a certain amount about how a young intelligence officer is developed and raised, and the same with an engineer, and that context helps us understand the advice they give us. To what degree do you think we need to understand how an AI works and to what level in order to be able to use it for decision making?

[00:13:20] **Professor David Whetham:** So enormous challenge here particularly in the gulf or the gap between what we think or what senior officer or decision makers think they understand about AI and what they actually understand about AI. A fascinating research paper this year at the staff college was exploring precisely that, and it turns out that there is a significant gap between what staff officers, the type of people who are going to be in exactly the situation you've just described, what they think they understand about AI, what their actual knowledge base is and that's a challenge for me as an educator and for us to bridge that gap that's the key. But yes. What does 61% confidence in a solution. What does that mean?

Now, if you happen to know that Emily, your incredibly capable staff officer can give you a 61% confidence score that she thinks that this is having done the research, she's 61% confident. Because of your knowledge of Emily, you can. then make your decision based on whether or not that's a reasonable punt. That's approaching certainty.



Or actually if you are less confident, perhaps you haven't met Emily before, perhaps you don't know how she's worked in the past and the type of advice she's given, maybe you'll look at that 61% and say, well, that's only barely above 50/50. I don't have the confidence to make that call here. But how do you apply that to an AI? But to me it's going to be very, very similar processes going on. How often has it got it wrong? You need to be familiar with the processes and understand what that 61% actually means. What is it drawing upon to give you that? Can you interrogate it further? On what basis has that decision been made? That it's not the technology, it's how we interact with it, which is, for me, one of the biggest challenges that we have lots and lots of focus on getting that 61% more or less accurate, but what does it mean to you as a decision maker? That's the bit I'm interested in, and I think that's absolutely key and one of the areas that I think that we have to be particularly careful with AI is the idea that you can always rely on the answer and it's machine bias.

It's the same, same way that you see people driving to rivers or creeks when they're following their sat nav, and then it's pretty obvious there's a river in front of you, but the sat nav says, no, it's fine, it's fordable. It's not fordable. You can see it's not fordable and yet you drive into it anyway. Why? Because the machines told you it was okay.

That machine bias is what I'm really worried about. It's the idea that in the military realm, we will see AI as a way through the friction, the fog of war and it's something that we've spent centuries looking for the magic wand that would allow us to see through the fog of war and know what's really going on and AI is quite seductive there; particularly for decision making. It appears to offer confidence. It appears to give you answers. And it's the risk of acting on that answer with getting rid of that uncertainty. That's what I'm worried about.



I think uncertainty actually fulfills a very important function in military planning and execution and that it introduces caution. That caution is not a bad thing. When you're talking about the military, caution is a good thing; getting the balance right. Obviously, somebody who is overly cautious is not going to be pursuing opportunities that they need to pursue. I understand that. But an absence of caution or abandoning caution cannot be a good thing in the military realm full stop. But even more so when you start thinking about things like tactical nuclear weaponry or strategic nuclear weaponry. I think a good healthy dose of uncertainty is a very good thing when you're dealing with such things.

[00:17:30] **BRIG John Fenwick:** I think that's a very interesting point, and I have seen some of the discussion on this where we have for a long time sought to train our decision makers to act in an environment of incomplete information and trying to decide the point at which I'm satisfied that I've got enough, but I gain an advantage by deciding quickly maybe quicker than my adversary.

[00:17:59] **Professor David Whetham:** Absolutely.

[00:18:00] **BRIG John Fenwick:** And I do fear that there will be a tendency to wait for more full information that something will be delivered in due course rather than acting decisively. Is that the sort of thing you see?

[00:18:13] **Professor David Whetham:** Absolutely. I think that's a very good way of framing it.

[00:18:17] **BRIG John Fenwick:** I'd just like to move slightly away from this to a broader topic that I quite often hear when we engage with young officers and soldiers, sailors and aviators around how ethics affects us in the military and whether it is an impediment. So being an ethical military is in some way an impediment to being competitive against perhaps an unethical or a less ethical adversary or an enemy. Do you have any thoughts on that?



[00:18:51] **Professor David Whetham:** Yeah, it's obviously harder. Boo-hoo. I challenge the assumption in the question really, the idea that if you're faced with an unethical opponent that it's somehow easier for them to win. Really, I, I'd love to see the evidence that abandoning rules, abandoning restraint, therefore being a less disciplined force somehow makes you more effective.

It certainly doesn't appear to be making the Russian armed forces more effective, their abandonment of the norms, of the laws of armed conflict, for example, in many theatres, seems to be a symptom of a poor organisation as opposed to something that is making them somehow deadlier.

I mean, yes, they are deadlier, but it's not contributing to what it is that the war is about, and that is the point. So, I'd say it's the question is born from a failure to understand that the military is an instrument intended to achieve a political objective. And if you, if that instrument makes achieving that political objective harder or more remote as a result, then it's not effective. If you have made the chance of achieving your political objective long term.

So it's worth bearing in mind things like the difference between conflict termination and conflict resolution as well. And we all too often focus on the point where the other side has stopped shooting at us, as opposed to when the other side no longer wants to shoot at us because we've resolved the issue - that's where you actually want to get to. That's how you actually achieve your political long-term objective - otherwise you haven't got a peace; you've got a stalemate or a temporary suspension of hostilities.

That's not the same thing as actually having achieved what it is that you set out to do. So, I would ask those people who'd say that it makes it harder to achieve your objectives by fighting ethically. I'd like examples, I'd like specific examples of where abandoning the rules somehow achieves your political objectives more successfully than fighting within it.

And I'd also like to ask them, you know. How are you going to look after your people afterwards?

[00:21:13] **BRIG John Fenwick:** Hmm.



[00:21:13] **Professor David Whetham:** Because they've got to go back to your society that you are there supposedly to defend at the end of the day and if you've basically told them, "oh, in this situation, the rules don't matter" what does that do to the people that you have sent to war?

And unfortunately, we know from far too much practical experience what happens to those people when they return home. And you can't just turn that off. And that's very bad for them and it's very bad for the society that you sent them back to as well.

[00:21:42] **BRIG John Fenwick:** Indeed. What does it do for the society and how does the society see itself now.

[00:21:47] **Professor David Whetham:** Absolutely.

[00:21:47] **BRIG John Fenwick:** In order to have won its peace that way. Yeah, I think it's a great point. And there have been a lot of examples through history of where it hasn't quite worked out quite so well.

[00:21:57] **Professor David Whetham:** Yeah.

[00:21:57] **BRIG John Fenwick:** And more examples of that, I think, than the, than the other counterpoint.

[00:22:01] **Professor David Whetham:** Yeah.

[00:22:01] **BRIG John Fenwick:** Yeah.

[00:22:02] **Professor David Whetham:** And, and I think it's also worth bearing in mind that military ethics isn't about being soft and nice and fluffy.

[00:22:07] **BRIG John Fenwick:** Mm.

[00:22:07] **Professor David Whetham:** It's about refining the military instrument to achieve what it's there to do.



[00:22:13] **BRIG John Fenwick:** Yeah.

[00:22:14] **Professor David Whetham:** And at the same point, looking after your people. I've had a very long, a lot of words explaining something that Nelson summed up beautifully.

It's a "victory with humanity" that IS what military ethics is about, "victory with humanity".

[00:22:31] **BRIG John Fenwick:** That sits very well.

[00:22:33] **Professor David Whetham:** So, I've just spent a lot of words explaining something that Nelson articulated with much greater brevity than I. Military ethics is entirely compatible with winning. It is basically victory with humanity. That's what it's about.

[00:22:52] **BRIG John Fenwick:** Yeah. Nice. So thanks very much for that, David. And I think we are very used to here in Australia making sure that we work you to the bone every time you come out. So, in the interest of giving you a little break from us. Thank you very much for the discussion today; it's been really insightful.

Before we completely pull away from you though in this podcast. I'd like to give you the opportunity just if there's anything else you'd like to raise or anything else we haven't covered today that you would like to particularly bring out.

[00:23:25] **Professor David Whetham:** Thank you very much. It's, well, it's as I said at the start, it's always a pleasure to, to be back here.

The one area I would just like to touch on at the end is a topic called, "reasonable challenge" and it contributes to an ethical and effective command climate, I think. It came in the UK out of the Chilcott Inquiry, which was the inquiry into how things went so horribly wrong in the invasion of Iraq and particularly the aftermath, when apparently hundreds, if not thousands of staff officers and MOD officials knew that everything was going to go horribly wrong, but nobody said anything.



And the Chilcott Inquiry was basically an attempt to try and understand how and why these things happened. And part of the response was on the very last page, and you can look this up on the internet, it's very easy – just Google Chilcot and reasonable challenge. The last page of the report is really, really powerful that the conclusions are deeply disturbing for British Defence. But one of the things that they could do right was by enshrining it and making sure that the leadership culture in the UK MOD embraced the idea of reasonable challenge.

Now, this isn't simply the idea that if you see something that's wrong, if you see that somebody hasn't thought about something, but it's critical to long-term success, you're supposed to put your hand up and say, um, "excuse me, Sir/Ma'am We've missed this bit". It's not just about that. Half of it is about that and how to raise an appropriate and legitimate challenge in different settings.

But it starts with you as the leader who is being challenged. And I think that's absolutely essential. It doesn't simply tell people to stick their hand up. It says, what do you need to do when somebody puts their hand up and says, we've got a problem here? And that's why I think it's particularly powerful because nobody, nobody is going to risk their necks in a culture where you are told to get back in your box.

The first part of reasonable challenge is understanding that a challenge delivered in an appropriate way is not a challenge to you. It's not a personal insult. It's not undermining your command authority. It is an attempt to make sure that the mission is fulfilled in the best possible way and understanding that from the start that this is a challenge that you need to listen to is absolutely key. Now there's a time and a place I get that and it refers to that, and that's why understanding when and where to raise an issue is absolutely critical to getting it right. When it is appropriate to raise a challenge, having that challenge listened to, and ultimately, it's up to you whether or not you decide to engage with it and act on it.



But you have to be receptive to it in the first place to be able to make that call, and that is key. So reasonable challenge. Being able to take criticism and understand that it's not at you, it's at the plan, and be able to modify the plan and make it better as a result I think is a really, really useful thing to bear in mind, when you are trying to develop a healthy organisational culture.

[00:26:57] **BRIG John Fenwick:** That's excellent, David, and you've done a great job of bringing it back to leadership and ethics in leadership, not just ethics, solely on its own, but the, the qualities of leadership. Thank you again, David, and it's great to have you here. You are a great friend of the Centre for Defence Leadership and Ethics, and we're really pleased to have you back and look forward to having you back again maybe next year, maybe sometime sooner. Who knows?

Thank you all out there for listening to us on this podcast. Please continue to listen out on the Forge for more in the Lives in Leadership series.

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