**whistleblowing**

In 2010, U.S. Army intelligence analyst Chelsea Manning leaked a classified video called Collateral Murder to WikiLeaks. The video showed a 2007 helicopter attack in Baghdad where American soldiers killed over a dozen people, including two Reuters journalists, and seriously injured children. Watching the video is hard, it shows how disconnected the soldiers seem from the violence they're causing. Manning said she leaked the video because she believed the public had a right to know what was really going on during the Iraq War. She thought people were being misled about what the U.S. military was doing overseas, and she didn’t feel like she could stay quiet about it.

What she did was definitely illegal, and she knew she’d get in big trouble. She was arrested, court martialed and sentenced to 35 years in prison. But whether what she did was right or wrong morally is still debated. Some people think she betrayed her country, others say she stood up for what was right.

In this paper, I’m going to argue that Virtue Ethics shows us that Chelsea Manning did act out of loyalty to the United States, just not in the traditional, follow the rules kind of way. I’ll argue that her actions were a moral case of whistleblowing. Using ideas from Vandekerckhove and Commers about “rational loyalty” and from Oxley and Wittkower about “care in the workplace,” I’ll show that Manning’s decision to leak the video came from courage, empathy, and a strong moral compass.

Vandekerckhove and Commers focus on something they call rational loyalty. That’s different from blind loyalty, the kind where you just do what you're told no matter what. Rational loyalty means sticking by a group or organization because you believe in its deeper values and goals, not just its rules or bosses. It also means being willing to speak up when the group does something wrong, because you care about its long term good.

For them, whistleblowing can actually be a loyal act, even though it might look like betrayal on the surface. If someone blows the whistle to stop harm and help the group get back on track with its real values, that can be seen as rational loyalty. They point out that a loyal person doesn’t just support their group when things are easy, they also try to make the group better when it messes up.

Chelsea Manning fits that idea pretty well. She wasn’t trying to destroy the military or harm the U.S. She was upset because what she saw in the classified files and especially in that video didn’t line up with what she thought the U.S. stood for. She said she believed in transparency, accountability, and protecting innocent lives. When she saw those values being ignored or violated, she felt like she had to say something. From the viewpoint of rational loyalty, her actions weren’t about betraying her country they were about holding it to a higher standard.

Now, looking at this through Virtue Ethics, which focuses on a person’s character and moral habits, we can see how Manning’s actions line up with certain important virtues. For example, she showed courage by risking her own freedom to do what she believed was right. She showed compassion for the people affected by the violence in the video. And she acted with integrity, staying true to her values even when it was dangerous to do so.

Virtue Ethics isn’t about following strict rules or always producing the best consequences. It’s about being the kind of person who tries to live a good life by building up good moral habit's virtues like honesty, bravery, empathy, and fairness. Manning, in this situation, wasn’t just trying to cause trouble. She was responding from a place of moral concern, shaped by her experiences and what she believed a good person should do.

She didn’t just leak the video on a whim. According to what she later said, she struggled with the decision. She thought long and hard about whether it was the right thing to do. That shows practical wisdom, which is another big part of Virtue Ethics. A virtuous person isn’t reckless, they think things through and make careful choices, even when those choices are hard. Manning knew she’d face serious consequences, but she decided that the truth mattered more. In that sense, she acted like someone who’s committed to becoming a better person and making the world better too.

So when we look at Manning through Vandekerckhove and Commers’ lens of rational loyalty, and then through Virtue Ethics, her actions start to look more moral than immoral. She was loyal not to the military’s chain of command, but to the deeper ideals she thought the U.S. was supposed to represent. She acted with courage, compassion, and honesty. That’s why I think her whistleblowing was moral, even if it broke the rules.

Oxley and Wittkower take a slightly different angle. They talk about care ethics and how that plays out in the workplace. They argue that loyalty isn't just about following orders or sticking to contracts. It also means caring about the people your work affects and recognizing that your actions have real consequences for real people. They call this relational responsibility, which means understanding how our roles connect us to others in a web of relationships not just coworkers or bosses, but also outsiders who are affected by what we do.

This is super relevant to Manning’s case. As an Army analyst, she wasn’t just handling data or files. The information she had access to represented real world events involving real people civilians, journalists, soldiers, and others. The video in Collateral Murder made it clear that people were dying in ways that weren’t being acknowledged publicly. From Oxley and Wittkower’s perspective, caring about those people and feeling responsible for them despite not knowing them personally is a kind of moral insight that matters a lot.

Manning didn’t have to feel connected to those victims. She could’ve just said, “Not my problem,” and followed orders like most people would have. But instead, she let herself care. That shows a strong sense of empathy and moral attention qualities that Oxley and Wittkower see as part of ethical responsibility in professional life. They argue that when we care about others, especially vulnerable people, we have a duty to act. And Manning did act. She made a hard choice to break the rules because staying silent felt like participating in something she believed was wrong.

When we bring Virtue Ethics into this again, Manning’s actions make even more sense. Care ethics and virtue ethics actually go together pretty well. Both are focused on the kind of person you’re trying to be, and both recognize that emotions like empathy and compassion aren’t weaknesses—they’re important moral tools. Manning didn’t just obey orders like a machine; she felt something, and she let those feelings guide her toward what she thought was right.

Her care for human life even the lives of people in a country the U.S. was at war with shows a kind of universal moral concern. That’s not easy to do, especially when the system around you is trying to train that out of you. But Virtue Ethics teaches that the virtuous person has to care not just about themselves but about others too. Manning extended her moral concern beyond national borders, showing a kind of justice and human solidarity that’s rare.

And again, we see her courage. She didn’t just speak up in a meeting or file an internal report. She released classified materials knowing full well that it could destroy her career, her freedom, even her safety. That wasn’t selfish it was sacrificial. From a Virtue Ethics standpoint, it takes moral strength to stand up to a powerful institution. It also takes a lot of moral clarity to realize that following the rules isn’t always the same as doing the right thing.

So if we look at Manning’s actions through Oxley and Wittkower’s ideas about care and loyalty, and through the lens of Virtue Ethics, it’s hard to say she did something immoral. She cared deeply about others, acted responsibly toward them, and took real personal risks to do what she believed was right. That sounds more like a moral whistleblower than a traitor.

So, did Chelsea Manning act out of loyalty when she released the Collateral Murder video? I think she did but it wasn’t the kind of loyalty that just follows orders or keeps secrets no matter what. It was a deeper, more thoughtful kind of loyalty what Vandekerckhove and Commers call rational loyalty. She cared about what the U.S. is supposed to stand for and felt like the government was going against those values. From that angle, leaking the video wasn’t betrayal it was an attempt to call the country back to its own principles.

Through Oxley and Wittkower’s lens, her actions also show strong relational responsibility and care. She wasn’t just thinking about herself or even about U.S. soldiers she was thinking about the civilians who were dying and about what kind of person she wanted to be. And when we tie all of this together with Virtue Ethics, we see someone acting with courage, compassion, honesty, and integrity.

Of course, some people would argue that what she did was dangerous that it put other lives at risk or made the U.S. look bad on the world stage. That’s a fair concern. Whistleblowing can have unintended consequences, and we should take those seriously. But I think Manning thought about that too. She didn’t leak everything she had she chose documents and videos she believed the public needed to see, and she tried to do it in a way that would focus on the truth, not just cause chaos.

No decision like this is ever perfect. But if we’re trying to judge her character, her intentions, and her reasons using Virtue Ethics, then I believe she made a hard but moral choice. She was trying to be a good person in a deeply flawed system. And that, to me, is what real moral courage looks like.