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PHIL 355E

10 April 2026

Case analysis 5

The video known as “Collateral Murder,” released by WikiLeaks in 2007, is a leaked recording from a U.S. Apache helicopter conducting surveillance over Baghdad. It shows an incident in which American forces opened fire on people they believed were armed insurgents. However, the people killed were later identified as civilians, including two journalists and several others who had arrived to assist the wounded. During the attack, the audio from the helicopter crew includes unsettling remarks that suggest detachment and even enjoyment, almost resembling the tone of people playing a video game rather than witnessing real deaths. Observing this event, Chelsea Manning, then a U.S. Army intelligence analyst, decided to release the footage and related materials to WikiLeaks in order to expose what she believed were serious ethical violations by the military. In this analysis, I will go through the lens of virtue ethics that although Manning’s actions did not align with traditional expectations of loyalty to the United States, her decision can still be understood as a morally justified act of whistleblowing.

One of the main ideas in Vandekerckhove and Commers’ article “Whistle Blowing and Rational Loyalty” is the concept of rational loyalty. This idea argues that loyalty should not be directed toward the physical structure of an organization, such as its buildings, leadership, or hierarchy. Rather it should put its direction toward its core mission, values, and ethical standards, as long as those principles are legitimate. In this sense, loyalty does not mean blind obedience. It requires individuals to think critically about what is right and wrong and remain committed to

ethical principles, even when those principles conflict with orders from authority. Chelsea Manning's actions can be understood through this framework. Manning released classified military information through WikiLeaks after witnessing events she believed reflected serious moral wrongdoing, including civilian casualties and possible violations of ethical conduct in warfare. Her decision to expose the material was based on her belief that the public needed to understand what was happening, even if it went against military expectations of loyalty. In interviews and related commentary, the footage is often described as showing a detached, almost video game-like attitude toward violence, highlighted by the crew's remarks during the attack and their reactions afterward. This raises ethical concerns about desensitization and the normalization of killing.

From the perspective of rational loyalty, Manning's choice can be seen as prioritizing justice and moral responsibility over obedience to authority. While critics argue that her disclosures may have endangered national security, saying that there was a significant gap between what the public was told and what was actually happening in Iraq, and that this needed to be exposed. Virtue ethics also supports analyzing her actions in terms of character and moral intention rather than strict rule-following of sorts. Although the military emphasizes values such as: loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, integrity, and personal courage, Manning's actions can be interpreted as a conflict between institutional loyalty and a higher commitment to morality and being truthful. From this perspective, her whistleblowing can be seen as an expression of character guided by ethical principles rather than blind obedience.

In Julinna Oxley and D.E. Wittkower's article "Care and Loyalty in the Workplace," they make the point that loyalty should be understood as a form of care. They explain that care ethics offers a way to view loyalty as a commitment to a person or institution based on genuine concern

and responsibility toward it. From this perspective, loyalty is rooted in interdependence and relationships where individuals rely on one another. In other words, loyalty is not just rule-following or obligation, but action driven by concern for others and their well-being within those relationships. Building on this idea, they introduce the concept of “critical loyalty,” which is closely related to rational loyalty. Critical loyalty involves actively working to improve an organization so that it moves closer to genuine moral well-being and ethical practice. Rather than simply accepting existing structures, it encourages individuals to reflect on whether the organization is acting in alignment with its stated values and to push for reform when it is not. This differs slightly from rational loyalty, which focuses more on justice-based reasoning, while critical loyalty places stronger emphasis on care and the quality of relationships within the organization.

In the case of Chelsea Manning, elements of critical loyalty can be connected to her decision to whistleblow on the U.S. Army. Oxley and Wittkower suggest that whistleblowing can sometimes be an expression of loyalty when it is motivated by a desire to correct wrongdoing rather than destroy the organization itself. Manning’s actions were not necessarily aimed at harming the military, but at exposing what she saw as serious ethical failures and encouraging accountability. From this view, her motivation can be understood as caring about the moral integrity of the institution and the people affected by its actions. When combined with virtue ethics, Manning’s whistleblowing can also be interpreted as reflecting traits like integrity and moral courage. Instead of prioritizing career security or institutional loyalty, she acted in response to what she believed was ethically wrong. While her actions came at significant personal cost, this perspective frames them as driven by character and a commitment to doing what she believed was right.

To bring this to a close, combining virtue ethics with the ideas of Vandekerckhove and Commers, as well as Oxley and Wittkower, helps explain why Chelsea Manning's actions can be seen as morally justified. Virtue ethics focuses on moral character and the idea that a person's virtues should guide their decisions, even when those decisions conflict with rules or carry serious consequences. Manning's decision to whistleblow reflects this emphasis on acting according to integrity rather than convenience or personal safety. Through the lens of rational loyalty, Manning can be understood as prioritizing justice and accountability over strict obedience to the U.S. Army. Instead of treating loyalty as blind compliance, this perspective frames it as commitment to ethical principles, even when that means challenging authority. In a similar way, Oxley and Wittkower's concept of critical loyalty suggests that her actions may stem from a deeper concern for the values the institution claims to uphold, rather than rejection of those values entirely. Although some may argue that Manning's actions endangered national security and damaged trust within the military, it is still important to consider the motivations behind her decision. From this perspective, her whistleblowing can be interpreted as an attempt to expose wrongdoing and bring attention to serious ethical issues, rather than an act of disloyalty for its own sake.

