Manning’s Virtue Ethics

The "Collateral Murder" video, leaked by Chelsea Manning in 2010, shows a 2007 Apache helicopter attack in Baghdad that resulted in the deaths of several civilians, including two Reuters journalists. The footage, characterized by a detached conversation among the helicopter crew and disturbing scenes of the aftermath, revealed actions that Manning believed constituted serious misconduct and potential war crimes by U.S. forces. This case raises questions about the nature of whistleblowing and loyalty to one’s country. Using virtue ethics, I will argue that Manning’s actions were not motivated by loyalty to the United States but represent a morally justified instance of whistleblowing.

Virtue ethics emphasizes the development of moral character and virtues, focusing on the intentions and moral integrity of individuals rather than the outcomes of their actions. Key virtues include courage, justice, and honesty. Manning’s decision to leak the video can be analyzed through these virtues. Manning's act can be seen as an embodiment of courage. He took significant personal and legal risks to expose what he saw as serious wrongdoing. Courage, in virtue ethics, involves standing up against injustices, even when it involves personal sacrifice. Manning’s willingness to confront military secrecy and potential legal consequences reflects this virtue.

Manning’s leak demonstrates a commitment to justice. By revealing the footage, Manning aimed to hold the military accountable and ensure that the actions shown were scrutinized publicly. His goal was not to undermine his country but to seek a higher moral standard by bringing unethical behavior to light. This aligns with the virtue of justice, which emphasizes the importance of transparency and accountability.

Viirtue ethics also considers the virtue of loyalty. Loyalty involves upholding the values and protocols of one’s institution or country. Manning’s actions involved a breach of military confidentiality and protocols, which can be seen as a failure to uphold this virtue. From this perspective, his breach of loyalty creates tension with his moral convictions. The ethical challenge here is whether Manning’s whistleblowing can be justified despite the breach of loyalty. Virtue ethics allows for a nuanced evaluation where courage and justice might outweigh the virtue of loyalty. The severity of the misconduct depicted and Manning’s intent to expose it suggest that his actions were driven by a commitment to higher moral principles rather than mere disloyalty.

Oxley and Wittkower’s analysis of whistleblowing emphasizes the need to balance personal convictions with professional responsibilities. They argue that effective whistleblowing involves navigating these competing obligations carefully. Applying their insights to Manning’s case, the conflict between his loyalty to the military and his duty to expose wrongdoing is central. Despite the breach of loyalty, the gravity of the misconduct and Manning’s dedication to justice provide a strong ethical justification for his actions.

In conclusion, Manning’s decision to leak the "Collateral Murder" footage reflects a complex interplay of virtues such as courage and justice. Although his actions involved a breach of loyalty, they align with a morally justified instance of whistleblowing under virtue ethics. The case highlights the difficulty of balancing personal moral convictions with institutional loyalty and underscores the value of virtue ethics in navigating these ethical complexities. Manning’s actions demonstrate the challenges of upholding moral principles in the face of institutional constraints and emphasize the importance of evaluating whistleblowing through a nuanced ethical framework.