Case Analysis on Whistleblowing

Will Lawson

 Within the video “Collateral Murder?” posted by Al Jazeera English, an in-depth analysis of a leaked military video showing a US army helicopter firing on Iraqis is explored. Within the leaked video, it shows the buildup of what led to the shootings along with what was communicated between the helicopter and the commanding officer. The video arose when Chelsea Manning decided to leak classified U.S. material onto the site WikiLeaks so that the public could have full discretion. While Manning’s whistleblowing did go against the wishes of the United States, I feel that it was for good reason. After watching the leaked footage, it is easy to see that there were numerous unnecessary actions committed from both the commanding officer and the helicopter. Some examples of these include laughing about killing, opening fire without seeing any weapons, mistaking a camera for a deadly weapon, and not taking more precaution with giving orders. Ethics of care help us examine relationships of interdependence in cases where we act on special obligations to show partiality. According to Ethics of Care, this can be moral when partiality supports one another in a relationship of mutual interdependence and allows it to grow. When examining the ethical tool, the ethics of care, it can be applied to a wide variety of connections beyond just personal relationships. In this Case Analysis I will argue that the ethics of care ethical tool shows us that Manning did act out of loyalty to the United States, and that her actions were a moral case of whistleblowing.

 Within the article, “Whistle Blowing and Rational Loyalty,” by Wim Vandekerckhove, he describes the complex relationship between loyalty and institutionalized whistleblowing. In his paper he argues that there is no contradiction between both needs of loyalty and whistleblowing. At the beginning of the article, Vandekerckhove attempts to define loyalty with prior definitions other researchers have given. He eventually concludes that the “framework within which loyalty can be rethought is constrained by four criteria: loyalty is an attitude aimed at an object, loyalty has an explicit external referent, loyalty is a learned attitude, and loyalty is bilateral” (p. 229). After categorizing loyalty, he discusses “rational loyalty” where “the adjective rational in rational loyalty indicates the need for the individual to make a deliberation whether or not her acts are a contribution to the explicit mission, values and goals of the organization she is loyal to” (p. 230). This points out that the object of such a loyalty is the explicit set of criteria, usually of some value or goals. Using this, a conclusion is made that “as whistleblowing can be an act of rational loyalty, organizations should institutionalize whistle blowing in order to protect employees who blow the whistle as an act of rational loyalty” (p. 232). Vandekerckhove makes very clear that there is no contradiction when discussing both needs of loyalty and whistleblowing within an organization or some other institution.

 When comparing the concepts mentioned above to the “Collateral Murder?” video, the argument can be made that Manning’s actions in releasing the footage was an act of rational loyalty to the United States. While she did release classified material, her intent was to expose some wrong doings of the United States military. Rational loyalty is seen here because she decided based off her values to expose this and wanted to improve these kinds of situations by raising awareness. Within the video, especially the second part, there were decisions made by the United States military that resulted in killing over a dozen Iraqi’s, some of them innocent civilians and children. With the United State’s military planning on never releasing any of the footage and trying to hide their faults, Manning did not have many options to accomplish the goal she had with her act of whistleblowing.

 When assessing the released footage with the ethical tool, the ethics of care, the decision for Manning to release the footage makes more sense and allows the argument for it to be moral to be valid. While Manning had an obligation to the military to keep the footage confidential, she felt a mutual interdependence to the public. The ethics of care apply to more than just personal relationships, and this is a good example. Manning thought about the type of government and military she would want and what a caring one would look like. Being secretive and allowing unnecessary killing was definitely not what she thought of and it propelled her to blow the whistle so that she could expose these wrongdoings. The ethics of care tool shows that for a mutual flourishing to happen, both the public and the government they are a part of must work toward the best possibilities. This example of whistleblowing was an attempt to better the United States military, therefore, making her actions moral even though it broke confidentiality.

 Within Julinna Oxley and D.E. Wittkower’s article, “Care and Loyalty in the Workplace,” they discuss loyalty in business as a kind of care which allows an easier distinction to be made when deciding when it is morally appropriate to be loyal in business contexts. Another important aspect of the article is the argument that “loyalty to a corporation can be deserved, but never obliged, since loyalty itself involves going above and beyond duties and obligations” (p. 222). The authors begin the article by introducing traditional definitions of loyalty and then start to compare loyalty as a product of care. The Ethics of Care tool is rooted deeply into this article as it uses its theory amongst others to show how it applies to loyalty. The authors state, “Loyalty should thus be interpreted as a kind of partiality to those one cares for, justified on the basis that one cares for the other” (p. 224). This discusses partiality over impartiality which essentially means that one chooses based off a relationship with special trust. The ethics of care here is based on a voluntary interdependence, such as a relationship with a life partner. The choice then creates an obligation, and it is justified on the basis that one cares for the other. Care that generates obligations is not just emotions but a whole process of caring about someone interpedently publicly. The authors also mention another crucial point where they say, “To think that loyalty is derivative of duties and justice or contractual obligations, and to treat loyalty as a duty or obligation, mistakes the effect for the cause” (p. 229). They are essentially saying that when someone treats loyalty in way of duty, the actual cause for loyalty disappears. By viewing loyalty based in ethics of care, we can move past an obligation or a contract, and involve feelings and other things that go beyond the original contract. This allows for a greater sense of loyalty.

 Using the concepts mentioned in the previous paragraph to analyze the leaked footage, Manning’s actions can be seen as moral and loyal to the United States due to the ethics of care. Manning knew that she had an obligation to the military to keep the footage confidential. However, with her act of whistleblowing and leaking the footage to the public, she expanded past the original contract, to act loyal to the United States public, instead of a smaller group of individuals. She felt that something needed to be done and knew that she would face consequences. However, her care for the public and wanting to improve future situations such as these led her to blow the whistle. She is choosing a partiality, which in this case is the public, over her obligations to the United States military. If Manning were to not say anything while being “loyal” to the military’s wishes, it would have been seen as a mistake because issues such as these would be undiscussed and most likely remain.

 When using the ethical tool, the ethics of care, to assess the actions within the video and Manning’s whistleblowing decision, it can be shown that she did the right thing. Oxley and Wittkower’s article is solely focused around the ethics of care and that certain obligations are made when there is a mutual interdependence. Manning felt that she was obligated to inform the public of the wrong doings within the military and what she experienced. According to the ethics of care tool, it would have been a disservice for her to not say anything about the unjust actions. Her care extended beyond the military where she most likely felt for the innocent people of Iraq that were killed and compared it to back home. She allowed feelings to be involved over contractual agreement and decided to inform the public of this occurrence. She decided that a caring government would not harm innocent people and then attempt to hide it as if it never happened. For all these reasons, I believe that her whistleblowing act was moral based on the interdependence between all members of society.

 In this Case Analysis I argued that the ethics of care ethical tool shows us that Manning did act out of loyalty to the United States, and that her actions were a moral case of whistleblowing. Manning experienced wrong-doings and even though she had an obligation to keep the secret, she decided to blow the whistle. This act of whistleblowing was carefully thought out, where the ethics of care is heavily involved. Within the ethics of care, the mutual interdependence can be applied to more than just personal relationships. In this case, it applies to society where Manning felt the right thing to do was to inform the public of what actually happened during this time. She allowed feelings to go beyond meeting certain obligations and her caring for the public pushed her to leak the footage. She felt this was one of the only ways that we would be able to flourish and for that reason I see it as an act of loyalty to the United States while also being considered a moral act.