
UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS
THE BASIC SCHOOL
MARINE CORPS TRAINING COMMAND
CAMP BARRETT, VIRGINIA 22134-5019

MORAL REASONING DG
B120129
STUDENT HANDOUT

Moral Reasoning

Introduction

Moral Reasoning is the manner in which an individual makes decisions based on the determination of what is right and wrong. This determination is further based on that individual's moral foundation. For Marines, our moral and ethical foundation comes from our core values, leadership traits and principles, and five horizontal themes.

Importance

Marine officers are responsible to ensure that the decisions they make are grounded in sound moral reasoning. An officer must never compromise his/her moral foundations when making a decision in the execution of his or her duties. Not only will he/she compromise his/her own ethical foundation, but he/she will also put the ethical foundation of his/her Marines in jeopardy as well.

In This Lesson

Some of the topics covered in this lesson can give you an edge on understanding moral reasoning along with your own moral foundations and judgement. This lesson will also help you identify your own strengths and weaknesses and give you the techniques to improve them.

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Learning Objectives

Terminal Learning Objectives

TBS-VALU-1001 While part of a Marine Corps unit, demonstrate Marine Corps Values IAW MCRP 6-11b.

TBS-CORE-2104 While serving as a leader of Marines, demonstrate the leadership principle "make sound and timely decisions," to support the mission of the Marine Corps and maintain combat readiness.

Enabling Learning Objectives

TBS-VALU-1002d While part of a Marine Corps unit, make ethical decisions when there is no reference or guidance IAW the TBS Five Horizontal Themes.

Background

The purpose of moral reasoning is to give the student officer a mechanism or framework for making moral or ethical choices. Normative ethics is that mechanism. While, moral foundation, judgement, ethical thought, choice, and decision making have always been key components in leadership development, there is significant value in developing a mechanism to help leaders work through difficult decisions. While there are a number of different frameworks and models for moral reasoning and development, normative ethics has been judged to be the most applicable for Marine Officers. That's not to say that there is not also value in reading other moral reasoning and development theories. Lawrence Kohlberg's ideas of moral development, for example, can lend quite a bit of context and drive discussion on individual values and development, but his theory is a little too centralized and confined to a lock step method of development to be applied universally. Normative ethics provides the framework to think through all aspects of a situation by lending context to all potential solutions prior to making a decision. As Marine leaders, every decision you make will have an ethical component.

Moral Reasoning

Moral Reasoning is the manner in which an individual makes decisions based on the determination of what is right and wrong. This determination is further based on that individual's moral foundation. Although moral reasoning can be seen as a personal choice, the choice is often dictated by ethical standards put into place by that individual's group (society, community, religion, family, etc). For Marines, our moral and ethical standards come from our core values, leadership traits and principles, and five horizontal themes. This is our foundation.

Normative Ethics

Normative ethics is the branch of ethics which attempts to establish ethical standards, what is right and wrong, and the ethical behavior that stems from those standards. As Marine Officers, our ethical behavior is determined by the manner in which we apply the Marine Corps moral and ethical standards to a given situation. This is how we ultimately determine what is right and what is wrong. How we act is the definition of normative ethics.

Normative Ethical Theory is broken into three Categories:

Consequentialism, Deontology, and Virtue Ethics

Consequentialism

The morality of a situation is contingent upon the action's outcome or result. Essentially, the action taken is considered to be morally right if the outcome or consequence of that action is good. As Marine Officers, consequentialism means focusing on mission accomplishment or accomplishing the task at hand with little regard for the actions we take in order to meet that end state.

Normative Ethics (Continued)

Deontology

In Greek, *Deon* translates to obligation or duty. Under deontology, an individual's actions are judged to be morally right if they are in accordance with one's duty. If the actions an individual takes are within the rules or bounds of that individual's duty or obligation, then they are seen to be right. As a Marine Officer, deontology means executing one's duty according to the rules and regulations that govern everything from the entire Department of Defense down to the specific theater ROEs which govern the manner in which a unit can operate when forward deployed.

Virtue Ethics

This approach emphasizes the role of individual character, and the moral foundation from which that character is built when determining or evaluating ethical behavior. In virtue ethics, morality is determined by the identity or character of the individual, rather than the actions of the individual or the consequences of those actions. For Marine Officers, virtue ethics means doing the right thing for the right reason at all times. In application, virtue ethics has traditionally been practiced according to the cardinal virtues; Prudence, Justice, Courage, and Temperance, which we learned about during Officership Foundations. The four cardinal virtues are the foundation from which our core values, leadership traits and principles, and five horizontal themes are derived. Therefore, by behaving ethically according to the Marine Corps ethical and moral standards, Marines are practicing virtue ethics.

Each of these approaches is used in concert when making a decision. Marines normally look at each situation with a consequentialist mindset tempered by deontology. Meaning that leaders focus on mission accomplishment, but they do so within the scope of their duty according to the laws and regulations of which all Marines are bound. In 95% of decisions that need to be made, deontology, or operating according to rules and regulations, will carry the day. In the cases where there is gray area; where rules and regulations don't seem to fit, Marines must turn to virtue ethics. In other words, they must rely on the application of their ethical and moral standards to help guide them to the right decision.

As Marines we strive for mission accomplishment, but we must do so according to our duty and our rules and regulations. When our rules and regulations don't fit the situation, we must apply our ethical and moral standards to help guide our decision making. We must never compromise our values for the sake of mission accomplishment.

Practical Application

You are the platoon commander for 2nd Platoon, India Company, 3rd Battalion, 4th Marines. Your platoon has been conducting counter insurgency operations in and around the Washir District Center, Helmand Province, Afghanistan. Yesterday, your company commander tasked you with conducting a security patrol in the vicinity of the major east-west running wadi in order to interdict Taliban transiting to Now Zad through Washir District via the wadi.

Today, while conducting a reinforced squad level security patrol through the east-west running wadi, you left behind a small four Marine security element near a significant choke point after a long security halt. You have used this tactic a number of times throughout your deployment in an attempt to ambush any enemy attempting to back lay improvised explosive devices (IEDs) prior to your return through the same choke point.

45 minutes later, while engaged in a conversation with a local farmer and his son, you hear the sound of automatic gun fire coming from the direction of the significant choke point where you left your four Marine element. One minute later, your radio operator receives a radio transmission from LCpl Hughs with the security element that one of your fire team leaders, Cpl Sanderson, has been shot in the leg and is bleeding out. Additionally, he tells you that the enemy is being reinforced from your direction. You can hear distress in LCpl Hughs' voice through the radio as you realize that the platoon corpsman is with you and the rest of the squad.

Your current location puts you in a significant disadvantage to quickly return. There are two routes back to the wadi choke point. The route you came from is highly trafficked by the local population, free from IEDs, and the likely route of enemy

reinforcement, but even at a run, it will take you at least 25 minutes to return. The more direct route will only take 10 minutes, but will cross through a number of fields with choke points known to be laden with IEDs. The fields belong to the farmer who you have been conversing with and while he likely knows the location of the IEDs, he and his family will face severe consequences from the local Taliban if they find out that the farmer helped you.

Take 5 minutes before proceeding. Think about how your decision could be influenced by consequentialism, deontology, and virtue ethics. How would each of these three approaches change your decision? What might your decision be under each approach?

Practical Application (Continued)

Consequentialism: The outcome that you want to achieve is both destroying the enemy and quickly getting medical aid to your seriously wounded Marine. It doesn't matter how you achieve that outcome, as long as you put yourself and your Marines in a position to do that. By subscribing solely to this approach, your decision might be to force the farmer into guiding you through his fields. If he initially refuses to guide you through, fearful of retribution from the Taliban against him and his family, then with little time for arguing, you might point your rifle at him and threaten to kill him if he doesn't lead you through the field. If he continues to refuse, you might threaten to kill his son next. After a short stand-off, he would probably succumb and leads you through the fields.

Deontology: The outcome that you want to achieve is still both destroying the enemy and quickly getting medical aid to your seriously wounded Marine. But under deontology, you must follow laws, rules, and regulations in order to accomplish these things. You may still ask the farmer to guide you through, but if he refuses, the rules of engagement, law of war, and your duty preclude you from threatening and coercing the farmer. You would probably leave the farmer and quickly advance back through the highly trafficked route where the enemy is most likely reinforcing from. You systematically destroy the reinforcing enemy as you advance back to the choke point, but by the time you get back to your four Marine element, your wounded Marine has bled out. Although unfortunate, you see this as a success as you have followed all rules, regulations, and your duty in your execution of the mission.

Virtue Ethics: While the outcome that you want to achieve is both destroying the enemy and quickly getting medical aid to your seriously wounded Marine, your first priority is helping your Marine, but you aren't going to compromise your ethical and moral foundation to accomplish this. You quickly explain to the farmer the situation and ask him to guide you through his fields. He wants to help, but refuses to guide you through, fearful of retribution from the Taliban against him and his family. With little time to waste, you quickly make a plan to bound back through your original route to fight off the enemy in order to get your corpsman to the four man element. Just as you begin to step off, the farmer tells his son to guide you through the fields and back to the choke point. You follow the son through the fields bringing the corpsman and reinforcement to your four man element.

Endstate: You can see that in this case, the deontology method isn't too far off from the Virtue Ethics method. In 90% of situations that you face, deontology will guide you to the correct decision. Virtue ethics, although always a factor give your moral and ethical foundation, should really only, should really only be the deciding factor in the cases where there is gray area; where rules and regulations don't seem to fit.

