

Moral Relativism and Modern Leader

Incompatible with the Corps' ethos

by Maj James M. Stephens

Since the foundation of western philosophy, concepts such as morality and virtue were regarded as transcendent of humanity. While the sources of authority varied, the notion that humans possessed transcendent qualities was ever-present in the philosophies of Plato, Marcus Aurelius, St. Augustine, and Kant alike. The Founding Fathers recognized our inalienable rights when they signed the Declaration of Independence and later when constructing the Constitution. Likewise, moral relativism has existed in schools of Western thought; however, it did not come into prominence until the 19th century.¹

Moral relativism is incompatible with our responsibility and legitimacy as leaders. Moral character must be bound to leadership as part of a core ethos. We must not only endorse moral character but live the concept on a daily basis. War is a distinctly human endeavor and humans are inherently moral creatures. By embracing a moral relativism, you are opening yourself up to two dangers. First, you are limiting your ability to understand the nature of war. Second, you will fail to uphold sacred traditions handed down by generations of warfighters. By replacing transcendent morality with relativism, we trade rock for sand. It is adaptable for a time but will ultimately erode and jeopardize the integrity of our institution. While the Marine Corps is currently weathering the storm better than other Services, we cannot take this for granted and need to take a more active role as moral leaders.

The rampant individualism of the 21st century has encouraged the practice of believing the appearance of virtue or

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morality is the same thing as possessing it. “*Credo, ergo sum*” could serve as this motto for this millennium. In his examination of Moral Narcissism, Roger L. Simon states, “The short form is this: What you believe, or claim to believe or say you believe—not what you do or how you act or what the results of your actions may be—defines you as a person and makes you “good.” In 21st-century America, almost all of us seem to have concluded that “you are what you say you are. You are what you proclaim your values to be, irrespective of their consequences.” In short, words are divorced from action and the emotions of an individual are the principal source of moral legitimacy.²

The principal problem with relying on emotions for a source of moral authority is their inherently mercurial nature makes them unsuitable to serve as a sustained foundation. Humans routinely take the path of least resistance and using emotions as a moral framework is easy because it is intellectually and ethically lazy. Moral Relativism allows humans to choose their actions on what “feels” best at the time. Logic and reason have no place in this framework either, as the difference between rational and irrational becomes moot.

Emotions serve as poor foundations for legitimacy as they do not intrinsically possess vice or virtue. The same emotions Marines rely on to do harm to the enemy on the battlefield while

“Words had to change their ordinary meaning and to take that which was now given them. Reckless audacity came to be considered the courage of a loyal supporter; prudent hesitation, specious cowardice; moderation was held to be a cloak for unmanliness; ability to see all sides of a question’s incapacity to act on any. Frantic violence became the attribute of manliness; cautious plotting a justifiable means of self-defense.”
—Thucydides

protecting a fallen comrade can be the same emotion that may result in domestic violence. Likewise, the desires that contribute to a healthy marriage and the expansion of family are just as likely to result in the removal of leadership for sexual misconduct. The full array of human emotions, desires, and morals all have a purpose in the lives

of Marines, but it is the context and degree that determines the character of their consequences. As C.S. Lewis eloquently put,

Now this thing that judges between two instincts, that decides which should be encouraged, cannot itself be either of them. You might as well say that the sheet of music which tells you, at a given moment, to play one note on the piano and not another, is itself one of the notes on the keyboard. The Moral Law tells us the tune we have to play: our instincts are merely the keys.

This is precisely why we possess a Marine Corps ethos: a moral criterion against which we measure those actions identical for every Marine. As leaders we bear the responsibility to ensure our Marines understand the complexity of morality, allowing them to make judgments based on a moral system.³

Perhaps one of the greatest pitfalls of moral relativism is that its logical conclusion is the denial of human dignity. The Founding Fathers recognized the necessity of identifying human transcendent qualities. A truly morally relative society is a society where the controlling body can take any and all action against both body and mind in the name of the greater good. Humans cease to be humans and serve only as automatons in a great society machine—to be discarded or hammered into place as required. Paradoxically, such a society still espouses a twisted reflection of morality, just one that can be manipulated to serve the state, as utopia justifies the means. As pointed out by John Lenczowski, if you put morality in the hands of men rather than a transcendent source, then society must determine the moral framework through a power struggle.⁴

If humans are reduced to bio-chemical reactions, morality ceases to have any meaning behind our hardware and control. C.S. Lewis wrote extensively on moral relativism and transhumanism in both his fiction and non-fiction,

The real objection is that if man chooses to treat himself as raw material, raw material he will be: not raw material to be manipulated, as he fondly imagined, by himself, but by mere appetite,



The Marine Corps inculcates out unique culture and ethos as part of the transformation from civilian to Marine. (Photo by LCpl Mackenzie Carter.)

that is, mere Nature, in the person of his de-humanized Conditioners.⁵

Eliminating what makes us human and relaying logical calculations alone is an imperfect answer as well.

Moral relativism does not lend itself to cultural understanding when the culture in question subscribes to a mor-

ally strict framework. Moral relativists operate at a huge disadvantage when placed in a situation where the cultural framework is a way of life. By establishing a strategy based on our own projected motivations on another, we can never truly understand alien cultures. Justifying actions becomes extremely difficult when one embraces a moral relativist outlook; this is what makes the Jihadist butchering infidels objectively worse than and Marine squad eliminating lawful designed enemy combatants. As a Nation, are we willing to tell our combat veterans there was no differ-

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ence between them and the enemy, that moral superiority is an illusion? Ours is a human-based profession; the center of gravity will always be the human heart. By ignoring morality, we are rendering ourselves unable to seek a decisive course of action. Ultimately, moral relativism cannot truly recognize hierarchy, driving factors, or core values.

It is our responsibility to train our Marines in our Corps values; they will not receive them from the civilian world. In war, decisions are rarely black and white; thus, a moral framework must be established to guide difficult decisions. Refusing to make a decision is still a decision. An organization's moral health is tied to its ability to recognize and follow its own framework. Possessing a framework does not guarantee anything; inherently flawed frameworks will quickly crumble, and strong frameworks can succumb to corruption. Immoral behavior has a cost to be paid

either in the time that must now be dedicated to administrative action or the loss of credibility among a population; moral failing takes away time and effort from other enterprises.

As Marine officers, we swear an oath to uphold the Constitution and are subordinate to civil authority, “*Cedant arma togae,*” as the Founders intended. This does not give us an excuse to be silent. “Only following orders” is an unacceptable excuse of the weak-willed and pathetic, and we can afford to be neither. It can be as irresponsible to disobey orders as it is to follow orders without question.⁶

Our decisions now will carry to the next generation of leaders, and the state of the Marine Corps will directly reflect our moral decisions. Our position is a tenuous one, as social change is not synonymous with the moral health of the Marine Corps. We must be resolute and be prepared to stake our credibility on the issues we stand for. Truth is our best weapon when fear is used to enforce conformity to faddish trends, typically in the guise of moral principle. Furthermore, we must live up to the standards we espouse; our authority as leaders does not exempt us from our core values. Do not speak of the moral burden but rather of a moral gift. It is precious, gives us our humanity, and must be passed to future generations lest we cease to bear the title of Marine.

The existence of the Marine Corps is akin to constructing a cathedral, such as the great Norman ones that can be found on the English coast. These imposing structures, built by a martial, seafaring, yet pious people, tower over the countryside, and the communities thus center on them. These structures are not built overnight but over generations in accordance with the blueprint of the master architect. Changes to the architecture must be carefully considered and done in accordance with the previous construction. Those that attempt to radically alter the construction risk permanently damaging the whole structure. A cathedral built by an emotional architect would be gaudy, structurally unsound, and change with the season, while an architect without humanity would construct a stout stone fortress.



When commissioned as a Marine officer, the moral and ethical foundation of the individual is as important as the oath sworn to uphold the Constitution. (Photo by Cpl Sean Potter.)

In both cases, the building fails to serve its original purpose—a functional but venerated structure.

But a cathedral is more than just the stone walls, arches, and bell towers. Cathedrals require sacristans, those who are responsible for the sacred imagery within and who are responsible for training the next generation, those who know the significance and the history of the cathedral and everything in it, for nothing is there by mistake. Cathedrals constructed by the moral relativist would be hollow buildings, bereft of holy texts, décor, and icons, for there are too many and all equal, none can take priority. In the end, nobody can use the cathedral, each individual must imagine how much more beautiful his cathedral would be than anybody else’s; however, the building is still empty and does not serve its purpose.

Notes

1. *Stanford*, s.v., “Moral Relativism,” available at <http://plato.stanford.edu>. For the purposes of this article, “Moral Relativism” will be defined as *Metaethical Moral Relativism*: The truth or falsity of moral judgments, or their justification, is not absolute or universal but is relative to the traditions, convictions, or practices of a group of persons; and Merriam-Webster, s.v., “Morality,” available at <http://www.merriam-webster.com>. “Morality” will be defined as

“Beliefs about what is right behavior and what is wrong behavior.” See also, John Lenczowski, “Political-Ideological Warfare Integrated Strategy” in *Fighting the Ideological War*, ed. Patrick Sookhdeo and Katharine C. Gorka, (Chicago, IL: Isaac Publishing, 2012).

2. I believe, therefore, I am. See also Roger L. Simon, “Moral Narcissism and the Least-Great Generation,” *Commentary Magazine*, (May 2016), available at <https://www.commentarymagazine.com>.

3. C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, (New York, NY: McMillian Publishing Company, 1977).

4. “Political-Ideological Warfare Integrated Strategy.”

5. C.S. Lewis, *Abolition of Man*, (Quebec: Samizdat University Press, 2014).

6. “Let arms yield to the toga.” Cicero was speaking in regard to the Roman military obeying the civil authorities, this is not a new issue. Quintus Tullius Cicero, *De officiis*, Stoics.com, (n.d.), available at http://stoics.com/cicero_book.html.

