

CAROLINA MUSEUM OF THE MARINE

From Definition to Practice, Continued

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In the document “Marine Corps Values: A User’s Guide for Discussion Leaders” one finds near the beginning, as the purpose of the document is introduced, a statement that captures in brief the mission of the Al Gray Marine Leadership Forum and Carolina Museum of the Marine. “Ensuring that today’s Marines uphold the legacy of those who have gone before begins at the recruit depots and Officer Candidates’ School. Here we undertake the transformation of young Americans into Marines, and ultimately into contributing citizens in our communities in a unique and indelible way.” We seek ever to understand and to uphold the legacy of those Marines who have gone before us, and

from this legacy and the knowledge and skill displayed within it, to explain to Americans more broadly what it means to be contributing citizens in our communities. Last month, we looked at definitions of selected moral terms found in the User's Guide, like ethics, morals, and culture, and in this issue of "Front and Center" we will consider a particularly bracing scenario from the User's Guide. Thought experiments in ethics are generally structured to engage the mind in careful consideration of moral concepts and how they guide behavior in real-life situations. Some thought experiments, however, engage people more deeply than usual.

In a section titled "Scenarios Involving Values and Behavior," one finds this situation.

"It is sunup and your six man patrol has just been hit about 1000 meters from your combat outpost. Your patrol killed the nine enemy soldiers that hit you, but you see about 15 or 20 more enemy heading towards your position from about 300 meters away. Three of your men and the corpsman were killed, and the fifth wounded badly. He's in great pain and begs you to kill him and 'make it' before the enemy reinforcements arrive. You don't think he's wounded that badly and believe he has a good chance to survive if he gets medical help. You know you'll have to carry him, however, and it'll slow you down to the extent the enemy may be able to catch up to you before you get back 'home.' You are certain you can make it back by yourself. What values are at play in this scenario?"

Perhaps it is deliberate that this scenario does not indicate that one Marine killing another is not on the agenda, since readers have to identify relevant values, but the lack of comment is striking. The key element of the scenario is the request to be killed, and when we read of the reaction to the request, the reasoning seems to suggest that the Marine who is not injured thought that the wounded Marine's condition did not merit euthanasia, which seems to imply that complying with the wounded Marine's request is not out of question. Thus, the issue is now before us.

The User's Guide for Discussion Leaders, as we've seen, defines "right" as an "ethical or moral quality that constitutes the ideal of moral propriety and involves various attributes, such as adherence to duty; obedience to lawful authority, whether divine or human; and freedom from guilt." "Wrong" is understood to be "[s]omething that is immoral or unethical such as, Principles, practices, or conduct contrary to justice, goodness, or equity, or to laws accepted as having divine or human sanction." "Ethics" is taken to consist in "principles of conduct governing an individual or a profession; the discipline dealing with what is good and bad, or right and wrong, or with moral duty and obligation." In an essay titled "Battlefield Euthanasia: Should Mercy-Killings be Allowed?"^[i] The author quotes this passage from the Geneva Convention of 1949.

"Members of the armed forces...who are wounded or sick, shall be respected and protected in all circumstances. They shall be treated humanely and cared for by the Party to the conflict in whose power they may be.... Any attempts upon their lives, or

violence to their persons, shall be strictly prohibited...; they shall not willfully be left without medical assistance and care, nor shall conditions exposing them to contagion or infection be created. Only urgent medical reasons will authorize priority in the order of treatment to be administered.... The Party to the conflict which is compelled to abandon wounded or sick to the enemy shall, as far as military considerations permit, leave with them a part of its medical personnel and material to assist in their care.”

The author of the essay names several moral philosophers, and quotes a few, in support of the conclusion he defends. The conclusion is that the potential either for error or abuse in any policy permitting battlefield euthanasia is too great, and thus mercy killing should not be allowed. The philosophers named by the author are, all of them, practitioners of a particular moral theory called “preference utilitarianism.” The heart of utilitarian moral theory is the Principle of Utility, which holds that an act is right if it generates more happiness than unhappiness. “Happiness” is defined as pleasure, and the relative absence of pain. A sticky intellectual problem with all forms of utilitarianism has been how to define pleasure, and more difficult, how to rank-order pleasures from better to worse, since, if one is to act according to the Principle of Utility, such matters must be ironed out (and they never have been). Preference utilitarians argue that pleasure is a private matter that differs from one person to another, and so the broadest latitude must be given for people to maximize pleasure as each one defines it, that is, according to individual preferences.



There are more fundamental problems with utilitarian moral theory that are helpfully debated by J.J.C. Smart and Bernard Williams in *Utilitarianism For and*

Against. [iii] Important among the difficulties is the inability of utilitarianism to account for justice, that is, an obligation we have as human beings always to give to each of our fellow human beings what belongs to him. If one's governing principle of morality is that acts are right to the extent they produce more pleasure than pain, the principle guiding one's actions does not recognize any moral obligations binding our behavior *prior* to acting in pursuit of pleasure. Are there moral duties that bind us as human beings, absolutely, regardless of circumstances? A common example given of acts that are always wrong is to seek the judicial punishment of someone known to be innocent of wrongdoing. The idea is that if we ask people to identify a circumstance, or set of circumstances, in which it would be morally permissible to condemn a man in court for a crime it is known he didn't commit, and then hang him for it, no one could do it. Interestingly, it happens almost uniformly that people who can offer situations in which judicial murder is morally permissible think as utilitarians, thus, it seems, proving the accusation about utilitarianism and justice since they believe they have identified a situation in which killing a known innocent human being is not unjust.

We can return to the definitions of terms we encounter in the User's Guide for Discussion Leaders for a different perspective on moral reasoning. An act is right if it has an "ethical or moral quality that constitutes the ideal of moral propriety and involves various attributes, such as adherence to duty; obedience to lawful authority, whether divine or human; and freedom from guilt." The "ideal of moral propriety," an ideal to be pursued in our actions, binds us as human beings *before* we act. The ideal is a moral ideal for human beings, and this is suggested especially by recognizing an obligation to obey divine authority. These elements of right conduct as defined by the Marine Corps provide us with intellectual guidance in distinguishing acts which are free of guilt, from those which are not.

An act is wrong that is "immoral or unethical such as, Principles, practices, or conduct contrary to justice, goodness, or equity, or to laws accepted as having divine or human sanction." Here we find stated, though in different words, that it is always wrong willfully to do injustice, and to act against what is good and fair. Ethics, we read, considers the "principles of conduct governing an individual or a profession; the discipline dealing with what is good and bad, or right and wrong, or with moral duty and obligation." The idea that we can analyze and understand what is good, what is bad, what is right and wrong, assumes that we human beings have natural moral obligations that we can understand and that bind us independent of circumstances. Circumstances are the conditions within which we seek to act according to our duties as human beings.

The reason many people find utilitarianism in its various forms attractive, especially in applied disciplines like biomedical ethics, is that it frees people from the inhibiting conditions of natural moral obligation. The Marine Corps defends and illuminates a different, more naturally human understanding of ethics that is a product of the ancient and venerable tradition of virtue ethics. This is seen, as we often observe, in the first principle of Marine Corps leadership: "Know yourself, and seek

self-improvement.” This isn’t done by practicing to be a “moral calculator” whose concern is to get the balance sheet of pleasure and pain correctly sorted out as often as possible. After all, because utilitarians evaluate the quality of an act by its consequences, they can never know if their actions are right until they act and see what happens. The Marines know better than this, and this truth is on display when they teach ethics for the continuous improvement of the Corps as a human institution.

[i] A copy of the essay may be found here: <https://www.thefreelibrary.com/Battlefield+Euthanasia%3A+should+mercy-killings+be+allowed%3F-a0411470309>

[ii] Published by Cambridge University Press, 1973.