

Principles and Traits of Marine Corps Leadership, Part XI

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We have arrived at the eleventh and final principle of Marine Corps Leadership: seek responsibilities and take responsibility. The idea of responsibility asserted in this leadership principle is comparable to the ideas of duty and obligation, but there is another, compatible meaning one may attach to “responsibility” that can cast some light on the idea of responsibility as a quality of one’s character. In 1962, an ethicist at Yale University named H. Richard Niebuhr gave a series of lectures in ethics in Scotland and the United States, later published as *The Responsible Self*. In part Niebuhr had in mind an effort to resolve a problem in contemporary ethics. In the mid-20th century, there were two broad classes of moral theories intended to explain why an action thought to be morally right is in fact morally right. One class of theories rests on the view that what makes an action right is the quality of the outcome, that is, it creates for people more benefits than burdens. Among the problems with this position is that if the outcome of an act justifies it, then one cannot know until an act is done whether it is morally right. In other words, moral theories that claim actions are justified by their consequences cannot guide our action *before* we act. The other broad class of moral theories holds that conformity to moral duty is what justifies an action. Of course, this raises the

question of how reliably to identify our moral duty, but in practice, duty-based moral theories are subject to unworkable rigidity. We can say with some confidence that it is morally wrong to tell lies, but does this mean it is always wrong to lie? For example, does a war that is clearly just become unjust because we use deception in battling the enemy? Perhaps a more everyday example of this involves a beloved aunt with a passion for silly-looking hats who buys yet another one and asks you what you think of it.

Many people by mid-century could see that outcome-based and duty-based moral theories were defective, but too many thinkers sought to contrive “fixes” that never worked. The reason for this is that modern moral philosophy tended to treat people as moral technicians possessing the skill of applying a theory to the situations in which a moral choice is to be taken, rather than attending to human beings as moral creatures in need of growth and development. Before the modern era, thinkers in the West were concerned with the moral quality of a human being and with how one comes to be a well-developed person. This concern was largely dropped in the early modern period in preference to focusing on what makes an action right and what makes an action wrong. The problem with seeking to explain the rightness of an act with reference to just one feature of it, like an act’s outcome or its conformity with duty, is that moral action is complex involving not only what is done, but the inner processes by which a person chooses a particular action. In the Middle Ages, it was common to hold that in order to evaluate the moral quality of an action one needed to know what was done, the circumstances under which it was done, and the intention of the one who acted. This approach takes proper regard for the moral dignity of the human person by recognizing that we often have to assess a situation and act according to that assessment, and that often there is no single correct assessment of a situation. Niebuhr sought to revive the concern for people as morally and intellectually developed individuals who are able to see the right thing to do in the many different circumstances in which we must act. The responsible self *responds* to others in their situations, addressing them as fellow human beings engaged together in common enterprises that often require skill, cooperation, and the honesty without which cooperation is not possible.

The eleven principles of Marine Corps leadership and the fourteen traits of a leader describe someone who is well developed morally and intellectually. This is clear when we recognize that moral and intellectual development are concerned with bringing discipline to the will and to the mind so that the two may function together identifying and choosing what ancient thinkers would have called the right things at the right time in the right way for the right reasons. This is what is intimated in the first principle of leadership: know yourself and seek self-improvement. One may think with good reason that this principle is first on list of leadership principles because leaders are human beings endowed with the human nature that is common to us all with both its strengths and its weaknesses. A well-developed person is a human being who has worked over time to convert the moral and intellectual potential latent in all of us at birth into actual skills of mind and body. A leader should develop a sense of responsibility among

subordinates, but central to doing this is setting the example by seeking responsibilities and taking responsibility.

We sometimes hear that most people want to belong to a group of other people, which is natural, but one of the consequences of this is that if members of a group begin thinking and acting in counterproductive ways, the tendency can spread to the detriment of the group as a whole. This is why people who are leaders in any domain of life must be able to see trends, whether for good or ill, and understand them. Moreover, where a group is wandering off of a healthy path, a leader must be willing to stand apart from the group, taking responsibility for the problem, and working toward correction, urging others, as Thomas Jefferson urged, to regain the road that leads to peace, liberty, and safety, which, after all, is central to the purpose of a well-ordered society.

The leadership trait of courage may be thought of as “the moral or mental strength to remain calm during challenges.” Challenges may include physical dangers to self and others, but it may include also admitting when one has made a mistake and taking responsibility for it. This is fine of course, but the importance of courage to a well-developed human being has long been recognized and the questions connected with it studied. Is courage about controlling fear? There is general agreement that it is, for example Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274 A.D.) in his important work *Summa Theologiae* argues that it is part of the function of courage to protect the will against being withdrawn from the good of reason through fear of bodily harm. So, courage binds the will firmly to the good of reason in the presence of the greatest dangers. Thus, Thomas argues that courage concerns the fears of injury and death.

Is endurance the chief act of courage? In some ancient treatments of courage, the argument was that to attack is more difficult than to endure because attacking is acting on others who resist while enduring is persevering without being changed. Therefore, it seems that attacking is the chief act of courage. Aquinas replies to this argument, following Aristotle, that courage is more concerned to allay fear than to moderate daring since it is more difficult to allay fear. So courage moderates daring in an attack while endurance requires the repression of fear. Therefore, the chief act of courage is endurance, which is a trait of a Marine leader.

Does courage require anger while acting? Interestingly, Aquinas answers this question saying: “Accordingly the brave man employs moderate anger for his action, but not immoderate anger.” Here Aquinas is not splitting hairs, as he appears to be doing, but he is taking Aristotle’s side in what was an energetic dispute among schools of thought. For the Stoics, someone who is good and wise has “excluded” the passions, including anger, from his mind. Thus, someone who is brave does not act in anger. For Aristotle and his followers, the passions are natural to human beings and cannot be excised from the soul. Rather, the passions are to be moderated by reason, and so the brave man employs moderate anger for his action.

In pre-modern western tradition, before the 16th century, courage, along with prudence, temperance, and justice were the four “cardinal virtues,” and central to the moral and intellectual growth of human beings. So, Aquinas found it fitting to close his discussion of courage by asking whether it is the highest of virtues. He answers by saying that the better a virtue is, the greater it is, because virtues are great according to their expression of the human good. That good, the good for humans, is reason’s good, by which Thomas means that reason functions to identify the good or else it is not truly reason. The perfection of reason in a human being is the function of the virtue of prudence, as the perfection of reason in human affairs is function of justice. The other virtues, temperance and courage, work to safeguard these goods by moderating the passions and keeping them from leading someone away from reason’s good. Thus, courage is a cardinal virtue, but not the greatest of the virtues.

When examining the principles and traits of Marine Corps leadership we find that they aim consistently at the growth of a fully developed human being, mind and body. To be a leader, then, we may suppose, is a way of being, or perhaps we may say that a leader is a leader more by who he is than by what he does, but then we might discuss whether being and doing in human beings can in fact be separated. Examining the principles and traits of leadership is a proper way to begin a conversation about leadership, what it is, and how one may become a leader. We find, however, that leading self and others, like singing, is a practice everyone can do, but that some do better than others. Still, it is good for a people as a group or society to have good leaders among them, and for the others to understand what leadership is, and why it is important for all of us to seek to grow as human beings. This is a conversation we shall find thriving at Carolina Museum of the Marine.