

Integrity, Moral Courage and *Innere Führung*

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The aim of this paper is to examine the usefulness of the somewhat related notions of integrity, moral courage, and *Innere Führung* (the leadership concept used by the German military) as a means of making military personnel behave ethically. Of these three notions, integrity is mentioned most often within military organizations, and the largest part of what follows is therefore devoted to a description of what integrity is, and what the drawbacks of this notion are for the military. This will lead us to conclude that integrity in its most common meaning is too vague and subjective to be of much use to the military. It is because of these drawbacks that this paper looks into moral courage and *Innere Führung* as possible alternatives for integrity.

What is integrity?

Integrity is the virtue that makes that we do the right thing in spite of being tempted otherwise, even when there are no witnesses present. No wonder that most militaries list it as an important virtue: also in war, morality cannot be a matter of not being found out. Regrettably, however, integrity as a term has acquired so many meanings today that it has come to signify everything and nothing. The term has a rather restricted meaning in most organizations, however, which define it negatively, stipulating the things an employee should not do, such as accepting gifts above a certain value, or taking office supplies home. Although most organizations use this narrow definition of integrity, most people will think that this is not what integrity is really about.

Integrity has a wider meaning outside that organizational context, although it is somewhat hard to pin down. It can stand for “wholeness,” which goes back to the ancient idea (the Latin *integer* means “whole” or “complete”) that virtues are related; someone who has the virtue of courage needs the attendant virtues of wisdom and temperance to guide that courage. Others see integrity as being consistent over time, and expect us to stick to our principles under pressure. Some, finally, simply use integrity as a synonym for being ethical, and hold that we possess integrity to the extent that we live moral lives. Clearly, this definition is so general that it does not help us understand what integrity is really about.

This proliferation of meanings makes judging someone’s integrity somewhat arbitrary; it all depends on what one chooses the term to signify. We can circumvent that problem, and most other semantic concerns, by seeking the meaning of the term in its use, and staying close to the everyday understanding of the term. If we do so, we can take integrity to mean something like acting on one’s own values and principles, as this is what most people consider integrity to be. This definition locates integrity somewhere between the narrow definition of integrity as conforming to organizational rules, and the all-too-wide definition that equates it with ethical behavior.

Can we live by personal moral principles?

There are some problems with integrity in this common-sense meaning, however. To begin

with, everything depends on the values and principles someone actually adheres to. Malevolent dictators, mobsters, and terrorists can all claim to possess integrity without being contradictory as long as they live by their own principles. This evidently means that the above-mentioned use of the term integrity as synonymous with being ethical is misguided; if we ask our colleagues or friends to be persons of integrity, we should always specify that we do so assuming that their personal principles are good – an altogether rather unsatisfying construction.

Just as worrying is that we cannot know to what extent those who claim to follow their own moral compass – “I only do what feels right/ what my conscience tells me/makes it possible for me to look at myself in the mirror” – are actually doing so. Although sincerely believing that they are following an innate moral rule, how can they possibly know whether they are really doing so? Could they not be deceiving themselves? In that aspect, the followers of such rules somewhat resemble Daniel Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe who, alone on his island, used an improvised calendar to keep track of what day it was, and named the native he befriended Friday, because he thought it was on a Friday that they had met. But Crusoe could not know whether Thursday or Monday would have been a more appropriate name, and in fact Crusoe learned that he had missed a day or two after his rescue. Two centuries after Defoe, Ludwig Wittgenstein (not an often-cited philosopher in military ethics) argued that there are three possibilities when people claim to follow a private rule: 1) they are indeed following a rule and do so consistently; 2) they follow a rule, but are not entirely consistent; 3) they claim to follow a rule but their judgments are in reality completely random. The problem here is that it is impossible to know for both the rule followers and their audience which of the three alternatives we are dealing with. According to Wittgenstein (and many others), this shows that we cannot have a private language. But his argument also

has implications for those who claim to live by personal moral rules. We can only consistently follow a rule, moral or otherwise, if there is a public that can tell us whether we are in the right or in the wrong.

Finally, integrity is not always a moral motive – insofar as it emphasizes good intentions at the neglect of taking consequences into account. In that case, integrity is more about the ability to look oneself in the mirror, and a certain self-image, than anything else. To give an example: unconditional pacifism, although highly principled, is perhaps above all about demonstrating good intentions (and hence is unsuited for policymakers, who have to take the outcomes of their decisions into account, too).

Integrity in the military

We already mentioned that most militaries consider integrity an important virtue, and include it on their list of virtues and values. The imprecision in writing about integrity is widespread, however. Within the military, we come across both the very narrow definition of integrity as abiding to all relevant regulation and the very wide definition that equates integrity with being ethical, while the notion of integrity as wholeness underlies the view of some that a good soldier is a good person in all walks of life. To most military personnel, though, integrity means that which it means to most of us – namely, upholding your personal values and principles.

However, not surprisingly, most military organizations that list integrity as a virtue see it as upholding organizational values, and thus not as something that is about one’s own values and principles. Any other way is impossible, as it would clearly be inconsistent to include integrity as living according to one’s own values in a list of values that all military personnel must adhere to. But if members of the military do see integrity as the upholding of personal values,

even if their organization defines integrity differently, this could pose a problem.

Evidently, acting on one's own principles is not a problem if these principles are compatible with what the military wants, but this is obviously not always the case. How much room there is in a military organization for upholding one's personal values and principles is consequently a thorny matter. On the one hand, soldiers are often seen as professionals who should have considerable leeway in their decision-making: in a recent handbook on military ethics, we read that "in any situation where law and ethics set different standards, a member of the military profession will follow the higher standard, inevitably the one required by ethics."¹ But on the other hand, we can all see how militaries struggle with conscientious objectors, whistleblowers and soldiers refusing orders that (they think) are unethical, and overall military organizations offer a somewhat hostile environment for acting on personal principles if these conflict with organizational views. By nature more collectivistic than individualistic, militaries foster cohesion and group loyalty, and it is probably this emphasis on loyalty that explains why soldiers who act on their own values sometimes end up as martyrs for a good cause rather than as moral exemplars for their organization.

A famous example of some time ago is Hugh Thompson, Jr., the helicopter pilot who tried to stop his fellow US soldiers from killing Vietnamese villagers in My Lai in 1969 and was afterwards the victim of an orchestrated smear campaign. More recently, Joe Darby, the sergeant who in January 2004 went to the US Army Criminal Investigation Command with the Abu Ghraib pictures, had to live in protective custody after Defense Secretary Rumsfeld made his name public. Now, most of us will (rightfully) think it a blessing to have principled people like Thompson and Darby within the military. But we have also seen that integrity is intrinsically subjective, and there are of course examples of sol-

diers who were clearly in the wrong when they acted from personnel principles (and at least some conscientious objectors fall under that heading). So, yes, there is a need for something that induces us to do the right thing, even when there is considerable pressure to choose the wrong course of action, but integrity is not the ideal candidate to perform that role. Although many militaries see it as an important virtue, integrity is in its most common meaning overwhelmingly vague and subjective. It is a good thing therefore that there are other candidates.

Moral courage and *Innere Führung*.

One candidate is the notion of moral courage, the ability to withstand the unfavorable opinion of friends and colleagues – if that is what doing what is right requires. As such, moral courage is an important subspecies of courage because we need people who blow the whistle if necessary, or correct a colleague when they think them in the wrong. On first sight, moral courage is somewhat akin to integrity; both expect us to uphold our principles when others disagree. But there is a difference: moral courage by definition furthers some moral principle, while this is not necessarily the case with integrity – considering that a steadfast mobster could also claim to possess that good quality. Although we could say that such a man or woman possesses integrity, we cannot maintain that they are morally courageous.

Some classic examples of integrity have in fact been motivated by principles and values that were not very personal at all, and were therefore actually instances of moral courage. The aforementioned My Lai hero Hugh Thompson, for instance, did not act on strictly personal values that were at odds with societal or professional values, but on ideas about what his country and organization should stand for (and perhaps once stood for). Thompson later stated in a lecture on moral courage that the soldiers involved in the massacre "were not mili-

tary people,” and thus made clear that it was a military – and hence not a personal – ethos that was guiding him.² So moral courage is a virtue that would suit the military better than integrity. The only argument against it is that it is not always clear which moral principles are supposed to inspire moral courage. Such principles can be organizational, societal, or perhaps even individual – in that latter case, moral courage could suffer from the same subjectivity as integrity does.

But what, then, about the concept of *Innere Führung* of the German military? Is there a built-in subjectivity in that notion, too? At first sight, one might think so – to most people unfamiliar with the concept the term itself suggests that it is a notion more similar to integrity than to moral courage. “Inner guidance” sounds as if it is something resembling an internal moral compass, and thus something in which values external to a person (such as professional or societal values) do not play much of a role. However, this is not what the concept (as I understand it) is meant to denote. One of the ideas behind *Innere Führung* is that soldiers should disobey orders that are manifestly unethical; they are expected to think for themselves. But that does not mean that anything goes; the values that should guide that independent thinking are clearly societal, and members of the German military are to actively defend, out of personal conviction, values such as human dignity, freedom, justice, equality, and democracy.³ In fact, the whole purpose of *Innere Führung*, and the notion of the citizen in uniform that it underpins, is to bring the military in alignment with civil society. One of its stated principles is the realization of constitutional and social values in the armed forces.⁴ It is thus a lot less subjective than integrity as it is commonly understood; one could say that it can fulfill the role often designated for integrity, without having its manifest shortcomings. In the end, *Innere Führung* has an advantage over moral courage, too, as it is more clear where the moral princi-

ples that underpin it are located – namely, in larger society. The only ambiguity lies in the fact that it asks military personnel to “sharpen their conscience” in order to be able to distinguish right from wrong.⁵ Should the just mentioned societal values not guide them in making that distinction?

Conclusion

A paramount quality of most definitions of integrity is their imprecision; possessing integrity is often seen as identical to being ethical. This very broad view on integrity is widespread and has possibly contributed to integrity being one of the most used moral terms in the military. In a more specific meaning, integrity requires of us that we live according to our own personal values and principles. We have seen that integrity in this meaning is fraught with problems, with its overall vagueness and being much too subjective among the more important ones. However, we also see that sometimes being principled is what is called for. Without expecting soldiers to be men or women of principle to at least some extent, they could hide behind the fact that they were just doing as others did. One could say that their integrity is tested when it is plain what is the right thing to do, yet with considerable pressure to choose the wrong course of action. Especially when no one is around, or when those around are letting their moral standards go, sticking to your principles is the laudable thing to do – as long as your principles are morally sound, that is. The question is whether these principles should be truly personal principles, or internalized societal or professional principles. As we have seen in the above, the latter seems to be the more promising option. That makes both the concepts of moral courage and *Innere Führung* better ways of making soldiers behave morally than integrity – with *Innere Führung* probably being the most appropriate of the two, as it is grounded in widely accepted societal values.

