

What happens when an ex-POW of Hanoi determines to teach a course in moral philosophy?

The Stockdale Course

Joseph Gerard Brennan

When Commander James Bond Stockdale lay in prison in North Vietnam, he told himself that if he ever got out alive he would teach a course in moral philosophy. After seven and a half years in captivity, much of that time in solitary confinement and under torture, he was released at last and returned to the United States. Promoted rapidly to vice-admiral and appointed president of the Naval War College at Newport, Rhode Island, he introduced and taught just such a course. I helped him organize the course and served as his tutor and team-teacher, staying on to teach the course at the War College after Stockdale retired from the Navy in 1979. The course is still going strong and draws full enrollment from the military officers who make up the student body of the Naval War College.

Because of its association with the ancient philosopher Epictetus, the name Stockdale caught my attention in a brief news item from *The New York Times* in the fall of 1975:

Rear Admiral James B. Stockdale, who was a prisoner of war in North Vietnam for seven and a half years, has been presented with eight medals for, among other things, "resisting all attempts by the North Vietnamese to use him. . . ." In 1973, after his release, Admiral Stockdale wrote of his experience, "When I ejected from that airplane in 1965, I left my world of technology and entered the world of Epictetus. I was alone and crippled; self-reliance was the basis for daily life."

The original source of Stockdale's remark about the contrasting worlds of technology and Epictetus was a column written by Stockdale, then still a Navy captain, that appeared in *The New York Times* of Sunday, April 1, 1973. I had missed seeing that piece, which caused little reaction outside military circles at the time.

Admiral Stockdale and Epictetus

Curious as to what this man had found in the old Stoic philosopher to sustain him in his long ordeal, I wrote to him. Almost by return of post, I received a lengthy reply. I give it here in full because it affords necessary insights into the character of Admiral Stockdale and reveals his motive for establishing the course that was to bear the title "Foundations of Moral Obligation."

I was honored to receive your inquiry about the comfort and strength philosophical readings gave me throughout my seven and a half years in prison. Perhaps I can best explain how this came to be with a rather rambling chronology.

I came into the Navy as a Naval Academy midshipman in 1943 at the age of nineteen. For the next twenty years or so I was a rather technically oriented person. I was a seagoing destroyer officer, an aviator, a landing-signal officer, a test pilot and academic instructor at the test pilot school, a many-times-deployed fighter pilot, and ultimately, a squadron commander of a supersonic F-8 Crusader outfit.

In 1960 I was sent to Stanford University for two full years of study in politics, history, economics, and so on, in preparation for later assignments in politico-military policy making. I loved the subject matter, but noticed that in many courses my interest would peak at about the time the professor would say, "We're getting into philosophy—let's get back to the subject." I had more than adequate time to get the expected master's degree and suggested to my adviser in my second year that I sign up for some courses over in the philosophy corner of the quadrangle. He was dead set against it—thought it would be a waste of time. He said, "That's a very technical subject—it would take two terms to learn their peculiar vocabulary." Finally, after I persisted, he said, "It's up to you."

It was my good fortune on that first morning that I wandered through the halls of the philosophy department, grey-haired and in civilian clothes (or course), to come by an open office whose occupant looked me in the eye and asked if he could be of help. When I told him that I was a graduate student in the humanities with no formal philosophy background, he could scarcely believe it. When I told him I was a

naval officer he asked me to have a seat. He had been in the Navy in World War II. His name was Phillip Rhinelander. To jump ahead, his background was as follows: As a Harvard lawyer, he had practiced in Boston for fifteen or twenty years before Pearl Harbor, volunteered for war service at sea, and thereafter took his Ph.D. at Harvard under Whitehead. After tours as a dean at Harvard and Stanford, he was back in the classroom, at his own request. He was in the midst of his two-term "personal" course: "The Problems of Good and Evil." This he had built upon the lessons of the book of Job ("Life is not fair"). He offered to let me enter the course and, to overcome my shortcomings of background, to give me an hour of private tutoring each week. What a departure from the other departments! (In some, Ph.D. candidates sat outside their adviser's office for hours on end, awaiting a ten-minute conversation.) I loved Rhinelander's class, and particularly our hour together each week. I remember how patient he was in trying to get me to realize the full implications of Hume's *Dialogues on Natural Religion* (I still have page after page of notes on that).

To jump ahead again, I completed the course in fair fashion, and went on to others from a visiting professor from Michigan named Moravcsik, but Epictetus had already come into play during my last tutorial session with Rhinelander.

As we parted after our last session, he reached up to his bookshelf and said something like, "As I remember it, you are a military man—take this booklet as a memento of our hours together. It provides moral philosophy applicable to your profession." It was *The Enchiridion*.

That night I started to peruse my gift. I recognized nothing that applied to the career I had known. I was a fighter pilot, an organizer, a motivator of young aviators, a martini drinker, a golf player, a technologist—and this ancient rag talked about not concerning oneself with matters over which one had no control, and so forth. I thought to myself, "Poor old Rhinelander—he's just too far gone." Nevertheless, I read and remembered almost all of it, if for no other reason than that it was given to me by the man I had come to worship as the most complete human being I had ever met—a sensitive scholar, a man who devoted himself to teaching quality kids quality concepts after a full career of legal and academic administrative success, a music composer, a kingpin of all major phases of university life, and a sophisticated gentleman of kindness and generosity.

About three years after I had said goodbye to "poor old Rhinelander," while in the midst of my second combat tour against North Vietnam as a wing commander, I pulled off a target one September

morning in the midst of heavy flak, when all the lights come on (fire warning, hydraulic failure, electrical failure, and so on). As I sped over the treetops, it became immediately apparent that I had lost my flight controls—by reflex action I pulled the curtain and ejected—and was almost immediately suspended in air 200 feet above a village street, in total silence except for rifle shots and the whir of bullets past my ear. So help me, in those fleeting seconds before I landed among the waiting crowd, I had two vivid thoughts: (1) Five years to wait (I had studied enough modern Far East history and talked to enough forward air controllers in the south to fully appreciate the dilemma of Vietnam—I turned out to be an optimist by two and a half years). (2) I am leaving that technological world and entering the world of Epictetus.

The world view of the stoics, Professor Rhinelandt had joked, was that their environment was a buzz saw, in which human will was the only salvation. I was to spend over four years combatting a veritable buzz saw (until the torture and extortion machine was set in idle in the late autumn of 1969) and over three more years of simple deprived detention of the sort one would expect in a primitive, hostile country. Over four years were to be spent in solitary confinement, nearly half of it in leg irons. Throughout, until 1970, every effort was to be made to break my will, to make me a cat's paw in tinhorn propaganda schemes. Real or fabricated "violations of the established regulations for criminal's detention" (for example, tapping on the walls to another prisoner) would result in torture, with the end aim of sequential confession of guilt, begging for forgiveness, apology, and atonement (signing an antiwar statement). A similar sequence would be set up with particular gusto if I were found to be exercising leadership of others via the tap code ("inciting other criminals to oppose the camp authority").

The situation was thus framed in the above context. I was crippled (knee broken, eventually to become rigidly fused by nature; shoulder broken, partial use of arm), alone, sick (weight down by fifty pounds), depressed (not so much from anticipating the next pain as from the prospect of my eventually losing my honor and self-respect), and helpless except for will. What conditions could be more appropriate for Epictetus' admonitions? As a soldier, I had bound myself to a military ethic:

Chapter XVII of *The Enchiridion*

Remember that you are an actor in a drama of such sort as the author chooses—if short, then in a short one; if long, then in a long one. If it be his pleasure that you should enact a poor man, see that you act it well; or a cripple, or

a ruler, or a private citizen. For this is your business—to act well the given part; but to choose it belongs to another.

I was crippled:

Chapter IX of *The Enchiridion*

Sickness is an impediment to the body, but not to the will unless itself pleases. Lameness is an impediment to the leg, but not to the will; and say this to yourself with regard to everything that happens. For you will find it to be an impediment to something else, but not truly to yourself.

I was dependent on my extortionists for life support and soon learned to ask for nothing, to avoid demands for “reciprocity”:

Chapter XIV of *The Enchiridion*

Whoever then would be free, let him wish nothing, let him decline nothing, which depends on others; else he must necessarily be a slave.

I could stop my misery at any time by becoming a puppet. Was it worth the shame?

Chapter XXVIII of *The Enchiridion*

If a person had delivered up your body to some passerby, you would certainly be angry. And do you feel no shame in delivering up your own mind to any reviler, to be disconcerted and confounded?

Relief from boils, heat, cold, broken bones was available for the asking—for a price. What should I say?

Chapter XXIV of *The Enchiridion*

If I can get them with the preservation of my honor and fidelity and self-respect, show me the way and I will get them; but if you require me to lose my own proper good, that you may gain what is no good, consider how unreasonable and foolish you are.

Epictetus was not the only valuable philosophic memory in my predicament: Job (“Why me? . . . Why *not* me?”), Descartes’ bifurcation of mind and body, and many other readings were invaluable.

It is important to note that I am speaking only for myself. Some of my prisonmates had more doctrinaire religious concepts, which served them well; some drew resolve from their concepts of political virtue, and so on, in a broad spectrum of varying levels of sophistication. Thoughts of God and country helped me, too—but my “secret

weapon" was the security I felt in anchoring my resolve to those selected portions of philosophic thought that emphasized human dignity and self-respect. Epictetus certainly taught that.

This has been a much longer explanation than I had planned, but I am enthusiastic about the wonders a man in your profession and discipline can bring about in the lives of people in need. I wish I had the qualification to be in your shoes, teaching in a good school. From firsthand experience, I am committed to the position that the study of moral philosophy is a particularly relevant part of education. And though education, as one of my favorite quotations reads, may be but an ornament in prosperity, it is a refuge in adversity.

Moral Philosophy at the Naval War College

More correspondence followed. In late 1977, Stockdale asked me to come up to visit him at the War College in Newport. In a sunlit office overlooking Narragansett Bay, I found myself stared at by a man who looked a little like James Cagney in his prime, but more handsome. Piercing blue eyes bored into me from under a shock of thick, prematurely white hair. Stockdale wore the blue- and white-starred ribbon of the Congressional Medal of Honor on his uniform. Intense, feisty, and impatient with anything but directness, Stockdale moved about restlessly, stumping back and forth on his leg that had been broken by the fall from his plane and rebroken by beatings from his captors. He asked me if I would help him put together a course in moral philosophy and team-teach it with him. I had just retired as professor emeritus of philosophy at Barnard College of Columbia University and was on the point of accepting a State Department offer of a Fulbright lectureship in India. Stockdale said, "Phone those characters in Washington and tell them to go to hell." I did so, politely, and we set to work at once on organizing the course.

The Naval War College, I found, offered a one-year graduate course of study to military officers in midcareer. The curriculum centered on three core courses—strategy and policy, defense economics and management, and naval operations. Upon assuming the War College presidency, Stockdale had expanded the elective course offerings to twenty or thirty, the number depending on the particular trimester in which they were offered. All the elective courses, except the new offering in moral philosophy, were related in some way to the three required core courses. The student body at the Naval War College consisted of about 300 midgrade military officers ranging in age from thirty-two to forty-two and in rank from lieutenant commander to commander, or major to lieutenant colonel. There were a few Navy and Coast Guard captains, as well as a handful of colonels from the other services. About half the student body was in the Navy, with the rest split among the other services. A very few

civilian officers from various government agencies were also enrolled. Two small groups of foreign officers formed autonomous but integrated colleges within the larger whole—the Naval Command College (senior) and the Naval Staff College (junior). All the officers wore civilian clothes, as did the military faculty, except on days when high-ranking Pentagon officers made official visits.

How were we to organize the Stockdale course for this formidable student audience? The first question was the title. Stockdale did not much like the word “ethics.” He thought the contemporary “ethics explosion” had eroded the older, nobler sense of the word. He knew that ethics courses were spreading rapidly, not only in military institutions, but also in business, industry, and the professions. Harvard Business School had become ethics-conscious, IBM and Electronic Data Systems Corporation were working on ethics, and the Cummins Engine Company had taken on a professor of ethics from a major university. Stockdale was uneasy about this trend. He did not want his course to be the military equivalent of what he called “Ethics for Dentists.” He preferred the term “moral philosophy” to “ethics”; the former seemed to suggest the tradition of the humanities, and he believed that, without some background in the humanities and some familiarity with the ancient and modern philosophical classics, it would be hard to teach ethics without boring students, at the very least. Stockdale was convinced that semieducated people (and, in his opinion, that group included many academics) tended to reduce ethics to a branch of psychology. Training in the humanities, Stockdale believed, would show that much of what goes by the name “social science” serves up ideas expressed earlier and better in classical philosophy and modern literature.

Stockdale was convinced, too, that a course in moral philosophy for military officers did not need to be organized directly around military ideas or writings on military ethics. The study of good philosophy and literature, he held, would benefit human beings; and, since military officers were human, it would be good for them, too, not only as human beings but also as military officers.

“Foundations of Moral Obligation”

“Foundations of Moral Obligation” was the title we finally agreed on. We had only a ten week trimester to get through the course’s readings, lectures, seminar discussions, papers, and examinations. The course opened with the idea of the Hermetic—the alchemical transformation that may occur when a human being is subjected to intense pressure within a crucible of suffering or confinement. Stockdale’s own *Atlantic Monthly* article “The World of Epictetus” (April, 1978), led easily to discussions of the prison experiences and reflections of Socrates, Boethius, Cervantes, Wittgenstein, Sartre, and Anwar

Sadat. We went on to readings and discussions of the book of Job, the Socratic dialogues of Plato, Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, Kant's *Foundations of the Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals*, and Mill's *On Liberty* and *Utilitarianism*. These readings were supplemented by selections from the works of Emerson, Sartre, Camus, Conrad, Koestler, Dostoyevsky, and Solzhenitsyn. The course closed, completing a circle, with a reading of Epictetus's *Enchiridion*, the little book which Phillip Rhinelander had given to Stockdale and which sustained him in prison—a Stoic work Albert Salomon describes as “a manual for combat officers.”

Reflecting on the course years later, Stockdale (1982) said, “We studied moral philosophy by looking at models of human beings under pressure, their portraits drawn from the best materials we could find in philosophy and literature. The professional implications for military men and women followed. We did not have to draw diagrams; the military applications came up naturally in seminar discussions” (p. 98). Recently, Stockdale came across a monograph called *The Teaching of Ethics in the Military*, published by the Hastings Institute (Stomberg and Wakin, 1982), an ethics think-tank. He exploded at this sentence: “A flight leader threatens American values if he cannot analyze a moral problem.” In his review of the monograph, Stockdale (1982) wrote, “That's not helpful. A flight leader threatens *human* values—and, by inclusion, American values—if he hasn't the guts (‘character’) to act like a man” (p. 98).

Stockdale believed that, before one can teach moral philosophy, one must decide whether to emphasize rules or character: both are necessary, of course. As senior officer of the Hanoi “Alcatraz,” Stockdale exacted obedience to a stern set of rules. “Our value systems [in Alcatraz] had in common,” he wrote in “Back from Hanoi” (*The New York Times*, April 1, 1973), “the fact that they were based on rules, that they placed unity above self and that they precluded self-indulgence.” But, for Stockdale, rules were always secondary to character in considerations of moral life. He agreed with Aristotle that the end of a man is to be as human as possible. To achieve this fulfillment is an art that can be learned only by hard habit and stressful training. Acting well and living well follow from character, from what a man is. While he found Sartre's dictum “A man is the sum of his acts” challenging, Stockdale still held that to do something one must be something. He was less enthusiastic about Aristotle's heavy emphasis on the primacy of reason in the moral life. To our class that first year at the War College, he quoted Dostoyevsky's underground man: “You see, gentlemen, reason is an excellent thing, there's no disputing that, but reason is nothing but reason and satisfies only the rational side of man's nature, while will is a manifestation of the whole life, that is, of the whole human life, including reason and all the impulses.”

Stockdale liked the way that, for all their differences, both Dostoyevsky and Aristotle supported the reality of individual freedom and personal respon-

sibility. He endorsed Dostoyevsky's rejection of the Socratic axiom that humans act only in accord with what they think is good for them. He had seen men knowingly choose the bad and consciously rush head down to their own destruction. Like the underground man, Stockdale declined any social system that made men into "piano keys" and believed that any society scientifically organized according to the principles of rational self-interest would end, at best, as a harmonious anthill.

Among Stockdale's favorite pages of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* were those in which the philosopher distinguishes between voluntary and involuntary action, analyzes the role of choice and intention in human acts, and describes the way free choice and compulsion can coexist. Stockdale denied the existence of brainwashing; one was always responsible. If one broke under torture—and everyone did, at some point—one could always make the torturers start all over again the next day. His captors did not like to do that, Stockdale remarked; it made things so much easier for both sides if the victim "cooperated." When his comrades, racked by twisted ropes, had "spilled their guts" and returned to their cells weeping from shame, Stockdale would comfort them via the tap code on the wall: "We've all done it. Just make them work for it. Don't give anything away free." And so, to our Naval War College class, he read from the *Nicomachean Ethics*: "There are some instances in which such actions elicit forgiveness rather than praise, for example, when a man acts improperly under a strain greater than human nature can bear, and which no one could endure. Yet there are, perhaps, also acts which no man can possibly be compelled to do, but rather than do them he should accept the most terrible sufferings and death." Stockdale himself had risked death when he beat himself into bleeding insensibility with a wooden stool to prevent himself from being filmed for North Vietnamese propaganda purposes.

Student Reaction to Stockdale's Course

The Naval War College has a detailed course evaluation system, and the student-officers are frank in their estimates. How did they react to the Stockdale course? Most of them admired Stockdale just short of idolatry and gave the course very high ratings. A few found the admiral ill at ease in the more intimate seminar discussion sessions. All applauded the chance the course had given them to read the works that were discussed. For the greater part of their military careers, these military officers had concentrated on highly technological material. The writings and thoughts of Aristotle, Kant, Sartre, and the others were mostly a new experience for them, but they were quickly at home with these writers. Woody Hayes came one day to visit the class and was delighted to hear that Wittgenstein's *Was kommt leicht hat keine Wert* was no more than his own charge to his old Ohio State football teams: "If it comes easy, it ain't worth a damn."

The first midterm examination was formidable; Stockdale and I were determined (it was a mistake, of course) to throw everything in. Senator John Glenn was visiting that day, and Stockdale brought his old classmate to my office. Clutching a copy of the midterm Stockdale had proudly thrust upon him, John Glenn stood shaking his head in bewilderment, saying, "Pretty heavy test, Professor!" Meanwhile, screams of anguish from officers taking the test down the hall were painfully audible.

What the officers liked best of all about the Stockdale course was the opportunity to reflect on questions they felt had always been in their own minds, but just below the surface. This course, they agreed, provided them their first chance to raise those questions to the level of mature consciousness. At the close of the school day, the car pools back to the officers' homes and families at Fort Adams and Coddington Cove resounded with arguments on what they had heard that day, what they had read the night before, and how they saw it in the context of their own lives and work. A conversation repeated to me disclosed that one carpooler had said, "Kant's ethics is all right in theory, but in practice, it won't work," to which his comrade had replied, "But Kant's not telling how people do act or what does work, but how they ought to act and what should work." That officer had done his homework for the course.

During the year we taught together, I passed on to Stockdale a number of passages from my own reading. These he carefully copied onto his note cards, of which he kept a voluminous file. One of his favorites was a remark Sartre made in 1940 to a Catholic priest, when both were prisoners of war in a German camp at Trier. In his *Avec Sartre au Stalag 12D*, Fr. Marius Perrin recalls the remark "L'Important n'est pas ce qu'on a fait de vous, mais ce que vous faites de ce qu'on a fait de vous"—"The important thing is not what they've made of you, but what you make of what they've made of you." Stockdale had good reason to endorse that belief; he had lived it.

Reading List

These were the reading assignments for "Foundations of Moral Obligation." This list, except for minor revisions, is the same one offered when the Stockdale-Brennan team taught the course for the first time in the fall of 1978.

Week One From 20th Century Technology to the World of Epictetus. The Meaning of Moral Philosophy.

Stockdale, J. B. "The World of Epictetus." *Atlantic Monthly*, April, 1978.

Koestler, A. *Darkness at Noon*.

Gabriel, R. A. "The Nature of Military Ethics."

Walzer, M. "Prisoners of War."

Week Two The Book of Job. Life Is Not Fair. The Problem of Evil.

- "The Book of Job." *Old Testament*.
Solzhenitsyn, A. *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*.
- Week Three *Socrates. Doctrine and Example. Civil Disobedience. Can Virtue be Taught? Soul and Body.*
Plato, *Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, and Phaedo*.
- Week Four *Aristotle. Happiness as Living Well and Faring Well. The Moral and Intellectual Virtues. Courage as Balance and Endurance.*
Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*.
Conrad, J. *Typhoon*.
- Week Five *Kant and Hart. Ethics of Moral Duty and Civic Law. Motives and Consequences. "Ought" and "Right." The Meaning of Natural Law.*
Kant, I. *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*.
Hart, H. L. A. *The Concept of Law*, Chapters Eight and Nine.
- Week Six *Mill. Morality as Social Utility. Justice and the Greatest Happiness Principle.*
Mill, J. S. *Utilitarianism and On Liberty*.
Dostoyevsky, F. *Notes from the Underground*, Part I.
- Week Seven *Individualism and the Collective, I.*
Emerson, R. W. "Self-Reliance."
Sartre, J. P. "Existentialism Is a Humanism."
Camus, A. *The Plague*.
- Week Eight *Individualism and the Collective, II.*
Marx, K., and Engels, F. *The Communist Manifesto*.
Lenin, V. I. *What Is to Be Done?*
Dostoyevsky, F. "The Grand Inquisitor" from *The Brothers Karamazov*.
- Week Nine *Science and Values. Does the Universe Have Meaning or Purpose?*
Monod, J. *Chance and Necessity*.
Smith, H. *Kamongo*.
- Week Ten *Return to the Beginning. Epictetus. The Stoic Ideal and the Ethics of the Military Officer. Philosophy as Technical Analysis and Way of Life. Wittgenstein and the Ethics of Silence.*
Epictetus. *The Enchiridion*.
Wittgenstein, L. *Tractatus* (selections)
Malcolm, N. *Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir*
Plato. *Phaedo* (rereading of opening and death scene)
Stockdale, J. B. "Freedom." *Parade*, June 29, 1980.

References

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- Stomberg, P. L., and Wakin, M. *The Teaching of Ethics in the Military*. Hastings, N.Y.: The Hastings Institute, 1982.

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Admiral James Bond Stockdale is now senior research fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University, where he is writing a book about his experiences as a Navy flier and prisoner of war.