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by

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THE PROBLEMS OF ETHICAL BRINKMANSHIP\*

Stanford University's Dean and philosophy professor, Philip Rhinelander, used to give a course called "The Problems of Good and Evil." His starting point was the "Book of Job," and the message was that "Life is not fair." The course brought home the fact that man's life must make sense. Man seems to have submerged within him a need to believe that a moral economy in which virtue is rewarded and evil is punished prevails in this universe. When he discovers that the ways of the world seldom conform to this notion of "fairness," he often comes unglued unless he has thought it through beforehand. Man instinctively craves an ordered universe, not open-ended ethical systems in which each person "does his own thing" under the guise of "fulfilling himself." Mental health, emotional stability, and purposeful lives are built around accepted norms of behavior. When good and bad are so vaguely defined as to rob life of any meaning there's trouble. When life does not make sense man invents his own solutions--Hitler, for example. In his discussion of his life in a German concentration camp, Victor Frankl expresses the thought that a man can resist only as long as his life has meaning. So if one believes that the religious hypothesis is to be discarded (and I personally do not discard it), then it follows that some other hypothesis should replace it.

Aristotle said, "All humans desire to know." People can't live with moral guidelines based on inconsistent patterns of popular slogans. Consciously or unconsciously man has to have thought through the derivation of his idea of reasonable rules of behavior. If we are to consider the lessons of the 60's and

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how they might apply to the 80's, I think two of those lessons need to be dealt with at the outset. The first is that those without well-defined norms will probably fly off the handle when their values are tested. A second is that a society whose educators ignore its history, who choose not to enlighten and guide but to train, are contributing to its dissolution.

Perhaps a few words about who I am and how I got into the world of education while wearing a military uniform might be helpful to those questioning my choice of lessons: I was raised in a little town in Illinois, an only child, the son of upper middle class skeptics. In our home the quality of life was good, and conformity was not considered a measure of virtue; it was my idea to go to Sunday School. Like many of my generation and probably as a result of World War II, I was a hero worshiper. In college, I was a member of a Naval Academy class full of hero worshipers, who had every intention of getting into the conflict and wound up graduating as the war came to an end. It was as though we entered the arena to find that the only people still there were the janitors sweeping up the debris. This must have had some powerful psychological effect on us because my class has produced the highest proportion of admirals and generals, lawyers, doctors, ministers, heads of the CIA, and Presidents of the United States of any in Academy history. Another personal trait I would identify is that I am by nature a romantic. After commissioning, I satisfied this romantic drive in the postwar period with peacetime cruises and technical training by becoming first a carrier pilot, and then a test pilot at the Naval Aviation Test Center at Patuxent River, Maryland. It was there that I did my first teaching as a flight instructor at the Test Pilot School. I was also an academic instructor sharing an office with a civilian Ph.D. who taught me not only the aerodynamics and physics I needed for my course, but the philosophy of science. I wrote my own book on aircraft performance, gave daily lectures and had the time of my life. After that tour was up I went back to the Fleet and for five years flew the fastest and best jet fighters in the world.

I then went to graduate school at Stanford and I loved each of the twenty-four months of it. As a Naval Officer, I was enrolled in an interdepartmental program of history, political science, geography, and economics, with lots of time for excursions into other disciplines. Through this course I entered the Navy's world of "planning," while others chose the world of "programming." "Planners" are those who see the world in more or less traditional terms, making estimates of service need on the basis of history, current events, threat, risk, and so forth. During those years when I was flying jet airplanes and studying at graduate school, other bureaucrats, the "programmers," were making deep inroads in government, and becoming institutionalized. Programming was in vogue.

The first "programmers" were what we knew as Kennedy's and McNamara's "whiz kids." I think of them when I read Michael Maccoby's description of the glamorous gamesmen. "Programmers" do not live in the classical world--they work the other side of the street. They live in the "real world" of the budget, of facts, of figures. They don't ask what we "need" for national defense. They realistically trace the budget and parcel it out. They are efficient, expedient, and cool, "analytically," slicing ancient dilemmas into neat chunks. They produced the planning, programming, and budgeting system around which the Pentagon still revolves, and also incidentally, made the Vietnam war a logical iteration, invented the "body count," and tried to mold the military mind into its business counterpart. There were also "whiz kids" at my university--academic "whiz kids." These were the young professors who subtly built a case against what they called "fixed value systems." These were bad because they led to abstractions such as patriotism, military-industrial complexes, and esprit de corps. To give their shallow concepts a shroud of acceptability, these academic "whiz kids" had to assume, and endlessly repeated, that the past was no gage for the future, that "we are now in a new age", that nuclear weapons were so terrible and computers so intricate, that the world would never be the same, and so on.

The great professors on the campus were being overrun and yet they scarcely seemed to notice it until it was too late. They lacked a party theoretician. Dr. Tony Sokol was my advisor the second year. He was his own theoretician. He was at retirement age and was thought of as a reactionary by the campus liberals. Though he did not advocate war, he considered it a possibility in the human predicament and thus something that educated people should study. Will and Ariel Durant in their small book Lessons of History have observed that in the last 4,000 years of recorded history there have been only 268 free of war. Tony was a realist well versed in such lessons of history. Once he asked me what I was reading and I said, "Tony, you would be very happy with the selection of books I have chosen because they deal with your favorite subject, national defense. They are written by Brodie, Kahn, Schelling." (I gave him a whole string of names and books like Strategy of Conflict, etc.) His face turned purple. He said, "I do not read those books." I said, "Why not? This is your field, these are the modern strategists." And he replied, "Those people do not understand war. They are economists and economics is driven by rationality." He said that people get mad in war and they do not obey the economists' law of logic. I can still remember his remark, "These so-called intellectuals think they can play games with people in war and mark my word, they will get us in trouble."

Years later, I was lying in a cell listening to the street noises of Hanoi, and to our loudspeaker system in prison, ridiculing in pidgin English the ideas of these gamblers' ploys of escalation and all the rest. It was then that I fully realized the wisdom of Tony's remarks. I also remember Tony scoffing at the idea of the dawning of a new age and the effect of nuclear weapons. He said that wisdom has not been turned upside down because of some technical device and for that matter that the German people in the 100 Years War suffered 55% fatalities, a far greater death toll than even the wildest estimates for a nuclear exchange. He did not believe that nuclear war was good or desirable, but rather he felt that the advent of the bomb had neither changed the elements of the game of international politics nor overruled the laws of human nature. During that year, Tony gave me a lot of good advice; only once did his counsel fail. The latter was his remark, "Don't bother going to philosophy corner," when I told him I wanted to explore that field. He thought that I would waste time learning a new vocabulary, and that as a 38 year old man of the world, I didn't need it.

Nevertheless, I did go against Tony's injunction and went over to that sacred area and there I met Professor Rhineland and from then on at Stanford "philosophy corner" was my academic center of gravity. It seemed to me that finally I had found what I had been looking for. I could stretch my mind and bang against the stops of rationalism, empiricism, and so on. More importantly, I learned that there were few ideas or methods that I could conjure up that had not already been well discussed, dissected and documented, by men of wisdom in the days of antiquity. Epictetus' mind was every bit as capable as Jonas Salk's. I learned to talk about God's existence, human frailty, immortality and freedom in the non-self-conscious manner of critical thought.

I was never the same again. As a carrier pilot, some years later, on my way to my second cruise of the Vietnam war, I was able to lecture to my Air Wing on the subject of personal commitment in limited war. My punch line, and I still think it's valid and that even Aristotle would have been proud of me, was that limited war is a national concept and bears little on the obligations imposed on the individual: He who fights must be totally committed to the act. To rationalize pulling off high on a bombing run because he wanted to save his plane "for the future real threat to national security," that the limited national commitment didn't require the best of him, was to run the risk of shame for the rest of his life. To paraphrase Bertrand Russell, "No form of caution is as damaging to human happiness as caution on the battlefield."

Of course it was in prison that philosophy became most valuable to me. Soon after I arrived I fully realized the formidable of our opponents. In the pidgin English propaganda books printed in the late 50's that I glanced through, and based on my recent scholastic efforts in Far East history, I could tell that their summarization of the happenings of the previous 20 years left no possible cheap shots at American malfeasance undeveloped. The Vietnamese communists were well prepared for that war. They had packaged and spread hatred not only about American history, but American traits--you know, "Americans are really good guys at heart, they always give the kids candy bars." Well those Vietnamese kids had been coached on that. A wink was repaid with a spit in the face. Our interrogators had a schoolboy's knowledge of our stereotyped orientation. Often they would say, "You are pragmatic." "Act in your own self-interest." "Be fair minded." "Meet us halfway." Any student of Marxism will realize that these remarks were strictly tactical trial balloons. Anyone who spends a few hundred hours with communist interrogators or negotiators comes to realize that they are committed to the point of view that you are the victim of a warped personality by having been raised in a society of acquisitiveness and greed. They speak to their American counterparts on the same basis as American psychiatrists speak to their patients. They believe that they know us better than we know ourselves. "Meeting halfway" is contrary to dogma. Extortionists? Of course. I remember in an unguarded moment an interrogator laughing about nuclear weapons and saying, "Well it doesn't matter now because you've got too many troops over here to use them anyway." That to him was a real knee slapper. The party line was that criminals were to repent, but never to say anything they did not truly believe "in their hearts." Once when I suggested that I would not sign an anti-war statement for the tongue-in-check "reason" that "You wouldn't want me to sign anything I didn't believe, would you?" The casual and frank reply was, "Are you shitting me? Don't you know what extortion is?"

It was of course within ourselves in prison that we met the greatest tests. You may wonder why more of us did not "cross over to the people's side" as the Vietnamese demanded. The answer is that you have to be there to realize how simple-minded their case was and how opportunistic a person would have to be to damage his fellow Americans which was the price of crossing over. It was a tough life, a life that brought to mind the wisdom of the Durants' observation that culture is a very thin veneer which superimposes itself over civilization and that we are but one generation removed from barbarism. We were in the land of Epictetus and most of us were alone. And for those skeptics who think I'm talking of something unreal, not part of this "new world" I say in the most calm and candid manner that I have access to a survival school environment and

that I can put any one of them in the land of Epictetus in less than three days and that they will sit in their cells and shamelessly cry at the humiliation of soiling their pants.

The question was raised about heroes and our concept of them. I had my heroes in prison. They were not necessarily do-gooders, but were of sophisticated courage. Their courage was not so much the blind charge but that of endurance--the courage of which the ancient Greeks wrote. They were men of strength and resolution. I am thinking of Jon Reynolds, a man I whispered to in Heartbreak Hotel for five days before I realized, one, that he had no shirt in the cold weather, two, that he was in leg irons, and three, that he was having to be fed by the guard because he had two broken arms. Never a complaint. That boy's a graduate of Hartford's Trinity College and the school should be proud of him. Another hero of mine, an escapee by the name of George McKnight, was a boxer at Oregon State University who later acquired a respiratory infection so serious that he had to be carried by his prison mates on a pallet. Offered a chance by his American commander to accept the Vietnamese offer to go home without strings attached, he gallantly sent back a message saying, "I will go over the wall or out the gate with you, but that's the only way I'll leave this prison."

Years of solitary confinement allow the maximum utilization of the mind's capacity. Constantly the mind generalizes; always it seeks to gather particulars and group them into general categories. What a contrast to life in the street, where particulars are the serviceable commodities. Another aspect of the solitary life was the nobility of thought it engendered. The most precious object in your life was the man in the next cell. Never seeing him, you grew over the years to love him. He was your link with sanity--your communication link with the rest of the prison. To have evil thoughts about him brought pangs of remorse and when he was taken to the torture chamber often the time only permitted the quick tapped message "I love you." In that prison I saw also the wisdom of Victor Frankl's remarks that even under the most severe circumstances, freedom remains. A man always has the last freedom, and that is that of forming an attitude about what goes on about you.

One comes to realize that of all the attributes you hold, your self-respect is the most precious and that once you lose it you lose it all. A very serious and bright medical doctor approached me recently with a plan that I had heard others advance on how to avoid the torture of prisoners. He said, "Why not just have the government tell the world that whatever our men say in captivity should not be held against them because they have been instructed to say whatever their captors asked them to say?" Perhaps you have to have been in prison to

realize the flaws of such a plan. First of all, it would create practical disciplinary problems within the prisoner community, but secondly, you would be asking men to give up their self-respect. It might not be a problem for the first year or two, but it would start a degenerative process, eating their souls, and that would be a higher price to pay than that of taking torture.

The lessons of the Vietnam prison experience to me were that a man needs to develop a pole star that will guide him. Whereas technology and the use of living comforts are tactics, strategy is morality. To survive under pressure, man needs a strategy that will pass the test of time and taste, and it can't be so shallow as a plan to somehow achieve "self-realization." In a high stress environment, men of wisdom necessarily arise. They are often simple men, but they are always men able to work under trying circumstances with patience. They are necessarily men who can be hated without giving in to the inefficiencies of hating. Men of that type rose to the top and ran our society. This brought to mind the men St. Paul idolized in his letter to the Romans, "They rejoice in suffering knowing that suffering produces endurance, that endurance produces character and that character produces hope." They were men with structured value systems, to whom life made sense.

Permissiveness doesn't work in prison--and in the long haul it doesn't work in the life on the street. In this connection I recall Plato's description of Athens just before its downfall, when all were vying to pander to the passions of the mob. "The teacher fears and flatters his scholars, and the scholars despise their masters and tutors . . . the old do not like to be thought of as morose and authoritative and therefore they imitate the young . . . the citizens chafe impatiently at the least touch of authority and at length they cease to care even for laws written or unwritten . . . and this is the fair and glorious beginning out of which springs dictatorship." To repeat my refrain: Life must make sense. People crave order. In a cell you must structure a life of routine and ritual or you become an animal. Education is necessary for survival.

Permissiveness is the glorious beginning out of which springs dictatorship. So also is a lack of moral organization or standards. I remember a story that illustrates this. If a month passed with a prisoner not being called to interrogation for something more purposeful, he was usually given what we called an "attitude check." One day at a little prison we called Alcatraz my good friend Jim Mulligan was called in to meet with the interrogator we knew as "Softsoap Fairy." Softsoap Fairy was intense, bright and articulate. He was the

"nice guy" part of the Mutt and Jeff act--the sort of man assigned to escort American professors "visiting" their friends in Hanoi. Mulligan was pugnacious. After Softsoap had given Jim the usual rundown on the world situation as voiced by the Hanoi newspaper, Nan Damh, and assured him that the Vietnamese people were choosing the path of freedom and righteousness, Mulligan burst forth with his lecture on freedom, including the fact that North Vietnam did not have the vaguest notion of what the word meant. Mulligan pointed out, of course, that everything was programmed, from the interrogator's questions to the daily newspaper, that it was all under party surveillance. Softsoap, who over the years had learned to accommodate American arguments, lost his cool, sprang to his feet, pounded on the table and said, "Maybe we don't have freedoms as you know them in America. Maybe we don't have the personal options of which you're so proud. But let me tell you one thing: we do have order. For the first time in 4,000 years this country has order and we're glad to have it."

As Solzhenitsyn says, "Order has limits beyond which it degenerates into tyranny, but freedom is moral only if it keeps within certain bounds, beyond which it degenerates into complacency and licentiousness." I have suggested that today's relativist's moral rules are nothing more than slogans, and moreover that his slogans often contradict each other. A few weeks ago I spent a few days in the company of Tom Landry, coach of the Dallas Cowboys. Although at the meeting we attended, where everybody spoke, there were many Nobel prize winners and other intellectuals of achievement, it seemed to me and many of the others that Landry laid it on the line as simply and clearly as possible. He said he did not believe in lining his locker room walls with slogans. But he did say that he had a single slogan over the door. It said, "The quality of a man's life is directly proportional to his commitment to excellence." Just another slogan you say? Perhaps, but I think there is a difference between a slogan which strives to raise good men to a new level of excellence and one which urges them to cruise the depths of egalitarianism, especially at a time when the pejorative "elitist" is often and mistakenly used to denounce advocates of excellence. Perhaps Stuart Alsop was right a few years ago when he wrote, "A great power needs an elite--a group of self-confident, more or less disinterested people, who are accustomed to running things."

I am reminded of a summer lecture series I heard at Stanford about 17 years ago in which Professor Eric Goldman of Princeton gave his views of the history of American society. His central theme was, that contrary to the popular myth of America being the preserve of the common man, it had in fact been nurtured and inspired by the high and mighty. He said, that for its first couple of centuries at least, America had



been basically a patrician society. In evidence he read us excerpts from the Groton Prep School speeches of Endicott Peabody to schoolboys like Franklin Roosevelt. Peabody's message was, you boys do not need money. Don't stoop to making it, neither should you stoop to sloth. Your job is to get out and devote your lives to bettering the quality of life in the United States. Run for public office, be a servant of the Republic. If I am not succeeding as the Endicott Peabody of the Naval War College, at least, like him, I am its headmaster, and I am trying to duplicate his high minded moralism.

I doubt that many of my students are committed to the fads of sloth or relativism, but I'm sure that many are committed to the fads of the sort preached in the better business schools of the country. That is to say, that rational managerial concepts will cure all evils. This viewpoint has its limitations when applied to fighting forces. That's one of the many things Vietnam proved. But a fad is a fad, and you schoolmasters and I in a sense have the same problems in common. We are dealing with people who have been weaned to live on slogans and I believe that we share the need to make our students understand that they need logically consistent rules and principles to live by. They need to develop rules that they can support with logic flowing from: first, a coherent cosmology, an idea of what the world is like and, second, their idea of the nature of man. Is the world indifferent to man? Aristotle and Spinoza said that God will not step aside to save a good man, but they both felt that there is harmony between man and the universe. Job thought the universe was ruled by a benevolent God. Some think that the universe is hostile to man. What is the nature of man? Is he aggressive as Hobbes has said? Is he in a hopeless situation as the existentialists claim?

The important thing of course is not that all our charges come to the same conclusions on these issues, but that each think out how his particular assumptions on the nature of the universe and man logically lead to his ideas of the proper norms of behavior. What I'm saying is that ethics does not grow in a vacuum. An educated person should be able to extrapolate from concrete realities (facts) and his values (i.e., his needs, goals, likes and dislikes), logical, consistent, and reliable standards of action. Some will, like Kant, prefer an ethic of acts. Others, as Aristotle and the stoics preferred, an ethic of character. Either moralities of acts or moralities of character can be made to work. What is important and instructive however, is that man, each man, sort his system out in a consistent manner.

If God desires us to develop ourselves rather than to obey legalistic commands, as those who proclaim the secular

age would indicate, let us then consult the champions of self-development, the great classic humanists. Plato, who in his dialogue "Meno" found no evidence that values can be taught per se, did spend his life getting students to reflect on moral excellence and what to expect from a man. From a good cobbler (his favorite analogy), he assumed one could expect good shoes, from a good soldier, skill, courage and endurance. Another dimension in the study of ethics emerges from Aristotle's famous remark, "The purpose of this present study is not the attainment of theoretical knowledge. We are not conducting this inquiry to know what virtue is but to become good." That is, in Aristotle's view, the very study of ethics was corrective of human conduct. Epictetus, the ancient stoic, reflected the same idea in saying, "The first and most necessary topic in the study of ethical philosophy is the practical application of principles." The same idea was recited much later by the English writer John Ruskin, "The purpose of education is not to teach people what they do not know, but to teach them to behave as they do not behave." You can't teach others in a vacuum and you can't learn moral excellence like cost accounting. You need not only knowledge but experience. Wisdom can't be acquired any other way.

By this time, there may be several of you thinking that I'm the Western military version of Solzhenitsyn and asking where this uncertain, somewhat bleak dialogue is leading. Well, my point is simply this: every man should, through both formal education and tedious thought commit himself to some philosophy of life, some defined values with which he can proceed confidently each day. From those, he must strive for a congruence of act and character. This is not an easy or enjoyable task, but one which will prepare you for the uncertainties of tomorrow. As educators, we provide the tools and the thoughts of some of history's wise men who have grappled with these questions and answered them. While the technical specifics of method are a concern, they should not dictate an ethical bankruptcy for future generations.

Sentiment rules the world. Socrates knew it, Napoleon said it and J.F. Kennedy put it to music. I don't think we are in any new age, secular or otherwise. Listen to the words of the late Walter Lippmann: "We have established an education system in which we insist everyone must be educated and yet there is nothing in particular an educated man should know. . . . The greatest crime is depriving our youth of their classical heritage. . . . The graduates of modern schools are the actors in a catastrophe which has befallen our civilization." Those words were from his speech to the American Association for the Advancement of Science. The date was forty years ago. I think there's enough challenge in that statement for all of us to have a piece of the action. I'm teaching a course in moral philosophy. What are you doing?