

COURSE SUMMARY

JBS/JGB

Foundations of Moral Obligation

Naval War College

1978-79

Congressional committee hearing table. The readings of this session concern men in prison only because that environment is intense, extortion-prone and instructive. They include "The World of Epictetus" by VADM J.B. Stockdale, the course lecturer, Professor Michael Walzer's viewpoints on the obligations of a prisoner of war, and a fictional account as given in Koestler's novel DARKNESS AT NOON, the story of a man in prison, faced with death, forced to examine his past and to rethink his moral commitments.

SECOND WEEK

The existence of evil in the world has produced one of the oldest problems upon which humans have pondered. Religious and poetic expression of this enigma we find in THE BOOK OF JOB of The Old Testament. "JOB" is a work by an unknown author writing in an ancient era before philosophy had been developed as an intellectual and moral discipline.

The frame of Job's story is religious, the supreme meaning: the ways of God. How are His ways justified to men? Why do the good and the just suffer undeservedly? Job reasons with God and receives an answer in terms of the incommensurability of the finite and the infinite. God's ways are not our ways.

Modern parables are joined to our thoughts on the Book of Job. Albert Camus' novel THE PLAGUE tells the story of a man fighting a losing battle; he fights on knowing that his own efforts are unavailing. Solzhenitsyn's novel ONE DAY IN THE LIFE OF IVAN DENISOVITCH is the chronicle of a simple man, unjustly imprisoned in an arctic Soviet labor camp. He endures the cold and hardship with a shrug, gives his bleak day a little meaning and value by outwitting the system to the extent of an extra spoonful of soup, a second piece of bread.

THIRD WEEK

Socrates was the man who gave philosophy a decisive turn toward moral inquiry. Before this old Athenian, philosophy had been hardly more than primitive physics. As Plato dramatizes the thoughts and events of Socrates' life, we consider the questions of the just and the unjust man; the problem of duty to our country; whether moral values can be taught; should we obey or disobey an unjust law? Through Plato, we visit Socrates in prison during the final hours of his life and hear his last discourse to his students. That discourse sets out two themes, of metaphysical and moral implications that had profound impact on the West--the Platonic doctrine of the Forms, and the teaching of the separable and immortal soul.

FOURTH WEEK

We then turn to the NICHOMACHEAN ETHICS of Aristotle, Plato's pupil, a work that stands as the first textbook of moral philosophy. To Aristotle, right actions are what we expect of a good man. Just what constitutes a good character must be considered before asking what actions are right or wrong. For right actions follow from a good character, and a good character is built up by practice of those virtues or excellences proper to a human. We read Aristotle on the moral virtues as means or balance between excess and defect. Courage--which Plato called Endurance of the Soul--is defined as the mean between excess of rashness and the defect of cowardice. Courage is the supreme virtue of the military man, for death is the most terrible of evils, and fearlessness in the face of death the highest moral excellence. Aristotle applies his criterion of the mean to the other virtues--generosity, self-control, self-respect, truthfulness.

The theme of endurance stands out in two stories of courage at sea that are read in conjunction with Aristotle on character and courage--Stephen Crane's story "The Open Boat" and Conrad's novel TYPHOON.

FIFTH WEEK

We turn now to a crucial work in modern ethical theory, Kant's FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES OF THE ETHIC OF MORALS. Central to Kant's theory is the idea of duty, certainly a concept inseparable from the military vocation. Opposing every attempt to reduce moral judgment to expediency and profit, Kant emphasizes the absolute and unconditional character of the moral command we give ourselves. As autonomous beings, capable of being a law to ourselves, we can say "I ought to do this because it is right."--Not because it will profit me, make me feel better, be good for business, grease the wheels, serve some other purpose. Kant's Categorical Imperative provides the formula for the supreme command of duty--"Act so that you can will your act to become universal law." And to those who say "Kant's ethics is all very well in theory, but in practice it won't work," Kant replies that he is not describing how people DO act or what DOES work, but how people OUGHT to act and what SHOULD work.

SIXTH WEEK

To Kant, the substance of morality lies in the quality of our motive, in the freedom of our intent from self-profit and narrow expediency. Hence he understresses the role of consequences or results in the moral situation. By contrast, John Stuart Mill's UTILITARIANISM endeavors to locate the nerve of morality in consequences rather than in motive. Those actions, he says, are morally right which tend to result in the increase of general happiness. Such acts, even though done from self-seeking motives, are still morally right acts--though we may not esteem very highly the moral worth of the person who does the right thing for hope of reward. In Mill's writing we see clear stress on what have become the traditional virtues of liberalism--fairness, impartiality, evenhanded justice, respect for just law, tolerance for all so long as they do not infringe on the rights of others.

Mill's essay "On Liberty", the twin of his treatise on utilitarianism, emphasizes the supreme value of the individual person in vocabulary different but in meaning not far from Kant's stress on the autonomy and inviolability of the individual person--his right to follow the law of his own nature. To Mill this may lead to the most radical nonconformity so long as it does not damage the liberty of others.

SEVENTH WEEK

Age of Rebellion

The theme of individual sovereignty finds American expression in Emerson's 19th century essay SELF RELIANCE and in our own time, post-World War II Europe, Sartre's EXISTENTIALISM. To the existentialist, what a man is rests with himself. We are not born with characters, but we make them by our acts. A man is the sum of his deeds, and the responsibility for them rests squarely on his own shoulders. What we are is up to us.

Anticipating Sartre, Dostoyevsky's NOTES FROM THE UNDERGROUND preaches an extreme form of individualism which denies the Socratic axiom that when we act we cannot help but choose what we think to be our good. The Underground Man asserts that men do not reason things out that way, that they will go knowingly, willingly, toward their own certain destruction. People will deliberately choose that which is harmful, forbidden, shattering. Here Dostoyevsky is reacting to a certain fashionable moral optimism of his time, based on the claim that the way to happiness is that of reasonable self-interest.

EIGHTH WEEK

In contrast to the extreme ethical individualism of Existentialism stands the collectivist ideology of Marxism-Leninism, illustrated by Marx's COMMUNIST MANIFESTO and Lenin's WHAT IS TO BE DONE? The latter is a classic treatise in the techniques of securing a social and political end, judged by its author to be supremely good, by any means whatsoever. The end justifies the means, in the case of the supreme social and political good, for what else would justify the means in this case? As reflective commentary on these classics of Marxism-Leninism, we consider the confrontation of Christ and the Grand Inquisitor from Dostoyevsky's novel THE BROTHERS KARAMAZOV--a parable not only of a Church run wild but of Communism in the same situation as well. In both, the dread figure of the Interrogator takes center stage. He has arrived from post-medieval Seville--or perhaps from 20th century Hanoi.

NINTH WEEK

Marx and Lenin believed their social doctrine to be "scientific". But most contemporary scientists working in physics, chemistry, biology, and related natural sciences, consider this a misuse of the word "science." What then is the relation--if any--between science and ethical values? We are told that organisms depend to some degree on their "genetic programs" which are "pre-wired" into their nervous systems. Although humans rely to a much greater extent on their brains, what is the connection between behavior, including ethical behavior, and genetics? No study of moral philosophy would be complete today if it ignored the presence of science and its effects in our world, or overlooked the role of technology in our lives. Jacques Monod's CHANCE AND NECESSITY presents the case not for the dialectical materialism of Marx and Engels (which Monod considers a form of sheer animism) but for scientific materialism--the doctrine that reality is constituted of physical, chemical, and biological elements only. Organic life, consciousness, mind, are to Monod more or less complicated states of purely physical entities in various states of combination or energy levels. Monod claims that science is value-free, that it deals with what is, not with what ought to be. For him, the only ethical commitment an enlightened person should make today is to the "objective" method of the natural sciences, a method which Monod believes constitutes the only path to truth. We examine critically the limitations of this ethical puritanism, noting particularly the failure of the author to recognize that the ethical value of knowledge itself is a doctrine as old as Aristotle, that Monod's own admirable work in helping unlock the secrets of organic life is morally as well as scientifically

important, that science has in itself moral potentialities-- these residing in science's proven power to transform the worse to the better, to improve the human condition. The philosophy of the scientist in Homer Smith's story, KAMONGO, (written about 40 years earlier) is similar to that of Monod.

TENTH WEEK

The theme of science and technology leads us back to the beginning of the course where men in 90 seconds parachute from the world of 20th century technology into primitive conditions where nothing is "given" but one's own resources. In this situation, one is forced to fall back on the power of his will. A better guide to self-sufficiency and moral resource is found in the writings of the Ancient Stoic Epictetus than in any strategic, managerial or operational texts in Newport.

Marx's dialectical materialism posited a Godless universe, yet one with meaning. For to Marx, history and matter itself moved and developed according to laws that could be learned by men, used, and exploited for human advantage so that a social order deemed unjust could be overthrown and replaced by one thought just.

Monod's scientific materialism posits a Godless universe devoid of meaning. There is no Plan, no rationale, no design, no God, not even dialectical laws of matter. Like his friend Camus, Monod believes that the only meaning of life is the meaning we humans put into it. In Monod's case, this meaning is dedication to the objective methods of science. There is no meaning or value in the Universe as such.

Pagan Stoicism and the Christian religion constitute two responses to this, answers that overlap, for Stoicism was the philosophical forerunner of Christian doctrine. Stoicism was a materialism WITH GOD, a materialism in which the universe had meaning, rationale, purpose, BECAUSE that universe was part of God. God is not separate from the material universe, like spirit from dead matter. God is immanent in the universe; He is its inseparable cause. The Stoic's belief in the relation of our world to God was not far from Paul's "In Him, we live, and move, and have our being." By His divine mind or reason (Logos), God gives the universe--as soul gives to body--its life, its lawlike, orderly, rational character. From this metaphysical doctrine, the Stoic draws conclusions pertinent to personal ethics. Just as the universe--God's visible aspect--is sufficient unto itself, so our way should be that of self-reliance. We should endeavor to do what is in our power to control, to accept with equanimity whatever happens to us that we cannot control. We should try to learn the causes of things (not very different from Monod's "ethic of knowledge") and through this

knowledge develop the ethical virtue of understanding and compassion toward all things. We are one with Nature and with all that is comprehended in Nature. Thus the Stoic ethical ideal of scientific understanding, of knowing things through their causes, of accepting the reality of a shared common human nature, regardless of our condition--rich or poor, powerful or weak, sick or well--paved the way for Christianity. For two basic doctrines of Stoicism--the Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of Man--were taken up into Christianity and made part of a world religion whose God takes account of the fall of a sparrow, as well as that of a kingdom.

Through the Manual (ENCHIRIDION) of the Stoic Epictetus we are reminded of the double role of philosophy as it developed in the West--philosophy as doctrine and philosophy as a life lived. Socrates lived what he taught, dedicated his life to his teaching--that was the one thing (and yet it was everything to him) that he held above the law. In the technical philosophy of our own time, this is matched by Wittgenstein whose philosophy of linguistic analysis seems remote from ordinary concerns; yet its technical character did not prevent him from giving the same absolute commitment to his profession that Socrates gave to his. Wittgenstein said that encounter with him should produce moral change; ethical values could not be talked about, they must be lived.

What are the limits, if any, of the moral as well as the professional commitment to duty that may be found in the military life. The ancient Greeks thought of moral virtue or excellence as that which could be expected of a man. What are the virtues or moral excellences that may justifiably be expected of a military officer? To what extent do these coincide with the professional excellence that may be expected? To what extent do they transcend or go beyond the latter?

In his introduction to our edition of Epictetus's ENCHIRIDION, Albert Salomon notes that the Roman Stoics coined the formula: Vivere militare! (Life is being a soldier) and says that the ENCHIRIDION is "a manual for the combat officer." The course ends with the question: to what extent is this still true today?