THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF A COURSE: ETHICS AND POLITICS

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When I first began teaching in a course concerned with ethics and politics, the focus was on meta-ethics, i.e. a critical analysis of the logical and philosophical foundations of several prominent ethical positions, including utilitarianism. The perspective from which the critique derived was scepticism which may be simply described as the belief that normative precepts are not derived by perception or cognition. I supposed that the devastating critique levelled by scepticism against various naturalistic and intuitional ethical bases dominant until the middle of the twentieth century would first amaze my students — as it had me only a few short years earlier — and then stimulate them to seek some other basis for ethics as an alternative to the sceptical view. For the critical thrust of the course, the principal text was Felix Oppenheim's *Moral Principles in Political Philosophy* and for the search for an acceptable basis Chaim Perelman's *Idea of Justice* and Jean-Paul Sartre's *Search for a Method* were employed.[1]

This course fell far short of my hopes. The critical portion of the course did not ignite any intellectual fires under the students, with the result that the second, creative, half received only polite lip service. And by the impressionistic and systematic evidence any teacher has of students' reaction — it was a bore, e.g., attendance fell to about 50% half-way through the course. Seminar discussions were laboured. Written work was empty and ritualistic. Yet as it happened the enrolment in the course that year had been the cream of the crop, consisting almost entirely of well regarded honours calibre people.

Naturally some thought went into a post mortem. The fatal error had been a mistaken perception of the intuitive meta-ethical position of the students. It had been supposed that criticisms of naturalism and intuitionism in ethics would be intellectually exciting, either as something new or as a buttress to unanalysed conclusions held by the students. But dismissal of naturalism and intuitionism came as no novelty to these people. Indeed it was such old hat to them that no need was felt first to seize upon the sustaining arguments of scepticism and then to transcend them. These students apparently had been bequeathed an intellectual inheritance that rejected naturalism and allied doctrines on faith. Because this belief was apprehended intellectually, widely, and because these callow youths had little self-conscious experience as actors, they rested content with their inheritance. Since they had no residual naturalistic loyalties, it brought them no excitement to see naturalism challenged; the words carried no freight. The original strategy was aimed at believers, so to speak, and there were none, even though they might pray. My experience was like that of Graham Greene's Dr. Czinner:

> *The girl sat with her thumbs joined and her head a little bent. He knew what she was doing; she was praying . . . and from her secrecy he guessed that she was not accustomed to prayer . . . He spoke to her angrily: 'You are lucky to believe that that will do good', but he found to his amazement that she could instinctively outbid his bitterness, which was founded on theories labouriously worked out by a fallable reason. 'I don't', she said, 'but one must do something'.*[2]

Like Dr. Czinner, I was shocked by the ease of the disbelief of my students, which did not come from the painful reading of rationalist writers. They, like the girl, were born to disbelief as securely as I had been born to belief. To attain disbelief Dr. Czinner and I had had to sacrifice security, but the girl and my students felt the sacrifice of nothing.

If these students were to be prompted to transcend scepticism, first they must be made to doubt it, to mistrust their judgement. So I set about to rethink the course so that it would reveal the inadequacies of scepticism as well as naturalism.

I might add in candour that one additional feature I wanted in the course was some escape from the undergraduate sea of that-is-just-your-opinion-and-I-have-got-mine in which I was drowning. This attitude of it-is-all-a-matter-of-opinion was what passed for sophisticated and critical insight in adolescents bred to the sceptical orthodoxy. It provided a way to avoid confronting other people, to avoid taking them seriously, and to avoid the work of analysis which evaluation requires.

I reasoned that their easy subscription to scepticism was purely intellectual, because of their years, they had had little, if any experience, in living with the discomforts of it. Experience with reliance on scepticism was the key to stimulating the desire to transcend it. Only someone who wants to believe will both appreciate the critical force of scepticism and search for something in which to believe. In short, I was confident that with experience students would pray more and more as scepticism's intellectualisation proved emotionally unsatisfying, leaving them like Greene's untutored girl with neither the faith of naturalism, nor the insights of scepticism; leaving them, in short, without ever having come to grips with the foundations of ethics.

Of course, experience cannot be encapsulated in the classroom, but the substance of the course can emphasise it. So I decided to revise the course to focus on the emotional experience of ethical decision-making, and to explore teaching techniques that accentuated appreciation of ethical experience.

The basic idea arrived at was to present students with constructed ethical dilemmas, asking them to resolve each dilemma by making some choice, and then asking them to defend that choice, first in terms of the underlying meta-ethical premisses detected, and then in terms of the political implications. Dilemmas alone were not the answer though. It would become a tedious exercise in dramatics, unless a framework in which to place the dilemmas could be found.

I found my framework by borrowing an idea from T. S. Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* and applying it to politics.[3] I began to think of abnormal politics, after Kuhn's idea of abnormal science, as politics where ethical conventions are themselves in question. Two kinds of political events seemed to represent the challenge to established conventions in the extreme, namely war and revolution. In many instances of political violence, the only limitations on actions are those that are self-imposed. What limitations have been self-imposed? will be self-imposed? and should be self-imposed? — answering these questions will help us to see the foundations of ethics and the interaction of ethics with politics.

It may be objected, that as warranted as such a substance may be for the particular purposes at hand, it is so extreme as to deprive students of any appreciation for the more mundane run of political decision-making. After all, most of politics is not abnormal. But the meta-ethical foundations of arguments are the same regardless of substance. It has only been claimed that they are clearer in cases involving violence, because ordinary institution and ritual conventionalise behaviour and conceal its origin; it has not been claimed either that the foundation is different, that the normative substance is different or that the emotional reactions of actors are different. Where violence is involved a good part of what is at stake is clear, and not in itself subject to dispute and confusion.

Many of the common tasks of government involve, at great remove, life and death. Decisions about pensions, hospitals and traffic lights, for example, anonymously and randomly condemn some and reprieve others. The decisions made in such mundane cases rest on the same meta-ethical footing as decisions made in war and revolution, though this is not likely to be perceived by either the rulers or the ruled. A government that lowers age pensions does not proclaim its desire to exterminate the elderly through the effects of decreased nutritional intake or physical strain in walking and taking public transport instead of taking a taxi, in the same way that a government committed to obliteration bombing revels in the demise of its enemies, but the fatal impliction remains the same. Even if a less extreme premiss is struck, it is still easy to understand that the same issues exist in all political activity and might just as easily be illustrated by the college novels of C. P. Snow.[4]

The application of violence by government in war and the direction of violence at government in revolution was to provide the substance which manifested the bare bones of ethical foundations and the unquestionably important consequences of decisions derived, thus dispatching two undergraduate questions which frequently turn into intellectual quagmires: What exactly is at issue? and is it important? Whether they should or should not, my hunch was that undergraduates would see what was at issue and see that it was important because life and death was at stake, so that then we would be able to get onto the issues I sought to confront, choosing and justifying.

The ground cleared, care had to be taken not to re-introduce the same problems through the back door in the definition of violence. The problem here anticipated was that 'violence' has become something of a 'boo-word'. People tend to call any action they don't like violence and the unforgiving perspective of most undergraduates finds much to dislike. The corollary also holds: what one approves of is not regarded as violence. For documentation of the tendency the reader is directed to the curious studies of Monica Blumenthal.[5] The anticipation has been amply vindicated. The major obstacle to using the substance of violence has been the elastic nature of the word 'violence', and many associated words, in contemporary discourse. I have found a strong body of opinion that casts the net of violence so widely that a government's failure to increase old age pensions at the rate of inflation is termed violence; so that an instructor's imposition of deadlines for work is called violence; and so on. Interestingly enough there is sometimes another tendency and that is to label one's own non-violent action as violence, apparently to enhance one's self-image as a daring and committed actor. In this vein I have frequently found students who called themselves revolutionaries because they run a mimeograph machine on Saturdays to produce a screed denouncing various things.

The ambit of 'violence' for the purposes of this course is not cast as widely as all that now. But the second time I taught 'Ethics and Politics', I did not draw the net tightly enough and I learned from that error. Several students were permitted to write essays on abortion, as an action of violence politically governed. The result was that each writer devoted all their time to wondering whether or not abortion was murder, construing cases to show either that it was or was not, turning on the question of whether the foetus is a person. So that they never came to the question of whether or not murder

is justified. They tried to conceive and settle the question by the definition of 'person' and not by facing the need to justify the preference of one person's interests against those of another.

The definition of violence which forms the premiss of the course then is simply physical coercion that draws blood. Whether some persons think more actions than these are violence, no one has yet disputed that these acts are to be viewed as violence. A fair hearing is granted to the elastic view of violence in the assigned readings, before it is put aside, but it is put aside. The remainder of the course is premissed on the narrow conception of violence.

The next item of business was to set out to find ways to bring students into as direct a contact as possible with the choices and dilemmas of ethical life in order to mimic experience.

Before explaining how the substance of the dilemmas is integrated, it is appropriate to fill in some more of the background of the course. This course is offered to the general body of undergraduate students in years II and III without distinction as between pass and honours. Typically, 60 students take the course. It is totally self-contained and is usually run as a one-man band. I do all the organization, give all the lectures, take all the tutorials, and determine and execute all assessment. After an introductory section on violence, the remainder of the course's 13 weeks goes to equally lengthy sections on war, including morality of war, morality in war, the obligation to live and die for the state and for others, and war crimes, and on revolution, including assassination, terrorism, torture and revolution itself.[6]

To maximise the approximation of ethical experience it was first decided to emphasize tutorials in preference to lectures. Tutorials meet for two hours each week for the full thirteen weeks and not for the ordinary one hour for 10 weeks.

Two lecture hours are scheduled on Monday and Tuesday, while six tutorials are scheduled on Wednesday, Thursday and Friday, so that the course's work is spread out through the week as much as possible; it is not something that is over and done with for the week by Tuesday afternoon, which seems to be the ideal model for some students. Only about half of the second lecture hours are used to deliver lectures. The remainder of the second hours are used for the screening of feature or documentary films (which run over into the succeeding lunch hour) or are cancelled in return for attendance at simulations scheduled in the evenings.

A variety of films has been used from year to year as availability detemines. Most of the films are drawn gratis from such sources as the National Library, the French Embassy or the German Embassy. However, it is necessary to rent a couple of films each year in order to get something one especially wants to broaden the selection.[7] Only films that ordinarily would not be commercially available to the typical undergraduate are screened.

A good number of the films present particular individuals caught in particular, familiar historical situations, e.g. the French Resistance. These films have a surprising impact on students who find their easy, intuitive judgements made in high school or Hollywood history rudely upset by a flesh and blood depiction. Sympathetic characters turn out to be fascists, while admirable patriots are needlessly destructive, and so on.

Most of the films selected were chosen sight unseen on the basis of a distributor's description, or on the basis of descriptions in standard reference works on movies. Perhaps I have profited from an undue measure of dumb luck, because I have invariably found each film rich enough to kindle interest and to lend itself to illustrating particular points of analysis. For example, one fundamental aspect of violence is the distinction between its use for instrumental as opposed to symbolic purposes,[8] although this point has proven surprisingly difficult to convey to students in the abstract, for reasons that have successfully defied my comprehension thus far. It is easily illustrated in almost any films portraying violence in a political context. Naturally one can select films that manifest particular major ideas — though one is always at the mercies of availability — that are difficult to deal with.

For example, I find most students have accepted a rude act-utilitarian calculus of gross material interest as a single factor explanation for what people do in fact do and what they should do. Further, it is believed that this calculus is universal across time and space. To chip away at this belief of universality I have found it useful to employ Japanese films such as 'The Burmese Harp' or 'Fire on the Plains' which represent, in a fashion students find authoritative, men motivated, not by personal survival, but by personal honour and duty to others.

Faith in the crude act-utilitarian calculus is strong, like hard boards. It makes it difficult for students to appreciate ethical choice. As another means to expanding their appreciation a great deal of emphasis is placed on moral psychology, i.e. remorse and guilt, as the emotional aspect of intellectual justification. This point is surfaced in the first tutorial and reappears throughout the course. It comes into its own with the examination of Camus' *The Just Assassins;* Sartre's *Dirty Hands* and Fanon's case studies in *Wretched of the Earth.*

Participation in one simulation is typically required of each participant. These runs have often generated sufficient interest so that a second simulation is put on an optional basis. The simulation that is required is *Starpower.*[9] Unbeknownst to the participants, *Starpower* simulates a three-tiered low mobility class society in which a dominant class gradually merges on the basis of economic achievements. To the surprise of the participants this wealth is then converted to political power when the dominant class is authorised to make any rules for the continuation of the game they deem fit. This experience of governing and being governed by others for an hour or two invariably illustrates many points germane to the course. For example, members of the dominant group ineluctably prove very imperceptive of the feelings of the lower orders and of the structural features of the simulation that brought them to dominance, and it seldom occurs to them to use their power to confer with the lower orders, since they wrongly assume that they know what the lower orders feel. Usually then members of the lower classes must try to organize themselves to confront their rulers within the inhospitable simulation structure. Inevitably this organisation involves breaching the rules of the game. Very often violence is turned to, as when disgruntled players force the door to the meeting room of the gentlemen governors, or destroy the economic records of the society. And on a couple of occasions symbolic substitutes for actual physical violence were evolved and respected. For example, on one occasion a party of subjects who had broken the rules of class segregation and forced entry to the dominant class's deliberation chambers agreed to leave only if the members of the ruling group voted unanimously that they would use violence to expel the subjects. When public vote taken then and there was unanimous, the intruders left, surprisingly subdued. In the remaining hour and a half of the simulation the symbolic substitute for violence for a unanimous vote of the rulers became an accepted convention that operated even more effectively than genuine physical coercion would have done, because it was so effectively internalized. And it was on a question of voting for such violence that finally, irrevocably divided the ruling group and ended the simulation.

Another point effectively brought home in simulations is how difficult it is to interpret other people's actions and intentions. Students who tirelessly mouth clichēs about everyone (else) being motivated by material self-interest engage in some act in the simulation which they perceive as altruistic, only to be hurt to find out it has been interpreted by others as a ploy aimed at their own material self-interest in the terms of the simulation. Such an experience can do much to temper the sweeping generalization of the material self-interest thesis.

Persons participating in the lower classes of *Starpower* discover that violence can be a viable means of expression simply because there is no other avenue open.

When a second simulation is conducted it is usually *Bafá Bafá,* simulating cross cultural contacts between a European type culture and as Asian type culture.[10] This simulation is used to enhance appreciation of the difficulty of interpreting actions and intentions, this time not across a class barrier, but across a cultural one. The temptation to resort to force to relieve frustration is sometimes felt by some participants, and is a useful point of subsequent discussion and reference. There are many other simulations which one might use, simulations which generate conflict amongst participants.

On a day to day basis the main weight of the course is born by the tutorial programme. For each tutorial a reading assignment is made, generally equivalent to three scholarly articles, say 60 pages in all. Considered to be a short reading assignment, it is expected that each participant is thoroughly conversant with the material. Study guides nominating a list of say a dozen questions each reader should be able to answer in their own words concentrates the reading and is used to structure the discussion. No effort is spared in making the reading material available to students, so that no excuse for not having done the reading is accepted.

Tutorial discussions are opened by consideration of a weekly exercise, thirteen in all, co-ordinated with the topic for discussion. The exercises are distributed in the Monday lecture. The exercises consist of one sheet containing some information and asking the student to write a brief, 50 word, analysis. Typically an exercise sets forth some information and a conclusion drawn from that information. Students are asked to suggest reasons for not drawing that conclusion; to suggest other conclusions equally consistent with the given information; to supply a missing step in a chain of reasoning; to identify normative and empirical premisses and conclusions from various quotations; or to make a distinction between unfamiliar terms, such as justification and advocacy.

Wherever possible genuine cases are used for the exercise material, but sometimes liberties are taken to alter genuine cases or to present fictional material.

As discussion starters the exercises work well. They are a common point, usually basic enough for every student to have mastered, so that persons sometimes intimidated by their peers can contribute right at the outset of the discussion. The exercises are designed not to require any special knowledge, though a few require some fundamental research, consulting a good dictionary.

At the end of the tutorial where the exercise is discussed each participant receives another sheet setting forth answers to the exercise, as I have worked them out. Students are asked to write their exercises up in a cheap but durable spiral back notebook which is turned in at the tutorial to be read over and commented on by me and returned at the following Monday lecture.

Also in the spiral back notebook students are required to keep what I call a diary. The diary is a channel of communication required of all students. First, they are invited to use it to communicate in writing anything they want, but of course if that was all there was to it it would be an optional extra, used no more often than the option of a personal interview. Therefore, students are requested to respond to a variety of questions posed during the course. For the first diary instalment due at the first tutorial they are asked to describe briefly themselves physically and psychologically, a daunting task. This information aids greatly in learning the students' names and identities. At other times each is asked to state their progress on the major written assignments; to assess the strong and weak points of a piece of written work just completed and turned in for grading; to react to the grade and comments made on pieces of written work just returned; to give personal preferences on various administrative matters, such as when to schedule the simulations; or to comment on a particular film's merit for the course. Each response by a student is responded to with a follow up question, a suggestion, a bit of encouragement, criticism, or a charge to do better. Occasionally, participants are asked to write a summary conclusion concerning a tutorial topic which may have proven especially controversial or confusing. For example, suicide invariably turns out to be a topic poorly handled in tutorials. Students simply cannot digest in one sitting the idea that suicide can both be the product of social and political factors and can have both social and political repercussions, since they seem all to subscribe to the bowel movement thesis of suicide which holds suicide is the product of mysterious natural, inevitable, unstoppable, psychological forces only. After the appropriate tutorial discussion, they are asked to write a 100 word summary of suicide as a political phenomenon, arguing either that it is or isn't one, on some basis other than internal mysteries.

Finally an attempt is made to build into each tutorial a particular example of a dilemma which the students are called upon directly by me to decide. These situations are discussed in the first person as though I were the actor being advised by the students. Typically these are lifeboat dilemmas drawn from literary sources designed to reveal people's basic values, their foundations and implications. Without a doubt, the most effective of the dramatic situations is the dilemma of the Greek mayor posed in the middle of John Fowles' *The Magus.*[11] The situations are selected in the effort to emphasise the illusive and abstract values that men feel in action, but which seem to be elided from analysis, such as the integrity of community solidarity even at the cost of life as in *The Magus;* the moral force of a leader's carrying out the dirty work himself as suggested in Victor Serge's *The Case of Comrade Tuleyev;*[12] the importance of articulate speech from Melville's *Billy Budd;*[13] the obligation to live for others from Camus's *The Plague*[14] and so on. Wherever possible these examples are broken down into a series of smaller decisions culminating in the final one. In this way persons being cross-examined often find themselves, like their genuine counterparts, painted into absurd corners which they never intended to get into, but into which they backed. Equally important is that in this situation many students are of the belief that my relentless cross-examination is in aid of laying bare the right answer to the dilemma, despite the fact that I tell them otherwise. This residual suspicion is all to the good, because, of course, people trapped in these situations, too, are seeking a non-existent right answer, often as defined in the eyes of others.

Like much of the course, these situations aspire to force a normative decision from the students, so that it can be analyzed. Making such decisions does not come easily for them, a fact which I take as evidence for the seriousness with which they are taking the exercise. Once made the decision can be justified and its foundations and implications can be analysed.

The written work in the course consists of a critical book review, an essay and a final examination, which along with tutorial participation are the four equal parts of the grade. The book review is due in the fourth week of the course. A book review is made an assignment in the hope of getting people to expose themselves to some of the literature as soon as possible as they seek out material for their reviews. Relatively little time is allowed so that it is understood to be a small assignment. A comprehensive bibliography based on our library holdings is provided as well as a session with a social science librarian in order to get them moving. The essay is due in the tenth week. Set questions are not provided for this assignment, but abbreviated examples of topics are provided and far too many students rely on these. Both of these assignments are marked and graded quickly and returned to students whilst the course is in progress so that their future work may benefit from their previous work. To make prompt return possible, deadlines are strictly observed and penalties for lateness imposed.

The last written assignment of the course is a final examination offered as a take-home distributed in the last week of the course to be returned in the week immediately following. The structure of the examination is tied to the course content, in a way compatible with either a sit-in or take-home examination, in that the student is asked to write short essays on two questions, one from each of two lists of six alternatives. The options

are usually based on material perceived to be particularly difficult in the tutorial discussions, like our old friend suicide. One list requires that a case be argued, and the side of the case set is the one I suspect most students are unsympathetic to. The other list calls simply for the discussion of certain points or the application of certain ideas which were treated in tutorial in one context to another different context.

It may be added to all the foregoing, by way of conclusion that the course has the purpose of teaching people the immeasureable intellectual and emotional difficulties of ethical choice and the necessity of making those choices and of making them in a way that one can live with.

I was once told by a respected colleague, in one of those moments of truth made possible by wine, that the substance for the course 'Ethics and Politics' was all well and good for impressing the adolescent mind, but he wanted to discuss political theory, i.e. what Rawls wrote or what Locke wrote. What is done in 'Ethics and Politics' is not what-Hobbes-wrote, but it is political theory because it is concerned with what people are like, what they will do, what they should do, in political situations. The study of people in this way is more what I want to call political theory than the study of what-Rousseau-wrote. Another premiss which informs the course is that there is more about men in politics and hence more political theory in Thucydides than Rawls.

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