THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF A COURSE: ETHICS AND POLITICS

When I first began teaching in a course concerned with ethics and political philosophy, I was naive about meta-ethics, i.e., a critical analysis of the logical and philosophical foundations of several prominent ethical positions or methodologies. 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 dominated until the middle of the twentieth century would fit my students—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 Chalm Perelman’s Idea of Justice and Jean-Paul Sarte’s Search for a Method were employed.

This 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, received only polite lip service. And by the impressionistic and systematic evidence of my hand, students reaction—or lack thereof—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, the 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 were intellectually exciting, either as something new or as a buttress to unanalysed conclusions held by the students. But bilateralism and intuitionism came as no novelty to these people. Indeed it was such old hat to them that no need was felt to first seize upon political activity as proof of scepticism and then to transcend them. These students apparently had been prepared by their intellectual inheritance that rejected naturalism and allied doctrines of vulgar intellect. Because this belief was apprehended intellectually, some of these callous youths had little self-conscious experience as actors, they resented 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. What was aired at believers, so to speak, and there were none, even though they might pray. My experience was like that of one of Dr. Czinner’s students:

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 there will be good’, but he found to his astonishment that she could instinctively outbid his bitterness, which was founded on theories (absurdly worked out by a fallacious reason). I don’t; said, but one must do something.”

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 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 coudary that one additional feature I wanted in the course was some escape from the undergraduate sea of that-is-just-your-opinion-and-I-am-for-some other. It was 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 intuition and principles were coined with its origin; it has not been claimed either that the foundation is different, that the normative substance is more salient or that emotional reactions of the 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 conclusion.

Of course, experience cannot be encapsulated in the classroom, but intuition remains the same. Even if a lesson’s main method is striking, it is still easy to understand that the same issue exists in all politics. To illustrate scepticism in teaching techniques that appreciated appreciation of ethical experience. The basic idea arrived at was to present students with constructed political dilemmas, asking them to resolve each dilemma by making some choice, and then asking them to defend that choice, first in terms of the political dogma, second in alternative methods of reasoning, detecting, and then in terms of the political dogma, and third in political dogma, and second in terms of the political dogma. But this was not the answer. Though it would become a tedious exercise in dialectics, 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. I began to think of abnormal political events as different consequences derived from the political 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 intuition and principles were coined with its origin; it has not been claimed either that the foundation is different, that the normative substance is more salient or that emotional reactions of the 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 conclusion.

Many of the common tasks of government involve, at great remove, life and death. Decisions about persons. This is 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 want more and more scepticism’s intellect-ualisation proved emotionally unstaying, leaving them like Dr. Czinner’s students with the effects of faith of naturalism, nor the insights of scepticism; leaving them, in short, without ever having come to grips with the foundations of ethics. This course was not cast as widely as to obliteration bombing. The ambition of ‘violence’ for the purposes of the 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 tight enough to increase the chance of meeting that error. Several students were permitted to write essays on abortion, as an action of violence politically governed. The result was that each student devoted all their time to wondering whether or not abortion was murder, considering that either that it was or was not, turning on the question of whether the foetus is a person. So that they never came to 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 premises of the course then is simply physical coercion that draws blood. Whether some persons think more actions than there are persons one has yet disputed that these acts are to be viewed as violence. They are used to be viewed as illegal, but are now seen as, say, acts of violence in the assigned readings, before it is put aside, but it is put aside. The remainder of the course is premised 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. The 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 contains five lengthy sections on war, including morality of war, morality in war, and for others, and war crimes, and on revolution, including assassination, terrorism, torture and revolucion itself.

To maximize 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 thirteen weeks and not for the ordinary one hour for 10 weeks.

Two lecture hours are scheduled on Monday and Tuesday of each week and are followed by a tutorial 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 is the ideal model for some students. Only about half of the second lecture hour is used to deliver lectures. The remainder of the second lecture hour is given to discussion 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 discussion material. Most of the films are drawn gratis from such sources as the National Library, the French Embassy or the German Embassy. Sometimes even the students have to rent a couple of films each year in order to get something one especially wants to broaden the selection. Only films that ordinarily would not be commercially available to the typical undergraduate are screened.

A good number of the films present particular individuals in situations, e.g. the French Resistance. These films have a surprising impact on students who find their easy, intuitive coping mechanisms at school and high school and Hollywood history rudyly 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 discussion. The course's general aspect of violence is the distinction between its use for illustration as opposed to symbolic purposes, 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 mercy of availability — that are difficult to deal with in the text.

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 I have found it useful to employ Japanese films such as 'The Burmese Harp' or 'Fire on the Pieds' which shocked the students when they realized that in a fastidious society students find authoritative, men motivated, not by personal survival, but by personal honour and duty to others.

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 of a great deal of emphasis is placed on moral psychology, i.e. remorse and guilt, as the emotional aspect of intellectual justification. This is surfaced in the first tutorial and reappears throughout the course. It comes into its own with the examination of 'person' and not by others, and war crimes, and on revolution, including assassination, terrorism, torture and revolution itself.

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At the end of the tutorial where the exercise is discussed each participant receives another sheet of paper. Most of the sheets are blank, but some have a few questions written out in advance. The sheets are distributed over the week when the exercise is due. The sheets are designed not to require any special knowledge, though a few require some fundamental research.

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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 to use it to communicate in writing anything they want, but of course if that was all there was to 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 intended to elicit from them in 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, 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 suicides 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 sources designed to reveal people's basic values, their foundations and implications. Without doubt, the most effective of the dramatic situations is the dilemma of the Greek mayor posed in the middle of John Fowles' The Magus. The situations are selected in the effort to emphasize the illusive and abstract values that men feel in action, but which seem to be elided from many discussions 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 Tulayev, the importance of articulate speech from Melville's Billy Budd, the obligation to live for others from Camus's The Plague and so on. Wherever possible those 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 straightforward 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 late assignments are

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 immemorable 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 premise which informs the course is that there is more about men in politics and hence more political theory in Thucydides than Rawls.

REFERENCES