

GREEK CONFLICT OF DUTIES.

CHAPTER 4.

As far as I know the first people to consider the difficulty of resolving conflicting duties were the Greek poets and dramatists. And Professor Martha Nussbaum, begins her interesting and delightful book “The Fragility of Goodness”, by analysing the problem of conflicting duties as presented by Aeschylus in his play Agamemnon. I may have read the play, in translation of course. It was set to music by Gluck as Iphigenia in Aulis; which I have seen twice. And I have certainly read an analysis of the play before. So I know the story. The two conflicting duties that confront Agamemnon are his duty to the public, to do the act which will allow the gods to give the army a fair wind to Troy, and to family affection, namely not to sacrifice his own daughter. He is faced with the appalling oracle that only by the sacrifice of his daughter will the gods grant the fleet a fair wind for Troy; yet if he does nothing, disaster awaits him because the soldiers are already dying of hunger or disease. Besides he will be defying the gods, who have commissioned him to make war on Troy. Of course he has to put his public duty first, and the Chorus accept this; but the Chorus still blame him for dereliction of family duty, even though it was impossible to fulfil both duties. They were incompatible.

The one thing the Chorus particularly condemned Agamemnon for was sacrificing his daughter with enthusiasm, once he saw that he had to do it. But any man of action would tell you the same, that if the trumpet sounds an uncertain note, no-one will get ready for War. So, despite the Chorus, he had no alternative, as a leader of men, but to sacrifice her with enthusiasm. Lieut. Gen. Montgomery in his message to the troops before Alamein, which was short and to the point, says in para 4 “The sooner we win this battle, which will be the turning point of this war, the sooner we shall all get back to our families”. He did not say it was to be a 1915-1917 style infantry battle, because the ground allowed no alternative; there would be

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heavy casualties which he estimated at 13,500 men (which was almost exactly right); and that it would be touch and go, as most decisive battles are. He said it would be one of the decisive battles of history, which I think it was. It was shortly before Stalingrad. It destroyed the myth of German invincibility; it may even have inspired Marshall Zhukov to believe he could do the same, and Zhukov took huge risks in encircling the German Army. Of course the Desert was only a side show compared with Russia, and the actual battles of Alamein and Stalingrad were very different in size, and entirely different in concept. The significance of Stalingrad was that a German Army had surrendered! It was like the surrender of a Napoleonic army at Baylen in Spain in 1808. It marked the beginning of the end.

So, in my opinion, the Chorus were unduly hard on Agamemnon, because they did not admit the reality of the situation: that in War morale is the thing. No room for the fainthearted. There are many acts of generosity possible in war; treating prisoners properly, tending the wounded of both sides in field hospitals. But magnanimity must be reserved for victory. Many a campaign has been lost from the failure to exploit success ruthlessly enough. Of course today we should say that the choice which Agamemnon faced in the play was contrived. But the choice between public duty and private duty is anything but contrived; we are all faced with this conflict of duties every day of our lives. The point of the play was that the conflict was presented in its extreme form, so as to make it easier to analyse.

Sophocles carried the analysis a stage further in *Antigone*, where the two principal characters seek to avoid the horrid choice Agamemnon had to make, by each making one duty their supreme good. Creon, the King, makes the City's good his supreme virtue; Antigone, his prospective daughter-in-law, makes family loyalty her supreme good. In this way each tries to have a standard by which to live, that avoids conflicting standards. They both find that their respective devices destroy everything that is worthwhile in life. Creon treats men and women as agents of the City, without emotions, and therefore as less than

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human. Antigone treats enemies of the City as ordinary friends, and ends by failing to distinguish any longer between loyalty and treachery. I think the conclusion of both poets was that no system avoids conflict; and the most any human being can do is to recognise conflict when it appears, and do his or her best. This was about 500BC. And Jesus was faced with the same problem centuries later, in the conflict between his vocation and his family.

Ironically my attempt to solve the problem was instinctively exactly the same as his, although I was slow to realize it. In my book, I describe my choice in the only sensible way I could, by describing the spiritual or intangible world as I found it to be. So I tell the story obliquely. And in order to tell it at all, I had first to create a theory of consciousness. There was none already in existence, so far as I am aware. In Professor Roger Scruton's popular resume of philosophy, he records that among philosophers there is a tendency to think it is impossible to create a theory of consciousness, "as it always slips through your fingers". Well it may slip through the fingers of an individual, but it did not slip through mine, because I believed I had a sense of communion with another, which enabled me to weather the fluxions of consciousness, regardless of whether this belief was fact or fantasy.

Once I had created such a theory, it was relatively easy to see public duty, or if you like conformity with social convention, as being in one frame of mind, and family duty or human affection in another frame of mind. So the problem of reconciling them became just an example of reconciling two frames of mind; no easier for that, but at least recognisably a problem that one must be able to solve to live even the most basic life in society. No purely intellectual solution is possible, because you cannot reconcile two different frames of mind. But it at least helps you to see things in true proportion, and in this way helps you try to work out as best you can a true solution. It was just this that the Greek dramatists lacked: a theory of consciousness.

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Martha Nussbaum continues her book with a discussion of Plato and the dialogue of Protagoras, who I think is made to argue very well. She says the Greek philosophers sought for a single end product to living (usually pleasure or happiness) which would give coherence to the whole of human conduct. To my mind, they made the same mistake as Antigone made: seeking a single “good” which would enable an individual to avoid the type of conflict which Agamemnon had to try to resolve. But as Sophocles indicates, it is seeking to give “life” a simplicity which it does not have, and in the end “life” will not allow you to get away with it.

In my idiom, it is an attempt to attribute to one particular frame of mind a quality which one can make into a supreme good; like the German philosophers searching for a single “Weltanschauung”. Not only does this mean subjecting the body to continual tension, which it cannot stand for long as I will explain, it is also parochial. Einstein has taught us that no one frame of mind in physics is better, or worse, than any other; and even if in morality this is not so, it is still true that no frame of mind is unique, save for what I call “the perfectly relaxed consciousness”, in which thought as we normally understand it is not possible. Other frames of mind are likely all to be flawed to some extent; and are not therefore appropriate for making into a unique “good”.

Again the basis of the mistake in these dialogues of Plato, assuming Martha Nussbaum is correct about their search for an end product, was his failure to create a theory of consciousness, and his failure to appreciate that a perfectly relaxed consciousness, if this is a valid concept, precludes any idea of pleasure or happiness being a goal, because these two states of mind each represents only one of an infinite number of possible frames of mind, all of which are in a state of flux and “slip through your fingers”, and none of which can be unique, although it is fair to say some are much more desirable than others. Besides, nothing destroys the imagination quicker than being forced into a mental strait-jacket.

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Martha Nussbaum says that Plato recanted many of his earlier opinions in his final dialogue of the Phaedrus, in which he suggests that a man must give way to, or give expression to, the madness of love in order to remain human. This too is as false as his earlier dialogues explaining that the philosopher's life was the perfect life. Love is not always madness; sometimes it is the greatest miracle of sanity and self-sacrifice. Conrad in his novels tells wonderful stories, which I enjoyed as a schoolboy because they were mostly about the sea; and when read carefully, they are all love-stories. They range from the slavery of a debased obsession with a woman's body in *The Outcast of the Isles*, to the self-sacrificing love of *The Rover*. He studies with deep understanding the many facets of love; all of which Plato grouped under the bracket of madness. The truth is that Plato's attitude to sex and love was nauseating, particularly his attitude towards young boys.

The other objection to Plato is the goal he reached eventually in his *Republic*. His picture of an ideal state resembles Sparta or Nazi Germany more than any other. That too is nauseating, because not to put too fine a gloss on it, despite all its fine principles, it is dictatorship. Martha Nussbaum stresses that Aristotle always insisted on returning to experience; he knew all too well the danger of taking an argument to its logical conclusion, namely that you end up with contradiction or absurdity. I doubt if he appreciated that every frame of mind was based on its assumptions, which might or might not be true, and which were probably partly true and partly false; but he knew very well that logic is only valuable up to a point, and beyond that point can lead to absurdity, even if he did not grasp the reason for it. But he was right about Plato's logic leading to a result, which was either absurd or revolting, whichever way you look at it.

One can reach the same conclusion another way. Plato sought ideal forms, which would have a permanence, which reality seen in human terms never seems to have. But Bertrand Russell says in his *History of Western Philosophy* that what we have inherited from

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Parmenides is the idea of the “indestructibility of substance”; and I have certainly understood from friends who ought to know that the majority of modern philosophies are still based on the permanence of substance. But modern physics, with which I am superficially familiar, insists that all matter is highly destructible. Einstein’s equation, the first term of which is $E = mc^2$, postulates that ultimately all matter can be converted into energy. And even if classical physics talked about laws of conservation of energy, on the grand scale as on the small energy is degradable; because the 2nd Law of Thermodynamics records the practical experience that everything grinds to a halt, and as Entropy increases energy becomes less and less usable.

Plato inherited this idea of permanence from Parmenides; and in doing so built his philosophy on a false basis. In my theory of consciousness, I steer well clear of substance, and avoid it like the plague, for this very reason. Instead I make the basis of my theory the “perfectly relaxed consciousness”; but I do not suggest this is the same for everyone, for the simple reason no-one can ever know if his consciousness is completely relaxed. It may be; or it may not be. I also use the phrase the “consciousness of God” as a shorthand way of referring to it; but no-one can say if His consciousness always remains always the same; and I very much doubt if it does. I almost take refuge in Descartes’ Discourse on Method, in which he argues, “I think therefore I am”; except that I part company with him when he says the only thing he can be sure of is that he thinks and doubts. I reckon that the consciousness and the thinking process are themselves very much subject to change; and not to be relied on. But experience of the external world, which includes our ability to interpret it, enables us to be sufficiently sure of enough in life, at any rate to guide our conduct in our immediate present circumstances. So I reckon I have avoided all the pitfalls of the past, and learned to rely, as I gather Aristotle said one should, only on the truth of experience. Hence my immodest view that my theory of consciousness is a vast improvement on anything that has gone before.