

PAPER ASSIGNMENTS

LITERATURE AND ETHICAL VALUES THIRD PAPER ASSIGNMENT

Due by Lecture #26

Papers should be TEN pages in length, double-spaced, or the equivalent. (Figure 350 words/page.) You may write on any subject that occurs to you concerning the texts read during the LAST third of the term (from Ibsen onwards), although you may also write about materials drawn from our earlier readings, as well; the point is that at least half your attention should be directed towards the latter materials. The following list is offered by way of sample topics; you may choose one of them but need not do so.

SUGGESTED TOPICS

Justify or condemn Captain Vere in his treatment of Billy. Why does he convene a court-martial instead of holding Billy for judgement ashore or pronouncing judgement himself? And having convened the court-martial, why does he intervene? Depending on your view of Vere, and given Billy's dog-like devotion to him, his apparent insistence on making Billy (in the post-trial interview about which the narrator refuses to supply details) complicit in his own execution may look like an act of utter barbarity--a way of trying to ensure that Billy will not say anything during the ceremony of execution that might stir up trouble with the crew. Compare Vere with the narrator of "The Secret Sharer", who also has what might look like a murderer on his hands. Do the stories each embody a very different viewpoint from the other or are they compatible in their viewpoints, given the difference in circumstances.

Billy Budd has often been likened to *Antigone* as a representation of the fallibility of authority. Discuss in any way that seems useful to a comparison of the two texts. Again, the narrative compares Vere to Abraham and Billy to Isaac. Is the comparison justified?

Suppose that it is wrong for anyone in a position of authority within an organization to damage an innocent person in order to prevent a severe risk to the many careers and fortunes that depend upon it. (This, abstractly put, is one way of condemning Captain Vere.) In a utilitarian ethic, this supposition would give more weight to the damage of an innocent person than to the potential for damage to the organization as a whole. Should one be ethically required, then, to act upon this weighting and risk damage to an organization upon which many lives and fortunes depend in order to prevent damage to an innocent person? (This is a puzzle that arises when one wants to condemn Vere and also condemn the nameless narrator of "The Secret Sharer", whose final action is to risk the ship and its company "as a matter of conscience" to save what he believes is an innocent man.)

Those in authority seek to *justify* their actions by appeal to principles; what looks like an unethical or immoral action is justified by looking at "the larger picture". But Vere argues for a responsibility set against the claims of natural conscience, religious scruple, and the feelings of pity and sympathy--all of which must be put aside. He does not justify--rather, he insists upon involving the members of the court-martial in knowing complicity in a *guilty* deed, leaving the ultimate decision to them. (The text is ambiguous on how far his subordinates go along with his point of view, suggesting that they act rather out of a sense of fear or expediency.) In the text, it is Claggart who acts self-righteously, squaring what he does with principle out of the worst motives in the world, whereas Vere seems to know that what he is urging the court-martial to do is wrong but necessary. Discuss.

The narrative offers three consecutive endings to the story, chapters 28, 29 and 30, any one of which could have concluded the story by itself. What is the point of this device?

Compare the narrative's view of Nelson with its implied view of Vere. Which is the better leader? At the end of chapter 21, the narrative draws a distinction between the viewpoint of those in

authority during emergencies and those under authority or protected by it. What are the ethical implications of this distinction? Are they legitimate considerations in judging those in authority?

It could be said that Hobbes and Kant see ethics in similar terms, since each thinks in terms of laws that people can agree are reasonable. Describe the two theories and indicate the extent to which you think that they agree and disagree about the nature of morality.

Kant would not have recognized Aristotelian ethics as a system of morality, because Aristotle believed that human life was ethically fulfilled by the pursuit of happiness or well-being. Kant severed the tie between morality and the pursuit of happiness because he believed that we all desire different things and morality could not be binding on an agent by virtue of what makes him or her different from other agents, namely, the desires that he or she just *happens* to have. The agent might have lacked those desires and had quite different ones, and, Kant argued, it is intolerable that an agent should be bound to morality by something contingent. Morality should bind an agent solely insofar as he or she is rational; thus morality, for Kant, should be constituted by the formal laws of rationality alone. Elaborate the contrast between Aristotle and Kant in this connection.

One way (there are many) to describe Kant's view is to say that he does not think that you can justify an ethical maxim, for example, "Never tell a lie", but you can show that you cannot consistently will its contrary, "Lie whenever it suits you." The justification depends upon accepting the premise that maxims of ethical conduct are universal—that is, they are addressed not to whoever you happen to be by virtue of natural advantages, social position, lineage, or the appetites and aversions that you happen to possess, but simply to you in your capacity as a rational agent, which is to say that they apply to just anybody. Discuss.

Kant offers two different formulations of the Categorical Imperative—one that tests whether it makes sense to to express the maxim upon which the agent will act as a universal law, the other that enjoins an agent to treat other rational beings never just as a means but always also as an end. Explain these two formulations and say something about the connection between them. Some philosophers have tried to discredit the first formulation by pointing out that it justifies trivialities ("Everyone must always write with a felt-tipped pen") or immoralities ("Always persecute those who hold religious beliefs different from your own") or numerical qualifications ("Never tell more than twelve lies a year"). Comment.

Compare the different ways that Aristotle and Mill understand human happiness or well-being in a way that illuminates either or both.

The happiness principle as Mill expounds it at the opening of chapter 2 in *Utilitarianism* relies on the idea that end (or aim) of all action are either an increase in pleasure or a decrease in pain, both of which Mill chooses to regard as an increase in pleasure. Is this as obvious a point as it looks? If you make the aim of every action pleasure, then pleasure loses its content as a characterization of the aim of action—to say that one is acting for the sake of pleasure comes to mean that one is acting—period. The idea is, of course, to characterize the aim by quantity, rather than quality. One then tends to lose sight of *qualitative* differences in the motives, say, of the honest tradesman who believes in an ethic of business and the honest tradesman who believes in the utility of a reputation for honesty. (Kant's example.) What is gained and what is lost by reducing all deliberate action to action done for the sake of pleasure?

Compare Kant and Mill in any way that illuminates the character of each. You might refer here to Mill's criticism of Kant (near the end of Chapter 5), in which he argues that Kant's categorical imperative is either a misleading form of utilitarianism or else it "uses words without a meaning." Is his view correct here? In this context, too, you might want to consider Mill's concluding remarks about justice (next to last paragraph of the essay), where he allows that you might have good reason to kidnap a doctor and force the doctor's attendance on a patient. (Would he say the same about an unwilling kidney-

donor?) Because the rules of justice are so important, he argues, it is a good idea to think of them as “indefeasible”—i.e., never being modified by virtue of the fact that extraordinary circumstances sometimes force us to violate them—and so it is a good idea to speak of kidnapping in such circumstances as just, rather than as exceptions to the rules of justice. Suppose we applied what Mill calls this “useful accommodation of language” to the Kantian false promise and say that it isn’t *really* failing to keep your word when it turns out that keeping your word will produce more harm than good. How would Kant regard such a proposition?

In comparing Kant and Mill, consider that Kant offers a “decision procedure”, a way of determining whether any proposed course of action is right or wrong, whereas Mill offer a “resolution procedure”, a way of deciding between alternative courses of action when there seems to be good reasons supporting both of them.

And, of course, there is the major point of comparison. One recalls the passage in St Matthew, when the rich man came to Jesus, who advised him to give all he had to the poor, because it was harder for a rich man to enter heaven than for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle. The disciples were scandalized by this and said: “Who then can be saved?” because they thought that money represented power and power had to be exerted for good if one was to be saved. The issue is reflected in the contrasting attitudes of Mill and Kant. Mill holds that being ethical means making the world a better place, increasing its available supply of happiness, whereas Kant begins (the third through the sixth paragraphs of our readings) with a denial that making the world happier has anything to do with ethics. Comment.

Mill argues that “happiness is a good, that each person’s happiness is a good to that person, and the general happiness, therefore, a good to the aggregate of all persons”. (Opening paragraph of ch. 4.) The aim of ethical conduct in his view is to promote the aggregate good, sometimes at the expense of one’s own good but never vice-versa. How does he answer the question posed by an imaginary reader (Opening paragraph of ch. 3.): “If my own happiness lies in something else [i.e., something other than the general good], why may I not give that the preference?”

At one point in his exposition (near the outset of ch. 2), Mill tries to rescue utilitarianism from the charge that it offers a degrading view of both humanity and ethics by taking the aim of ethical behavior to be nothing more than trying to maximize pleasure or happiness. In the course of this he insists upon the existence of different kinds of pleasure or happiness and different sorts of people that go with them. “Better to be a human being than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied.” How does this view agree with his later insistence on taking an impartial view when it comes to considering whose happiness is in question or, even more strikingly, (fourth paragraph from the end of the excerpts) with his putting as the central principle of utilitarianism that “equal amounts of happiness are equally desirable, whether felt by the same or by different persons”?

Explain how Mill accounts for the fact that people value and desire virtue for its own sake, and not for the sake of increasing the world’s complement of happiness. At one point, Mill observes that people often have a strong regard for particular virtues or certain principles (mostly of the form “Thou shalt not . . .”), whether or not they produce happiness, and that it might diminish the hold that these virtues or principles have on them to argue that their regard for virtue really derives from some larger, abstract principle, like maximizing the world’s happiness. Why resort to a general principle then? Again: Mill thinks that the mind is not in “a right state” if it doesn’t value and desire virtue (or living by virtuous principles) for itself, that is, even if virtue doesn’t produce desirable consequences now and again, and yet he also thinks that “there is in reality nothing desired except happiness”, even though it appears otherwise to many people. Is he contradicting himself here?

Continuing in this vein: The idea of a general progress of mankind is appropriated by Mill to his position; he sees the advance of knowledge and the increase of democratic institutions making it steadily

less necessary to sacrifice individual happiness for the happiness of others. At the same time, he is very concerned to leave space for the notion that even in a perfect world, “paradoxical as the assertion may be, the conscious ability to do without happiness gives the best prospect of realizing such happiness as is attainable [not just for the aggregate of all humanity but for the individual who is sacrificing some of his or her interests for the sake of others].” (P. 3) In other words, you are always better equipped for happiness if you can do without happiness, because this enables you to face up to the accidents of life (including the misfortune of being mortal). Is there a contradiction here? What does the argument do to the notion that progress is a good thing and worth working for?

Many characters in *Crime and Punishment* hold views that are not dissimilar to Mill's. They believe that actions can be justified by social utility, that most people—most *ordinary* people—hold to moral principles just by way of “prejudice” (akin to Mill's “habit”, which conditions ethical response) and do not see clearly the way in which so-called moral principles have to be ignored in order to produce a better world. What would Mill have to say about Luzhin's theories about the virtues of self-interest? What would he think of Raskolnikov's inspiration for murder?

Discuss the dreams in *Crime and Punishment*. (There are five of them, but you needn't discuss all five.) How do they relate to the central themes of the book?

Analyze any three passages from *Crime and Punishment*, showing how they are symptomatic of the concerns of the text as a whole. (The paper length should calculate without including the space occupied by extensive quotation of passages from the novel.) For example, the long initial speech of Marmaladov, the encounter between Raskolnikov and a prostitute, in which he speaks of “a square yard of space”, and the account that Svidrigailov gives of his relationship with a young girl, whom he is thinking of making his fiancée.

In his interview with Sonia in the latter part of the book, Raskolnikov offers several notions of the reasons that he had for killing the pawnbroker. Do they add up? What are his motives for Raskolnikov's crime? How clear is Raskolnikov about his reasons for committing the deed?

Raskolnikov identifies Sonia with himself as someone who has committed a crime for no reason. Explain. Svidrigailov identifies Raskolnikov with himself, although he doesn't explain why. How similar are they?

At the outset of the story, the hero/narrator (he has no name) of *The Secret Sharer* is, for the first time in his life, in “a position of the fullest responsibility”. How should one understand that phrase in the context of the story? He draws a distinction between himself and the crew: “they had simply to be equal to their tasks, but I wondered how far I should turn out faithful to that ideal conception of one's own personality every man sets up for himself secretly.” Is there a contradiction here? The others do not have to measure up to an ideal, and yet we are told that *everyone* (ignore the sexism of “man”) sets up a secret ideal self. Further: does Leggatt represent an ideal self? After all, he has killed someone under his command, a person whom he describes as one of the sort of “miserable devils who have no business to live at all.

The captain of the *Sephora*, whose name is Archbold, speaks of himself as “representing the Law” and wants to turn Leggatt over to the Law for judgment. The narrator does not think of himself as “representing the Law” and does not wish to turn Leggatt over to the authorities. He harbors a fugitive and in the end risks his ship and the lives of his crew in order to give Leggatt his best chance at reaching shore without drowning. This, he says, “was a matter of conscience.” Conscience, then, is above the Law? Comment.

Leggatt says that neither a parson (his father) nor a man in a wig and twelve tradesmen would be capable of judging his actions. The assumption is that only someone with similar responsibilities of office is capable of understanding his situation. The reader, however, is not a ship's officer and is more

than likely to be either someone in business (i.e., a tradesman) or else someone who would think that—personal insufficiencies to one side—a religious vocation ought to enable one to understand guilt and exoneration. What is implied by Leggatt's claim? Why are we supposed to understand, as the narrator is expected to understand, what others are allegedly not capable of understanding? Is Leggatt seeking exoneration? Why does the narrator regard it as a weakness that he is at first unwilling to let Leggatt swim for shore since the swim and the subsequent marooning (if he survives the swim) will put Leggatt in peril of his life?

The major critical issue haunting this story derives from the fact that Leggatt, although not resembling the narrator much, is nevertheless looked upon by him as a second self, so that his attention is divided; the narrator seems to himself as if he is in two places at once—above deck in charge of the crew and confined to his cabin and dressed in a “sleeping suit”—i.e., pyjamas. In consequence, some critics have argued that Leggatt represents an unconscious or latent element in the narrator's character, and opinion is divided as to whether Leggatt represents an ideal side (as the remark about an ideal self might indicate) or a violent, daimonic self, which the narrator must exorcize if he is to be able to assume command of the ship. Why does the story emphasize the “doubleness” of the narrator and Leggatt? If Leggatt, in addition to being a seaman, is also a symbolic figure, does he stand for something higher or nobler than the morality of Archbold or something “lower”, as his association with dream, sleeping-suit, prison garb, and the unconscious would imply?

Examine any details of the narrative and show their relevance to the underlying theme of the story: e.g., the long opening paragraph of description, the import of the floating hat at the end, the sense of Leggatt that he is like Cain, the notion that Leggatt at the end is “a free man”, the distinction that Leggatt draws between drowning himself (i.e., committing suicide deliberately) and just swimming into the imensity of the Gulf until he drops from exhaustion.

Discuss the main themes of *Major Barbara* as you see them. Undershaft says that religion is the only interesting subject for intelligent people. Lady Britomart says that it is not a proper subject for discussion. What does each mean by this? What does Undershaft mean when he says that his religion is being a millionaire? Or, to put it another way, both Undershaft and Barbara believe in the need for salvation, but each has a different notion about what one has to be saved from.

Undershaft says that each person has his own true morality--that one person's meat is another's person's poison morally as well as physically. Lomax simply agrees, as if everyone knows this, but Stephen objects--there is, he says, only one true morality and anyone who believes otherwise is a scoundrel. Who is right, in the view of the play? How does this issue reflect the concerns of the play as a whole?

Undershaft rejects the values of Christianity--poverty, humility, and turning the other cheek. A particular Christian value, dramatized in the figure of Bill Walker, is “forgiveness”; Bill Walker is quite clear that he does not want to be forgiven for bashing little Jennie Hill. “What I done, I’ll pay for,” he says. Undershaft calls forgiveness “the beggar's refuge.” Elucidate the play's view of forgiveness. What does Barbara want from Bill Walker? What do you think of the notion that forgiveness is a major value?

Undershaft makes armaments--weapons. This catches a metaphor that runs deep in the Western tradition, as when we say that truth is our best weapon. Why do we need weapons? That is to ask, what justifies the metaphor? Shaw wrote this play before it became clear that weapons of mass destruction would be normally used in warfare against civilian personnel; he still believed that they would be used against other military forces, who were also armed to the teeth and prepared to use their weapons. This fact apart, why is it appropriate to the play's concerns that he is a manufacturer of weapons? Why not a manufacturer of tooth paste? Or (like Bodger) a manufacturer of something else that might be regarded as evil, like whiskey or tobacco? Would that do as well?

Cusins nicknames Undershaft "Machiavelli". Why? Lady Britomart says that she couldn't bear the fact that he practiced morality while preaching immorality. What she means is also put by saying that he always gives a bad reason for doing something good--as when he insists that his charitable contribution to the Salvation Army remain anonymous. Practicing morality while preaching immorality sounds the dead opposite of Machiavelli's advice to the Prince. Discuss.

Discuss the community of the Shortley farm in Flannery O'Connor's "The Displaced Person". Why do they conspire at the death of Mr Guizac. Do they actually kill him or just let it happen? What is the nature of this difference? How does the story illustrate the Parable of the Cave in Plato's *Republic*?