

Morals, Crimes, Responsibility, Science⁺

by

W. B. Allen

© W. B. Allen 2001

I agreed to discuss this rather protean topic without any conception of what I might say, or what would be appropriate in the circumstances. The question: “Is there some genetic disposition in the white race that leads us to believe that we are morally and technologically superior to other racial groups and that we have the right to enslave or exterminate other races or is it just cultural?” was posed and I plan to respond to it. I will also discuss other issues that speak directly to crime and violence. Finally, the answer that is needed is not so much a substantive commentary on particular social problems, but rather a discussion of the resources we bring to bear on these kinds of questions from the various sciences.

As a political scientist, I am in a unique position. That is to say, my area of study is uniquely the subject matter and the work of questioning what everybody already knows. Therefore, I am always in the awkward position of seeming ignorant and uninformed to people who are otherwise full of very robust opinions about the things of which I am supposed to have a disciplined understanding.

I met William Schockley when I was an undergraduate student; I was presenting a paper on a program where he also was speaking. It was a very dramatic moment. At that time Schockley was concerned not with transistors or physics, but rather with genetic predispositions. He was presenting a strong argument about an inherent predisposition to intellectual inferiority in blacks. On this particular day, I sat with one of my professors, now a famous science fiction writer, Jerry Pournelle.

We listened to Schockley describe incapacities for about forty-five minutes or so, at the end of which Pournelle stood up, and in a rather high-pitched, whiny voice, with anger, he thrust a finger in Schockley’s direction and demanded, “How can you say this? Look!” Whereupon his finger was pointed at my head. “Look at my student right here! It cannot be true.” Well, we are all sophisticated enough to know not to place great stock in averages, if what we wish to know is the reality. Averages serve certain heuristic purposes, but they do not inform us particularly. Nevertheless, I wanted to crawl beneath the table, for I realized that averages could not save me.

The opening question, regarding the genetic predisposition (ultimately, culture comes from genes too!) of Europeans to criminal violence against non-whites, reminded me of Schockley. So often, scientists are off the rails. They pretend that proficiency in a specialization grants licence in the field of humanity, which of course it never does. Nor do they bring special

⁺ Paper presented at the Conference on Statistics, Science and Public Policy, April 18-21 2001, Herstmonceux Castle, Hailsham, England. Published in *Statistics, Science and Public Policy VI: Science and Responsibilities*. Proceedings of the Conference on Statistics, Science and Public Policy, held at Herstmonceux Castle, Hailsham, U.K., April 18-21, 2001. Edited by A. M. Herzberg and R. W. Olford. Kingston, Ont.: Queen’s University, 2001.

understanding to the work of humanity, because of their accomplishments in their respective sciences. There have been many, many injustices that have coloured human history, and not only the history of this particular hemisphere.

One could talk about the “white race,” I suppose, if one could speak in a very disciplined fashion about race. But our science cannot even do that particularly well. This makes highly suspect, any conclusions, associations or correlations derived from race analyses in any but the most limited context, in which we know that we have defined populations to examine (it being indifferent whether we name them races or “x’s” and “y’s”) and can run certain statistical tabulations relative to the defined populations. Once we exceed those boundaries, our categories break down, and we cannot speak very meaningfully of Europe, without paying attention to a long history of mongrelization that calls into question easy genetic assumptions.

It is true, America was settled and very great crimes took place. However, the crimes were not always those typically remembered. In fact, one should read Tzvetan Todorov’s book, *Conquest of America*, which is the single best authority as to how that conquest occurred and what the dynamics were between the Europeans (particularly the Spanish) and the indigenous Americans. It is a very complex picture, and by no means a simple picture of an intruding group and the extermination of a host. Moreover, George Washington never made the statement that has been attributed to him, Jefferson, and Cotton Mather, among others.¹ I do not know who made the statement, but as I have researched the Washington corpus and published a collection, I know George Washington never made that statement. He was not even the “Great White Father,” as he is sometimes represented to be in fiction. That term did not come into current usage until Thomas Jefferson’s administration. Washington always addressed the Indians as “my brothers,” and was recognized by them (having worked closely with them ever since his service in the French and Indian Wars) as a brother.

It is a much more complicated picture than a simple aligning of one group, blacks or Indians, against others, whites. Alexis de Tocqueville, writing in *Democracy in America*, has a singularly dramatic chapter on “The Three Races in America,” in which he captures the difficulties inherent in these questions. In doing so, he offers a very pessimistic portrait of what the results will be. In fact, Tocqueville predicted no solution to the race problem in America, other than a violent war of extermination. He made that prediction scarcely thirty years before white Americans, in an all-out war of white against white, fought to the death of slavery. In short, even Tocqueville, who was incredibly wise, failed to see the extent to which white Americans would be driven by principles to which they were attached. I know some people will say the war was not over slavery. They are simply mistaken. Frederick Douglass, in 1873, preached that they were mistaken. He pointed out that, yes, Lincoln fought to save the Union, but he did so with the full knowledge that the Union could not be saved without extinguishing slavery. The war was about slavery; it was a war not of white against black but of white against white.

It is a mixed picture; it is a difficult picture. It requires an extraordinary discipline to understand all the events that transpired and to see in them the opportunities for decision that in fact coloured the outcome, rather than any particularly monotonic account of cultures or biological inheritances. It is important to observe that, because there is a larger question at stake. The question is not, who will be violent and who will not?, but what are the resources human beings bring to deal with questions of violence. And there is an area in which that is very important for scientists.

How do we deal then with terrorists, activists who in fact have become near cousins to scientific activity? At Michigan State University in 1992, we had offices, scientific laboratories and facilities, attacked by arson, and populations of minks (those that were not destroyed) let loose in the wilds. In 1999, we had other laboratories attacked by arsonists. The first case was prosecuted ultimately, but only a lone person was identified and convicted. The second remains under investigation. These are two examples of many. The question is: What has this new genre of violence to do with the way that we do science? Why is science, more perhaps than ever before, now at that critical nexus where it engenders violent, terrorist reaction? What does the uni-bomber have to do with you and me? That is the question that raises serious issues of responsibility for us. We reprehend the criminal activity as being criminal. But I believe it is insufficient to leave it at that, for often enough the criminals are not bad scientists. We need to be honest about this. It is certainly true that the activists are not necessarily bad scientists. Greenpeace has many good scientists who simply do not accept the science of government or corporate-appointed scientists.

The relation between official establishments and science has been, ever since the execution of Socrates, a very important question. We are much too sanguine if we leave unexplored the question of whether it is really science when it is carried out in the name of official organs. For, of course, that is the objection activists and terrorists seek to resist. Scientists who think science that it is rational authority — the force of argument — that they represent and not the marshal's gun, the enforcing power behind their decisions, make a very big mistake. We have to ask this question: Do we bear responsibility for some of the understandings that lead people to respond to science, not with dialogic engagement but rather with violent resistance?

What might the nature of that responsibility be? I am not going to answer the question directly; I am going to tease with the question. We are impatient to solve problems and we want to rely upon an authority to do so, without taking the time to recognize that the answer to the question is the only solution that we, as scientists, can generate. Answers are not decisions; solutions do not compel decisions. If, indeed, we want to marry science to political power, then we ought to do it very openly, with a clear understanding of what the implications are.

In general, I think nothing is worse in these contemporary days than the argument *ad hitlerum*, which comes too easily to the tongues of too many and which means, therefore, that it is rarely accompanied by any thought. The fact remains, however, that the principal criticism of Hitler's science is a criticism that is no less germane wherever science takes on the mantle of official authority rather than of intellectual authority, the authority of reason.

Now, there are many good reasons why the authority of reason has been undermined. It is a long story in modern philosophy and the philosophy of science. But I submit that, at a minimum, we need to take a step back and to question ourselves: How far have we contributed to that impression of things that gives scope to the terrorist from within (the Schockleys who think that any bias is sufficient so long as the title of science stands behind it), and how far are we responsible for the terrorist from without because of our failure to clarify the enterprise of science?

Students of Politics: Questioning What Everybody Knows²

Students of politics are often uncertain what reward they will receive from their efforts. I do not mean to say that they differ from biologists, or musicologists, or engineers, or any of the other arts that men pursue. They all are in the same boat when it comes to praying that following their natural bent or the lure of opportunity will not only be good for them but also just good. Still, students of politics have a special problem and are therefore special. For they alone pursue an inquiry into the subject of which, and the necessity to come to terms with which, are manifest not just to them but to everyone. Is there any other liberal study in which people in general are so largely unwilling to concede the possibility of an expertise beyond their comprehension?

The student of politics begins, then, with the knowledge that he or she will expend great labour to acquire a knowledge that all others believe to have virtually by birth. Little wonder that the student occasionally hears footsteps behind him and noises in the night, anticipates the reproaches of his fellows, and causes endless confusions for his more orderly peers with insistent questioning about matters for which everyone already knows the answers.

Who, then, are the students of politics? You will note immediately the need for me to clarify two points to answer this question. First, what are students, or, which is the same, what is education? Secondly, what is politics?

I am afraid, however, that I must disappoint your expectations if you wait now for, what would be in good order, explicit definitions, followed by qualifications (three on each side) and categorization (three for each qualification). Rather, I expect to make clear in passing what I take to be liberal education and what I take to be politics. Education at a minimum is the acquisition of understanding, and politics at a minimum is the constitution of a way of life in which individuals see themselves as distinct from others.

There are then two kinds of students. They who have learned to laugh about such things as ghosts and witches and who pursue their bents or opportunities while trusting to their consciences to keep them safe from evil-doing are one kind. They who have learned to laugh about ghosts, witches, and consciences are another kind. The latter seeks guidance not to acquire an art but more importantly to decide which art to seek and how to pursue goodness.

We have a problem, though, in that the prevailing view of our time throws every man on his own resources with respect to goodness. We say that there is no rational ground for decisions about the just things, the good things. Science can teach us the truth about facts (experiences) but can say no more about “values” than that everybody seems to have some. It makes no difference how one gets them, nor what anyone else thinks of them. Of course, science also has faith that everyone has some. Science cannot conceive that people exist who laugh not only at ghosts and alchemists but also at conscience.

The scientific “world view” is inadequate to the crisis of our time, and all of the arts, all of the disciplines of our time are based on the scientific world view — the fact-value distinction. We can summarize the crisis of our time by saying that we rely upon freedom to preserve our chance to achieve goodness of craft and character, but we are unable to defend freedom against the value of tyranny or totalitarianism. We have denied the authority of that rational argument which holds that freedom alone both begets and requires goodness by denying *a priori* the rational authority of every possible moral proposition. The only defence we will accept, and therefore will make, for the kind of life we live is that it is what we want, for now. The greatest

sin of our time is not lust or lechery, greed or wanton murder or mayhem, nor even racism or imperialism. The greatest sin of our time — in the eyes of the opinion that counts because it rules, the opinion of intellectuals — is moral absolutism. And because moral absolutism always aims at a conception of general human goodness (whatever its actual result), and alone does so, the greatest evil of our time is the idea of general human goodness.

There have been two outstanding sources of this evil in human history: religion and philosophy. In fact, both have subserved a single historical phenomenon: the city or, properly speaking, politics. Politics, therefore, is the outstanding force of evil in human history. There is, and always has been, but one discipline whose task it is to understand and articulate the claim of goodness, and that is political philosophy.

The pre-eminent example of the subject matter and aim of political philosophy is the opening sentence of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*: "Every art and every inquiry, equally practice and pursuit, seems to be aimed at some good" (p. 1). Just as politics is the architectonic or ruling art, which aims to comprehend all the lesser arts in the pursuit of what is in fact good, so political philosophy is the ruling science. Insofar as one becomes a student of politics, his craft will be political philosophy. To the degree that one submits his natural bent or the lure of opportunity or both to the test of goodness, the metric he must employ is political philosophy. If the purpose of a liberal education (and that is the education that suits a free man, the *liber*) is to bring one to submit his inclinations or prejudices to the test of reason, then liberal education will always be incomplete without political philosophy.

Fate or chance, we see, is the prudent exercise of favored ambitions. His ambition is to be able to do anything, but its realization forces him to seek what to do. Only the perfect human being can know what to will. The statesman is imperfect for he remains dependent upon earthly honor. That is, in wishing to will all, he reveals that those things that are the objects of will constitute his highest ambitions. Those things have to do with pleasures and pains and, as such, are inferior to the true purpose or end of the "great and immortal soul." Yet, this last alone can properly answer the question as to what should be willed; in virtue of its superiority to though not detachment from those ambitions (Allen, 1978, p. 79).

A complete education requires education in political philosophy, albeit in this critical time we do not generally demand a complete education. If we are ever to demand a complete education, it will be that we have become alive to the insufficiency of our lives, lives still fetid with the desiccated spirit of positivism. If we are to be so persuaded it will be because we have acquired the capacity to gaze upon possibilities long since hidden by the soiled gauze of history or, more correctly, historicism.

The late Leo Strauss characterized the problem of the "historicist assumption" in these words:

there are two opposed ways in which one can study the thought of the past. Many present-day scholars start from the historicist assumption, namely, that all human thought is "historical" or that the foundations of human thought are laid by specific experiences which are not, as a matter of principle, coeval with human thought as such. Yet there is a fatal disproportion between historicism and true historical understanding. The goal of the historian of thought is to understand the thought of the past "as it really has been," i.e., to understand it as exactly as possible as it was actually understood by its authors. But the

historicist assumption approaches the thought of the past on the basis of the historicist assumption which was wholly alien to the thought of the past. He is therefore compelled to attempt to understand the thought of the past better than it understood itself. In one way or the other, his presentation will be a questionable mixture of interpretation and critique. It is the beginning of historical understanding, its necessary and, one is tempted to add, its sufficient condition that one realizes the problematic character of historicism. For one cannot realize it without becoming seriously interested in an impartial confrontation of the historicist approach that prevails today with the nonhistoricist approach of the past. And such a confrontation in its turn requires that the nonhistoricist thought of the past be understood on its own terms, and not in the way in which it presents itself within the horizon of historicism (Strauss, 1968, p. 24).

We may see now that the possibility of political philosophy, and hence of a complete education, hinges on our acquiring a sense of the delusions under which we live, which is just another way of saying it depends on our having the intellectual fortitude to recognize and consider alternative models of political discourse and analysis. In addition to recovering sight of the aim of politics and political philosophy, we must also recover a sense of the subject matter, political speech, as it conceived of itself, fully coloured with sentiments of piety and revenge, anger and gratitude, indignation, honour, and shame: in a word, single-mindedness. Just as souls are the subject matter of politics or statesmanship, regimes (hierarchical orderings of souls) are the subject matter of philosophy.

Xenophon's *Agesilaus*, a celebration of a monarch, serves to provide an example of the possibilities for interpretation. Chapters 8 through 10 constitute proper material upon which to found a comparative analysis of present techniques and alternative possibilities. Xenophon closes the first of these chapters with the words, "he formed his soul so as to be impregnable to money, voluptuous pleasures, and fear." He thereby distinguishes Agesilaus' justice, moderation or continence, and courage (wisdom) from the virtues of piety and patriotism. By bringing the reach of the former virtues within range of a monarch's will Xenophon elevates them, at least insofar as what is both good for us and accessible to us is higher than what is merely good. The following chapters show Agesilaus putting his virtues to good use, or, properly, faring well on account of his virtues; they show the political image of a Socrates (See Xenophon's *Apology*). Xenophon recaptures the opening question of the work, concluding in Chapter 10 that Agesilaus is "rightly believed to be a completely good man". The closing chapter, the summary, completes the account of his total goodness. He was in awe of the gods, even among enemies, and in awe of what gods could do for men. Hence, his piety. After the first half of the summary, the gods vanish. From paragraph 9 to the end the reader revels in the man the monarch, for whom the good he could himself do was an obsession.

It is manifest that Xenophon's praise of Agesilaus takes seriously Agesilaus' purported concern for the common good. Would it not have been more likely for a twentieth-century Xenophon to see these same characteristics in the light of a mere attempt to gain influence over others, for the sake of some hidden agenda? Why then should we afford old-fashioned Xenophon's naiveté any credibility? If we look again, we will note that old-fashioned Xenophon was not uncritical. In Chapter 2, he allows that there might be some other way in which one could find fault with Agesilaus' apparently confusing the common good of Sparta and the common good of Greece. Yet, he discerned an ultimate objective which he judged to be the controlling factor in Agesilaus' mind and which, in any case, serves to bring us to reflect on the virtue and paradox of friendship as the aim of politics. Friendship as an end both necessitates *and* undermines justice. Defined by Aristotle as the preference of another's good, in its ideal

expression friendship is the relationship among all citizens, and something to be aimed at in legal arrangements. But, the stronger that passion, the more possible it is that someone might prefer a friend's good to the city's good. (Unlike Xenophon, Plutarch thought Agesilaus all too prone to that sin.) And there is a bigger problem to which Xenophon points in Chapter 7.

Here, Xenophon shows Agesilaus' elevation of soul, by revealing that he could consider the good of Sparta as compatible with the good of other peoples. The problem of every regime, the necessity of exclusivity, is overcome by a large ability to relate the end of the city to the human end (true to the wildest imaginings of Socrates). It is the political philosopher, Xenophon, who enables us to consider this question in a way that is far more fruitful than merely to assume universality or common humanity and thence to fail to comprehend war as a necessary defence of the chance for goodness.

There is one other perspective from which to regard the work of politics and hence the business of political philosophy. Readers familiar with Plato's *Republic* will recall that the ultimate definition of justice in that work is "minding one's own business." That notion plays a central role in developing the idea of "from each according to his ability, to each according to his need." It naturally leads to the idea that each person is endowed to perform some task best, and that when all members of a society do so (at least in the relevant classes), not only will order prevail but all sources of conflict of interest will be eliminated.

It is also true that Socrates ultimately stumbles in building his ideal city when, in Books VIII through X, the subject of the conditions for realizing it come up. The great symbolic example of some inexplicable difficulty is Socrates' inability to generate a geometry of moving solids — the inability to show the city in motion as opposed to speech. There is also a practical manifestation of this symbolic difficulty: after all was said, no one could be found whose special endowment it was to mind everyone else's business! Thus, the philosopher, the best citizen, had to be compelled to be monarch, a ruler.

What this reflects, for our purposes, is the sense of the regime or constitution as a device through which citizens are tutored to mind the business of the whole; that is, the purpose of politics at a practical level seems to be to make it everyone's business to mind the business of the whole. This shows in a dramatic way the significance of the claims about human goodness that every regime makes.

Political philosophy is the discipline that is able to articulate the regime's claims about goodness in such a way that every citizen, whatever his art or inquiry, may know how to assume his obligation to mind the business of the whole. There is a pre-condition to be sure: the citizen must be a student of politics before he can become a student of political philosophy — that is, only those who laugh at the delusions of mankind can recognize the prospects of an explanation and of guidance that political philosophy offers. I do not pretend that political philosophy is just one of many disciplines carrying out its assigned function. Rather, I mean to deny the conclusions drawn by those who think that a philosophical understanding is incompatible with a moral or political understanding (Allen, 1982).

Insofar as the human soul is, as may be, the only ordered whole which the human mind may grasp in its entirety, and insofar as it discloses itself never so fully as in comprehensive claims about human goodness or nature, political philosophy that articulates (see the dialogue with the "laws" in Plato's *Crito*) or investigates those claims will always be subordinate to its subject matter.

Even when political philosophy displaces it cannot replace revelation. For us, therefore, the problem is but to discover the necessity to include this study in a complete education. We have seen already that from the moment we perceive the need of education, that is, from the moment we are liberated from mere prejudice, we discover also the necessity of political philosophy. While not the historically first training we receive, it is the first education we receive. It follows, then, that where one has had no education in political philosophy, not only has one not had a complete education, but education and the associated moral responsibility have not yet begun.

NOTES

¹ “The Indians were as wolves and should be hunted down as wolves.”

² Portions of this essay were presented as a lecture at Wabash College as one of the activities associated with the “Owen Duston Visiting Scholar” program delivered March 16, 1982. The author acknowledges his gratitude to Prof. Edward McLean and the faculty and students at Wabash College.

REFERENCES

Allen, W. B. (1978), “Montesquieu's *Lysimachus*: A Translation and Commentary,” *Independent Journal of Philosophy*, vol. ii.

Allen, W.B. (1982), Review of John Blackmore's *Gibraltar Dialogues* in *Methodology and Science* (15:2): pp. 131-139.

Aristotle, (1975), *The Nichomachean Ethics*, H. Rackham, ed. Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press and William Heinemann Ltd. My translation.

Strauss, Leo (1968), *On Tyranny*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell Paperbacks.

Tocqueville, A. de (1875), *Democracy in America*. London: Longmans.

Xenophon (1971), “Agesilaus,” in *Scripta Minora*, E. C. Marchant, ed. London and Cambridge, MA: William Heineman, Ltd and Harvard University Press, 1971, pages 59-133. My translation.