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Psychological Operations: The Ethical Dimension

- by -
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Introduction: The Relevance of Ethics to PSYOP

This paper came about as a consequence of my participation in a recent symposium on Psychological Operations (PSYOP) at the National Defense University. The papers which were presented dealt primarily with the mechanics of how and when and against whom to apply PSYOP, and secondarily with the organizations and tools available to undertake such campaigns. The international situation being what it is today, there was a notable emphasis on “out-doing” perceived antagonists - principally the Soviet Union - by beating them at their own game.

Something about this atmosphere began to disturb me, and after awhile I recognized what it was: PSYOP was being treated as an environment in which **credibility by whatever means - not** credibility based upon a firm commitment to the **truth** - was the essential factor. This was particularly evident in an apparent emphasis upon the utility of “black propaganda”, in which the source of the entire message is deliberately misrepresented. The unspoken assumption seemed to be that, since the Soviet Union is apparently not concerned with the truthfulness of its “disinformation” programs, we need not be either. “Nice guys finish last.”

At one point, after hearing a presentation extolling the promise of “black propaganda”, I questioned this unspoken assumption. “The United States’ claim to leadership in the international community is based upon its commitment to principles of ethics and human dignity above and beyond the convenience of national interest,” I argued. “If we merely give lip service to these principles, how can we claim to be more deserving of international leadership than the Soviet Union?”

I received no answer from the floor, and the speaker responded only that he was not advocating lying [which was incorrect, since black propaganda specifically lies concerning its source]. The issue was not pursued in discussion, and I had the feeling that I had trodden on awkward ground - not so much because the symposium participants were deliberately unethical, but rather because American PSYOP practitioners have simply not spent much time considering this aspect of their craft.

This paper addresses the ethical dimension of PSYOP: to sketch the dimensions of the problem and to suggest renewed emphasis on the United States’ historic commitment to the **truth** as an essential component of such ethics - truth in this sense being **statements based on fact and which impartially and objectively represent a given situation**.

Truth in political and social contexts is inevitably influenced by the ethical assumptions and perceptions of the observer, which means that an appreciation for the influence of such ethics must be factored into statements that are represented as “true”.

I wish to plead a case for an **attitude** on the part of PSYOP practitioners, not just a “do this/don’t do that” section in a manual or circular. I am confident that PSYOP professionals, once sensitized to the importance and relevance of this standard, will evaluate their own work accordingly.

In the Special Warfare Center at Fort Bragg there is a statue of a soldier standing with his foot on a rock, under which is a snake symbolizing tyranny. The soldier wears the famous Green Beret, but he could be any American soldier in any of our wars.

One is struck by the contrast between the soldier and the snake: the stature of the soldier above the snake and his denial and condemnation of the snake. It has always seemed to me that this statue manages to convey the very essence of what has made the United States a “new order of the ages” [as our Great Seal proclaims]. We have always fought for something **beyond** ourselves, for certain principles in which reside the dignity of humanity. Our PSYOP must carry forward that same tradition.

Chapter 1: Ethics in American Political Culture

A man's character is his fate.
- Sophocles

Ethics Defined

Before one can consider the proper place of ethics in American PSYOP, *ethics* as a term must be raised from a vague sentiment to something more concrete. It is, unfortunately, one of those terms whose elusiveness has made it all too susceptible to casual and cursory use. "He's an ethical person," we say - and leave it at that. What **are** ethics? How can we identify them, and how should we judge them?

The specific role of ethics in American political culture is also germane. It is the argument of this paper that high political ethics are central and crucial to our culture, as they are less so to certain other cultures. [Chapter 3 will survey two significant variations on and substitutions for ethics that modern nation-states have applied and continue to apply.]

Ethics, alternatively called *moral philosophy*, seeks to distinguish what is good from what is bad and to formulate justifiable reasons for making such distinctions.

As a branch of philosophy, ethics is a **normative** science; that is, it seeks to identify principles of good and evil that transcend social, cultural, or political convention.

Consequently the bases for philosophical ethics are often sought in *metaphysics*, that realm of philosophy which investigates principles of reality beyond the immediate and apparent.

Since metaphysical issues are among the least understood and most controversial topics in human history, it is not surprising that practical problem-solvers shy away from normative ethical questions and try rather to address questions in terms of what are generally called *descriptive ethics* - the customs and standards of a given culture which serve as measurements of rightness and wrongness within that culture. An acceptance of descriptive ethics **as** ethics leads to an attitude of *ethical relativism*, according to which there is no standard for judging right and wrong apart from the cultural environment of specific situations. Hence the killing of humans by humans may be "ethical" if sanctioned by a judge or national sovereign, but the identical act may be "unethical" if undertaken by an individual, regardless of reasons.

The Enlightenment: Rational Ethics Exalted

The primary concepts underlying the ethical culture of the United States of America may be traced back to the social-contract theorists of the 17th- and 18th-century "Enlightenment". [Major ethical developments in Western civilization prior to the Enlightenment are discussed in the Appendix to this paper.]

With the Enlightenment came an enthusiasm for the power of **human reason** as an alternative to the religious scholasticism of the medieval and Renaissance eras - and as the basis for ethics.

Thomas Hobbes denied the religious tenet of a "supreme good", seeing in its place only material self-interest and gratification. [His attitude towards ethics is thus similar to

that of Glaucon in Plato's *Republic* - see Appendix.] Hobbes' prescribed social contract was thus a **negative** one, establishing an atmosphere of truce between citizens who would otherwise savage one another mercilessly.

Such a contemptuous view of humanity evolved forward into many "lower" ideologies of contemporary society, most conspicuously communism. "Hobbes," Karl Marx is said to have muttered, "is the father of us all." It should be pointed out, however, that Hobbes' reputation for harshness came not from personal preference, but rather from a coldly practical analysis of what makes human beings behave unpleasantly towards one another. Previously "evil" had been excused as a theological force, or as the result of "original sin", i.e. something for which rational individuals could not be held exclusively responsible. Hobbes denied such excuses.

John Locke and the Beginnings of American Ethics

In contrast to Hobbes, John Locke suggested that social-contract nations could exist on a **positively cooperative** basis of mutual interest. It is important to note that Locke's prescription was based not on idealistic abstractions (such as ethics), but rather on attainable material objectives: "life, liberty, and estate". Like Hobbes, he sought to design a society reflecting "basic man" rather than one espousing unattainable ideals and expectations.

Locke's positively-cooperative assumptions and prescription for limited government based upon majority rule formed the philosophical basis for the American Declaration of Independence and Constitution, to include the latter's Bill of Rights [against the government]. Locke recommended a "reasonable Christianity" - a faith which, while satisfying personal religious desires, would play only a symbolic and ceremonial role in political decision-making.

The history of ethics does not cease with John Locke, but his ideas, as immortalized in the aforementioned documents, ordained the ethical atmosphere of United States political culture to the present day. This atmosphere may be summarized in five general maxims:

- (1) Government based on law is a positive institution, not something to be eliminated in an ideal society.
- (2) Good government is a construct of the people and is responsible to them (social contract theory), not to a higher religion, destiny, or ideology.
- (3) The will of the people is best ascertained through the opinion of the majority, which thus determines "political truth". [It is precisely because there is no authority superior to such majority opinion that Locke placed certain "inalienable rights" of all humanity beyond the reach of government.]
- (4) As society is based upon cooperative self-interest, so the attractions of such self-interest - for example, private property - must be preserved and enhanced as beneficial and indeed vital features of that society.
- (5) There is an intrinsic dignity in the individual human life which must be accepted and respected as an article of faith.

If these five principles were endorsed throughout contemporary civilization, United States' foreign policy would not have had to travel such a rocky road during the last two centuries. Unfortunately for us, they are not. More pertinent to the present discussion,

those who do not accept them in whole or part **do not necessarily see this as a deficiency** in their social structure. To the Lockean frame of mind, these values are, in the words of the Declaration of Independence, “held to be self-evident”; they are beyond debate, beyond compromise.

The American Ethical Tradition

As the United States aged sufficiently to develop a sense of and regard for its own history, “pure” Lockean theory became leavened with a measure of ethical conservatism: an acceptance of certain things as “good” simply because they have continued to be tolerated over an extended period of time.

Conservatism was elevated to a deliberate ethical philosophy by David Hume, who defined the morally good as what one **ought** to do according to prevailing passionate custom. Hume denied that the good could be ascertained by dispassionate reasoning. Reason, he said, is useful only to discover the most practical or sensible approaches to problems. Hence virtue and vice are products of **sentiment**. Virtue is not approved because it is “intrinsically virtue”; it is considered to be virtue because it meets with passionate approval.

The point of this brief tour through certain key concepts in the evolution of ethics is simply to hold a mirror up to the American mentality: to show clearly what all too many people perceive only dimly and imprecisely - how the United States of America has developed its “official ethics”. If this background is **not** understood, we cannot clearly understand why we make the ethical decisions we do - nor understand why some foreign cultures “mysteriously/unreasonably” reject those decisions ... often on what **they** consider to be ethical grounds!

The science of ethics is not peripheral or incidental to PSYOP; it is **central** to it. Whether people hold a certain opinion or behave in a certain way is critically influenced by whether or not they believe themselves **justified** in so doing. Once “rightness” or “wrongness” is established, specific themes, messages, or behavioral recommendations will be received, judged, and acted upon accordingly.

In order to be effective, a PSYOP operative must first **recognize** and **consciously appreciate** the ethical components of his designs that are particular to their United States point of origin. He need not - and, as I will argue, should not - deny them for this; he need only be alert to their actual impact on non-American cultures.

Chapter 2: PSYOP in American Military Culture

You can get more with a gun and a polite request than with just a polite request.
- A. Capone

You can get more with a gun and a polite request than with just a gun.
- M. Aquino

Psychological Operations Terminology

PSYOP is an often-misunderstood term, and both it and its spinoff-terms will bear redefinition prior to the discussion of its role in the American military culture. From the U.S. Army's current PSYOP manual:

Psychological Operations (PSYOP) includes psychological warfare and, in addition, encompasses those political, military, economic, and ideological actions planned and conducted to create in neutral or friendly foreign groups the emotions, attitudes, or behavior to support the achievement of national objectives.

Psychological warfare (PSYWAR) is the planned use of propaganda and other psychological actions to influence the opinions, emotions, attitudes, and behavior of hostile foreign groups in such a way as to support the achievement of national objectives.¹

Note that in these definitions *per se* there is no mention of “the truth” or of the United States’ commitment to it. They are simply “mission-oriented” definitions. To be sure, they could be phrased thus to encompass the PSYOP and PSYWAR of all nations, not just the United States. The implication of their definition thus in a U.S. PSYOP manual, however, is that this **is** the way **we** look at them.

Propaganda is:

... any form of communication in support of national objectives designed to influence the opinions, emotions, attitudes, or behavior of any group in order to benefit the sponsor, either directly or indirectly.²

Despite this innocuous contemporary definition, “propaganda” as a concept still labors under the negative image Joseph Goebbels and his Propaganda Ministry created for it during the Third Reich. Goebbels’ obsession with the utility of propaganda led him to an arrogant contempt for the truth. In his eyes the motivational and indoctrinational goals of the German propaganda effort fully justified the use of half-truths and outright lies as they might be convenient or expedient. It is thus not surprising that today, in most people’s eyes, “propaganda” has simply become a synonym for playing with the truth.

In the above-cited American definition, the standard by which propaganda is measured is a mission-oriented one, in which “national interest” is the determining factor. Once more this definition can be excused as applicable to all propaganda, not just that of the United States; but in that case the door is again left open for the United States to utilize propaganda per just that rationale. Significantly, the U.S. Army makes the following statement concerning its propaganda:

¹ FM 33-1: *Psychological Operations*. Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, 31 August 1979, page #H-3.

² *Ibid.*

U.S. Army propaganda is based on a strategy of truth. It seeks to strengthen or create a favorable image by emphasizing the credible truth. This is so because the complete truth is frequently not believable by the target audience.

Dedication to the truth does not imply that a full recounting of facts is required or advisable. Facts to support certain themes may be selected while others may be excluded. The propagandist reports those facts that present his side in the best light ...³

What differentiates a “**strategy** of truth” from just “**the** truth”? Is the truth uttered merely because it is thought to be less vulnerable than lies, or because of a commitment to it that is above and beyond motives of convenience or expedience? And is the selective presentation of facts [and exclusion of others bearing upon the situation] justifiably considered “the truth” - even if done to enhance the “credibility” of a message to an audience?

Confusion over the terms “white”, “grey”, and “black” propaganda is common, so it may be helpful to review their definition as well before proceeding further. Note that all three colors of propaganda are **source**-determined. The color-coding does **not** refer to the truthfulness of the propaganda message **itself**:

White propaganda is propaganda in which the source is openly and accurately stated.

Grey propaganda is propaganda in which no source is stated.

Black propaganda is propaganda in which the source is deliberately and explicitly misrepresented.⁴

What is evident in the above definitions is that PSYOP as a tool is generally understood to be **mission-justified**, and further that its potential use includes **deliberate falsehood**.

These features do not in themselves invalidate PSYOP as a U.S. policy option, any more than a rifle’s potential for unethical use invalidates its place as a tool in support of ethical ends. What **is** important is that, like the rifle, PSYOP can be used unethically just as easily as it can be used ethically. The mere fact that it is the United States who employs it does **not in itself** validate it from an ethical standpoint.

Key Principles of the American Military Culture

PSYOP’s place within the American military culture will continue to be determined by the generally-accepted values of that culture, which in turn represent what the American military institution perceives as its proper posture within the culture of the United States as a whole. Some of the key principles of the American military culture might be summarized as follows:

(1) The existence and actions of the military are held to be justified by [and in defense of] the United States Constitution. It is significant that the oath of an American serviceman is to **this** document, **not** to a particular individual, government, or administration.

The effect of this orientation is to place the military at least theoretically within an “ethical universe” that is more or less purely Lockean. The “self-evident truths” in this perceptual universe are accepted as articles of faith which

³ *Ibid.*, page # 11-7.

⁴ *Ibid.*, page #11-2. This is not an exact quote; I have made the language rather more precise than in the manual. The distinctions, however, are accurate.

need no argumentative justification.

Indeed to question the assumptions underlying the Constitution would be viewed as a kind of quasi-religious heresy - as indeed it is from a philosophical point of view. The social-contract theorists of the Enlightenment held a vague, general disbelief that God, if he were presumed to exist, would disregard the operation of natural laws to take an interest in the behavior of individual human beings for better or worse. They therefore designed ideal governmental systems in which **human reason** was preeminent, with traditional (Judæo/Christian) divine influence being relegated to a ceremonial and symbolic role in **actual** political decision-making.

(2) Inherent in the American military culture, at least theoretically, is the responsibility of each individual for his own ethical behavior - and for the issuance of ethical commands to subordinates. Although the oath of military service also stipulates obedience to superior authority, this is theoretically subordinate to one's personal ethical responsibility and cannot be used to excuse unethical acts. This, of course, was raised to the level of explicit doctrine as a consequence of the post-World War II Nürnberg trials, in which German officials had unsuccessfully argued that their oaths of obedience to Adolf Hitler superseded, hence excused actions on their part which outraged prevailing Western norms.

The word "theoretically" appears twice in the above paragraph for a deliberate reason. Although the so-called "Nürnberg principle" is officially accepted by the United States, it is a difficult principle to apply [or enforce] in practice. The reason for this difficulty ought now to be clear: It requires individuals to make decisions **according to ethical criteria which they do not understand save as vague articles of faith**. The best that can be hoped for is a [Stoic] reliance upon **impressions** of situations to be reliable ones, and upon Hume's "prevailing passionate custom" as sufficient grounds for judgment of same. Even so it is difficult for a soldier, particularly of junior rank and/or limited education, to venture an ethical judgment overruling that of a senior. There is always the excuse that the senior is presumed to be aware of [and have taken into consideration] aspects of the situation of which the junior is unaware.

(3) As the individual is placed at the center of the Lockean universe, being in effect a "sacred object", each individual's ethics are an essential personal responsibility. In certain other cultures the individual is considered to be a mere component of the state, or of a class, or of an ethnic group. In such cases the right and responsibility to determine and judge ethics is similarly removed. This point is related to that discussed immediately above (the Nürnberg principle), but is separate in that it tasks each individual to be ethical, whether or not commands from a superior are involved.

Within the American military - most conspicuously in the officer corps - there is a further expectation that **professional** ethics be acknowledged and observed. It is interesting to note that these ethics are couched in terms of one's responsibility to one's service, fellow servicemembers, and country. They do not address ethics beyond the Lockean universe, and indeed it would probably be worrisome to the nation if they did. The armed forces exist to preserve and protect the United States **as it is defined by the Constitution**, after all - not to

presume to judge that definition.

To the extent that American military thinking is thus bounded by Constitutional values, military leaders are uncomfortable venturing outside that ordered environment. Conventional military wisdom is simply to war against and defeat those who think and act in ways that are perceived as an “unacceptable” threat to the United States, with the expectation that they will then see the error of their ways and be converted to “right thinking”. Persistent rogues will be dispatched. The psychology is essentially similar to that of the medieval Crusades, wherein it was thought entirely proper to win converts to Christianity - or Islam - at swordpoint.

(4) The American military culture incorporates the principle of civilian superiority to the armed services. The effect of this from an ethical perspective is to place a certain escape-hatch between military leaders and their responsibility to Constitutional values.

While the Nürnberg principle forbids the military to relinquish personal ethical responsibility for their decisions, the civilian government can cite its Constitutional superiority in support of its prerogative to “interpret” said ethics. At the national level it would be unacceptable for a military leader to challenge that presumption [and it must be borne in mind that controversial issues are rarely clear-cut ones where the Constitution is concerned].

As a practical matter the Constitution is what the executive branch of the government **says** it is, except in those occasional instances where what amounts to a “priesthood” of this quasi-divinity - the Supreme Court - assumes the prerogative to **interpret** the Constitution, much in the same way that ancient Egyptian priests sought to interpret the will of Amon-Ra or that medieval scholars sought to interpret Christian scripture through canon law.

What the four principles discussed above illustrate is that it is no easy matter to determine or apply ethics within the American military culture. Ethics is an elusive concept whose very vagueness leaves the individual uncertain as to just what his actual responsibility is, to say nothing of how he should apply it.

PSYOP: “Un-American but Necessary”

What does all this have to do with PSYOP?

To be effective in his art, the PSYOP operative **must** venture beyond the Lockean universe, and he **cannot** allow his assessments of competitive universes to be distorted by Lockean faith-based values.

If he condemns communism *a priori* simply because it **is** communism, he has safeguarded his orthodoxy within the American military culture - but he has also lost the ear of non-Americans who do not look at communism through Locke-tinted glasses. To be credible, a PSYOP challenge to communism must evaluate it rationally and then propose a rational alternative to it which is conceptually and demonstrably superior. To respond only with an indignant denunciation else is merely to indulge oneself in the equivalent of emotional name-calling, which may be satisfying and reassuring but does **not** adjust matters towards the solution of an international/intercultural problem.

By its very nature, then, PSYOP sticks in the craw of American political culture - and of its conventional military establishment. A four-star general once remarked to me that PSYOP is “un-American but necessary”, and by that comment he indeed summed up the situation. To reach through the body into the mind with the intent of manipulating it is somehow held to be an “unclean” science, a kind of Black Art practiced by Nazis and North Koreans - but **not** by straightforward, decent Americans. We do it not because we want to, but because the “other side” does it and we have to counter them. [From there it is but a short step to add “... by their own techniques”.]

Once you allow a dog to consider it acceptable to attack human beings (for instance burglars), a threshold has been crossed which changes forever the human-dog relationship. The human can never see his dog in quite the same way once it has tasted human flesh. [Presumably the dog also sees humans, including his master, somewhat differently.] Since PSYOP is conspicuously outside the norms of the American military culture, its practitioners also carry something of a taint.

It would be even more of a taint if they were perceived [or allowed] to develop their arcane art to its potential limits, but they are not. Like a sentry-dog on a leash, PSYOP is not allowed to “run wild”, adjusting values, thoughts, and behavior according to unorthodox and mysterious criteria. It is placed firmly and decisively in support of “normal/traditional” military operations as a “combat support” element.

In practice this severely limits the effectiveness of military PSYOP as a means to change the ideological and ethical opinions of the enemy; it renders PSYOP useful only as a means to communicate surrender messages to opposing forces on the battlefield, or to issue controlling instructions to civilians in the area. “Orthodox” themes reaching beyond such simple, direct messages are quickly perceived as sloganistic, hence discounted by all but the most primitive audiences. The technique of interviewing captured or surrendering recipients - at the implicit end of a gun-barrel - is unlikely to elicit sincere comments as to the effectiveness of such propaganda; self-interest dictates an answer contrived to be pleasing to the interrogator.

It may well be that there is no practical alternative to this state of affairs. To free PSYOP from a combat-support role would be to introduce a manipulative element into the conflict that American conventional commanders could not control, nor be certain of in terms of its impact on their plans.

Such a situation emerged in the early years of the Vietnam conflict, when the Special Forces teams in country were still administering the Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG) program under the aegis of the CIA. When control of the CIDG program was turned over to the Defense Department via Operation Switchback in 1962-3, the Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) was quick to establish the Special Forces’ new role as a support to conventional military strategy.⁵

At the other extreme it is interesting to speculate on the climate that might emerge were PSYOP placed in a position **above** combat operations, where conventional commanders’ tactical decisions would have to conform to presumably-broader PSYOP strategies. Military leaders have traditionally bridled at having to dance to any tune other than victory through physical destruction of the enemy. In Vietnam “the politicians in Saigon” were resented almost as much as the Viet Cong for the barriers they always seemed to be throwing up between American commanders and their most direct course to victory. And there were starkly real grounds for such resentment, as vague and often-insincere political/ideological ideals seemed a shabby price to pay for American wounded and dead.

⁵ Stanton, Shelby L., *Green Berets at War*. Novato: Presidio Press, 1985, pages #51-63.

Yet if war, once set in motion, is allowed to proceed exclusively through the language of brute force against brute force, it can end only with the effective destruction of one of the participants [and the probability of serious damage to the “victor”, assuming rough parity between the antagonists].

PSYOP is a means not only for communication with target audiences other than via bullets, but also for a kind of communication that they will **understand** and **be at least somewhat more receptive to** because it is couched in an idiom and articulated according to a logic meaningful to them.

In such a scenario PSYOP would actually constitute the driving force of the conflict - a very real “war of ideas” - with physical weaponry being used as a “threatening presence” to force each side to listen to the other. To the reader who shrugs this off as preposterous, I would pose this question: How exactly were we defeated in Vietnam if not by the triumph of **perceptions favorable to the enemy** in American minds? [For this I do not necessarily credit enemy PSYOP, as I think it more accurate to say that we “did it to ourselves”. But the principle of the power of PSYOP to determine the outcome of conflicts is nonetheless illustrated.]

The proper place for PSYOP in American military culture has yet to be resolved. It is still a shotgun marriage with which neither partner is particularly happy or comfortable - and divorce seems out of the question. A practical and ethical relationship will be discussed in Chapter 4, but first a closer look at the ethical assumptions of competitive foreign cultures is necessary.

Chapter 3: Ethics and PSYOP in Contrasting Cultures

[Our effectiveness in propaganda] must be understood in the internal manner, that the truth which was contained in that agitation entered the minds of all. And one must not deviate from that truth.

- V.I. Lenin⁶

In Chapter 1 it was demonstrated that Western civilization's efforts to apprehend "truth" - and to answer the integral question of whether "truth" and "the good" are inseparable - have been arduous and frustrating. The United States emerged at a moment in history - the Enlightenment - when reason reigned supreme, and so the values of the Enlightenment's most optimistic and practical political philosopher, John Locke, were incorporated into our Constitution.

Lockean values have served us reasonably well these past two centuries, but what of those countries who have worshipped strange gods? What do they know of "the good", and in what respect - if any - do they hold "the truth"?

Hegel, Hitler, and the Organic State

The social contract theorists - Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau - viewed the state as a **man-made** construct, justifiable only as it might serve the interests of its citizens. The first of the two great challenges to this preeminence of the individual came from Georg W.F. Hegel, who insisted that the state is **prior to man**.

Hegel conceived of the Universe as the manifestation of God's mind seeking complete self-realization through a process called *dialectic idealism*. As applied to our particular planet, it is the concept that the history of the world consists of part of the spirit of God, manifesting itself through the collective spirits of mankind, moving onwards through logic (the *dialectic*) towards completion. An existing idea (*thesis*) is criticized and partially refuted by its opposite (*antithesis*), resulting in a more perfect product (*synthesis*).

Hegel felt the **organic state** to be the manifestation or reflection of the dialectic of God's mind in the world. Accordingly it might well proceed in ways and towards goals which are not necessarily the sum total of the ways and goals of the individual human minds within it.

The task of national leaders, according to Hegel, is thus to apprehend the "spirit of the state" (*Volksgeist*) and to make their decisions in support of its furtherment rather than for the citizens who may chance to populate it at a given point in time.

The Enlightenment values of individualism and rights against a government were considered by Hegel to **limit** freedom: Since they reduce the scope and power of the whole, they serve to limit possibility.

Hegel plus a heavy dose of 19th-century Wagnerian Romanticism pointed the way to the state-cults of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy. Germany in particular sought to displace the sense of life-consciousness from the individual human being to the state. Most Germans were able to achieve this only in a mundane sense - in a kind of ecstatic selflessness created

⁶ Lenin, V.I., *Poln. Sobr. Soch.* (Collected Works), Volume 40, page #252, quoted in *Handbook for Propagandists and Agitators of the Army and Navy: USSR*. Moscow: Ministry of Defense Publishing House, 1968.

and sustained by propaganda. But the “monk-knights” of the pre-war SS could disdain, even willingly embrace the death of the individual human body according to the doctrine that disciplined personal consciousness could be transferred to a larger life-form - that of the Hegelian state - and that individual sacrifice towards the strengthening of that life-form would actually contribute towards one’s greater immortality.

In a very real way incomprehensible to the mundane mind, therefore, all of the individual-death references in the SS - such as the *Totenkopf* insignia and ritual pledges of “faithfulness unto death” - were in fact arrogant affirmations of immortality. To Dr. Rauschning Adolf Hitler remarked:

To the Christian doctrine of the infinite significance of the individual human soul and of personal responsibility, I oppose with icy clarity the saving doctrine of the nothingness and insignificance of the individual human being, and of his continued existence in the visible immortality of the nation. The dogma of vicarious suffering and death through a divine savior gives place to that of the representative living and acting of the new Leader-legislator, which liberates the mass of the faithful from the burden of free will.⁷

Both National Socialism and Fascism are now episodes in history, but the principle which underlay their phenomenal power and impact - the organic state as the object of preservation and aggrandizement at the expense [and if necessary the sacrifice] of its individual citizens - remains very much a force in the contemporary international environment.

Perceptions of Truth in Organic-State Cultures

In the United States, social and political truth is arrived at via the methods specified in the Constitution, all of which are based on some combination of direct or representative voting. Our national perception of truth is thus **democratic** - an approach which John Locke would consider eminently reasonable, but one which would affront Plato and Hegel. To them, truth was/is an **absolute principle** - not something to be determined by whim, much less by the masses.

Plato held that truth could be attained through the dialectic of human philosophical enquiry; Hegel insisted that only God could consciously employ such a dialectic, and that the most humanity could hope for was to sense its reflection through the dynamics of the state.

What is it we see when we look at the many “democracies” and “republics” of the world and perceive them to be behaving not as vehicles for the benefit of their individual citizens, but rather as cultural amœbæ of ethnocentric, even xenophobic passion which contemptuously sweep aside appeals to reason? A few are relics of ancient theocratic systems, but most have shed this worn-out skin only to regenerate it under the guise of the *Volksgeist*.

One may indeed communicate with the citizens of such cultures as individuals, but to influence the culture as a whole one may not appeal just to the citizens’ individual desires. Rather one must speak to the interest of whatever it is that they perceive their “national spirit” to be. To seek to “Westernize” it - to alter citizens’ conception of the state into a social-contract model - is to attack not a set of rational opinions, but an **article of faith** which is perceived to be the very fountain of truth and ethics.

⁷ Hitler, Adolf, in Rauschning, Hermann, *The Voice of Destruction*. New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1940.

Marx, Lenin, and Dialectic Materialism

The second great challenge to social-contract individualism came, of course, from Karl Marx. Marx was strongly influenced by Hegel, but believed that Hegel had made a fundamental mistake in using nations as the basis for his dialectic and in relating it to a divine manifestation or purpose. Marx considered the dialectic to be a function of economic struggle between social classes, and he denied the existence of any supernatural intelligence, calling all religion “the opiate of the masses”.

Marxism, sometimes called *dialectic materialism* to distinguish it from the *dialectic idealism* of Hegel, is a theory of socialism that identifies class struggle as the fundamental force in history. Increasing concentration of industrial control in the capitalist class and the consequent intensification of class antagonisms and of misery among the workers will lead to a revolutionary seizure of power by the proletariat and the subsequent establishment of a classless, utopian society.

Marx, like Hegel, premised his ideas on a **necessary, inevitable process of history**. Thus communism would eventually come to pass, no matter what capitalism tries to do to stop it. The other side of this coin is that there is nothing Marxists can do to speed it up; their society must first evolve to the “last stages” of decadent capitalism.

This didn’t suit V.I. Lenin, who wanted to accelerate evolution a little. His prescription for doing so was the so-called *dictatorship of the proletariat*, under which a communist elite would force-march the masses towards their eventual paradise. The state apparatus would then “wither away”.

As in the case of Hegelian state-preeminence, communism cannot simply be challenged or refuted by appeals to individual self-interest. To a serious Marxist, history is again moved by far greater forces than the wills of individuals who may chance to inhabit it at a given point in time. Marxist states view the advanced capitalist cultures as social bombs collectively approaching critical mass; their desire is accordingly to avoid being caught up in the desperate external adventurism, including apocalyptic warfare, which they expect deteriorating capitalist nations to employ in an effort to stave off their inevitable communist revolutions.

Communism [to use the label by which modern Marxism is generally known] incorporates two attitudes towards the truth. The “greater truth” - the materialist dialectic - is considered to be absolute, and adherence to it is once again supra-rational: an **article of faith**.

Why an article of faith? Because the people, if given the sole power to determine the government, might revolt against it again - particularly if it is not [as per Locke] designed to facilitate their pursuit of personal interests. The option of further revolution must therefore be removed - by representing the Communist Party as the “priesthood” of a “god” higher than that of the people themselves. In service to this “god”, lesser ethical issues are unimportant - and indeed heretical if they confuse or inhibit the greater truth. As one PSYOP theorist elaborates:

Soviet and Chinese ideological and psychological activities often sound like massive polemics of questionable sincerity. However, ideology has real meaning for communists. Marxist-Leninist ideology is a living heritage. It assures communists they are right in trying to extend their sway over the rest of the world, and it tells them they will win. The latter conviction also endows their efforts with a patience that contrasts with the United States’ impatience for results.

The theoretical certainty of their ideological goals allows communists to be flexible about means. They can play on the contradictions that bother others without regard to their own

complete consistency. An ideological approach also highlights concern for “ideas”. This is obviously a frame of mind adapted to identifying and exploiting the psychological aspects of international developments.⁸

Capitalist-Communist Communications: Ethical Impasse?

When capitalists - or those who are in the service of capitalist systems, such as Western military professionals - seek to “reason” with communists, they fail to realize that they are regarded as ignorant, corrupt, or deluded **by their very inability to see and accept the “great truth”**. A sincere communist does not reason with such an opponent any more than with a child or idiot; he seeks rather to placate him, to deceive him, or to otherwise control him.

To communicate with a communist theoretician is thus a difficult task. One must first establish basic rapport by displaying an understanding of, if not an agreement with Marxist theory. Immediate goals of mutual interest may then be pursued jointly insofar as they do not intrude into ideological realms where the communist’s position must necessarily rigidify.

A curious and paradoxical picture emerges from this examination of communist vs. capitalist ethics. In the West we are accustomed to regard the United States as a **religious** society, and to condemn communism for its “godlessness”. On the other side of the fence, Soviet theorists disdain Western adherence to religion and take pride in the U.S.S.R.’s state **atheism**. But is this picture borne out in practice?

Locke advocated a national structure in which supreme wisdom lay in the will of the citizenry and in which organized religion played only a symbolic and ceremonial role: in his words a “reasonable Christianity”. Our governments have since approached our national and international problems under the presumption that the free will of the human beings directly involved will order the course of events. This is vintage Enlightenment-thinking, and to date the United States has seen no reason to subordinate it to any “higher authority”. In terms of its political decisionmaking processes, the United States behaves **atheistically**.

On the other hand, Soviet leaders do not consider themselves able to control or influence the passage of events as free agents. They may make minor adjustments here and there, but the basic course of the future is above and beyond their control, locked in place according to Marx’ principles of historic determinism. Like the ancient Mesopotamians, they perceive themselves as the incidental tools of a “god” - whose name just happens to be Dialectic Materialism instead of Baal or Marduk. In terms of its political decision-making processes, the Soviet Union behaves **theistically**.

Where ethics are concerned, therefore, the United States holds itself fully responsible for its own, while the Soviet Union considers any and all “minor” ethical abuses automatically justified if in service of its “god”. This is a **very** crucial point - and it explains why the United States goes through such persistent agonies of self-criticism while the Soviet Union shrugs off far more horrendous excesses.

It is **precisely** because of this perceived difference in ethical responsibility that the Soviet Union can engage abundantly and unabashedly in White/Grey/B lack propaganda, while the United States can scarcely tolerate the existence of its PSYOP machinery, much less allow it a preeminent role in either peacetime or wartime foreign policy.

⁸ Barrett, Raymond J., “PSYOP: What is it?” in Pollock, Daniel C. et al. (Eds.), *The Art and Science of Psychological Operations: Case Studies of Military Application* (Volume One). Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, 1976, pages #41-42.

Chapter 4: Ethics in American Military PSYOP

The United States has no propaganda to peddle, since we are neither advocates nor defenders of any dogma so fragile or doctrine so frightened as to require it.

- President Lyndon B. Johnson, at the swearing-in of USIA Director Leonard Marks, September 1965⁹

Given the precarious existence of a PSYOP capability in the United States military establishment, what can we reasonably expect from it? Is it realistically relegated to purely battlefield-support functions, if only because the informational environments it is likely to encounter will be significantly predetermined through the informational and opinion-influencing efforts of non-military institutions and organizations? And, in whatever parameters military PSYOP may be allowed to exist, what sort of ethical standards should it observe - and who should set them?

During World War II OSS General William Donovan advocated an approach to psychological warfare that would place it at the forefront of strategic thinking, rather than as a mere tactical aid:

Psychological warfare is the coordination and use of all means, including moral and physical, by which the end is attained - other than those of recognized military operations, but including the psychological exploitation of the result of those recognized military actions - which tend to destroy the will of the enemy to achieve victory and to damage his political or economic capacity to do so; which tend to deprive the enemy of the support, assistance, or sympathy of his allies or associates or of neutrals, or to prevent his acquisition of such support, assistance, or sympathy; or which tend to create, maintain, or increase the will to victory of our own people and allies and to acquire, maintain, or to increase the support, assistance, and sympathy of neutrals.¹⁰

Certainly this is a more explicit agenda than that offered by the U.S. Army's present definition [see Chapter 2], which restricts psychological warfare to enemy audiences and expands PSYOP only to the "creation [in neutral or friendly foreign countries] of emotions, attitudes, or behavior to support the achievement of national objectives".

Indeed the very term "psychological operations" arose, as one general officer put it in a 1947 letter, from "a great need for a synonym which could be used in peacetime that would not shock the sensibilities of a citizen of democracy".¹¹ Ironically such a cosmetic change does not seem to have calmed the Soviet Union, which in 1980 complained about U.S. Army PSYOP organizations at Fort Bragg, North Carolina as engaging in:

⁹ Johnson, Lyndon B., quoted in Wechsler, Irving R., "USIA's Mission and Responsibilities" in Pollock, Daniel C. et al. (Eds.), *The Art and Science of Psychological Operations: Case Studies of Military Application* (Volume One). Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, 1976, page #108.

¹⁰ Roosevelt, Kermit (Ed.), *War Report of the OSS* (Volume I). New York: Walker and Company, 1976, page #99.

¹¹ Letter, Major General W.C. Wyman to Major General Lauris Norstad, July 22, 1947, quoted in Paddock, Alfred H. Jr., *U.S. Army Special Warfare: Its Origins*. Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 1982, page #48.

... unpardonable methods of ideological sabotage including not just flagrant lies, slander, and disinformation, but also political blackmail, provocation, and terror.¹²

To anyone familiar with the painstaking propriety of Army PSYOP, such an indignant condemnation is more than a bit comic - and would be more so if such diatribes were not destined for the eyes and ears of third-party cultures who have comparatively little information on which to make an objective decision.

If we may not aspire to such a Mephistophelian countenance - possibly to the regret of some enthusiastic mindwarriors - to what should we aspire?

Military PSYOP: A Late Arrival on a Large Field of Battle

Conceptually the operational boundaries are largely set for military PSYOP long before its units are called into action - by the many departments and agencies of the U.S. Government which have a major or minor role in representing, promoting, and polishing the American image abroad.

Chief among these is the United States Information Agency (USIA), whose history has been marked by a number of uneasy readjustments between “objective information” and “propaganda” orientations. After its thankless ordeal as PSYOP czar in Vietnam through the vehicle of the Joint United States Public Affairs Office (JUSPAO), USIA has appeared to opt decisively for the “objective information” alternative. In this it is joined by the Agency for International Development, the Departments of State and Commerce, and other governmental institutions whose contact with foreign cultures is open and direct.

While military PSYOP is not commanded or controlled by such civilian institutions, it is obviously expected that its involvement not upset whatever applecarts they have previously managed to balance.

More controversial is the PSYOP role, such as it may be, of the U.S. intelligence community, most conspicuously that of the Central Intelligence Agency. While it is popular to infer that the very secrecy under which the CIA operates is sufficient evidence that it has something improper to hide, such generalizations are simply not justified on closer examination. Few government agencies operate with more painstaking attention to ethical criteria as the CIA, since the situations in which it involves itself are fraught with serious and embarrassing consequences for the United States should it overstep its license. The CIA has indeed had its share of difficulties over the years, but its inherent sense of responsibility to the nation has never been questioned by objective onlookers.

Military PSYOP operatives, in any case, cannot routinely expect to have information as to what PSYOP the intelligence community may be orchestrating or why. They must accordingly plan and execute military PSYOP with the expectation that, if it conflicts in any way with intelligence-community PSYOP, they will be alerted as appropriate.

The military PSYOP operative may thus expect that, by the time he and his unit are accorded an active role in a given conflict, the number of avenues ideally open to an “adjuster of opinions” will already have shrunk to a drastic minimum - by virtue of the evident failure of unarmed diplomatic and public-informational organizations and operatives to solve the problem. “Once the bullets start to fly,” commented one USIA official during the Vietnam era, “we have failed, and it is time to hand over the situation to

¹² Belashchenko, T., “‘Black Propaganda’ from Fort Bragg” in *Sovetskiy Voin*. Moscow, June 1980, pages #46-47.

the military.”¹³

The inescapable consequence of this staging of involvement is that “grand strategies” by military PSYOP planners are just not going to be practical. Theirs is “emergency-room PSYOP” in which they will be hard-pressed to accomplish certain immediate and basic objectives under highly-unstable and unpredictable conditions. In this sense, military PSYOP is not unlike the armed forces in general, who may expect to be called into a situation only when it has deteriorated or polarized so extraordinarily that only the threat or application of force may serve to stabilize it.

Further constricting the military PSYOP universe is the probability that the operative cannot realistically expect to have a major, much less a decisive voice in operational military planning upon deployment. Again the logic involved is simply that “the bullets have started to fly”, and physical combat demands will take firm priority over psychological issues.

Ethical Realities in “Limited PSYOP”

The constricted environment which the military PSYOP operative must expect to confront places him in a most demanding position. Within his extremely limited range of choices, he must make those which, per the manual, “support the achievement of national objectives”. At the same time he has the additional burden of ensuring that the choices he makes do not, in a greater and more enduring sense, compromise the principles on which the United States was founded - and by whose “self-evident truth” we presume to pass judgment on the conduct of certain other nations from time to time.

Such exhortations are often the stuff of patriotic speeches, but this one must be received seriously and thoughtfully, since the very **essence** of the United States - not just our international image, but our self-respect - is ultimately at stake. It is not the triumph of armed force that establishes the justice of a given conflict, but rather the **political and ethical intent** underlying that exchange, according to principles more profound than momentary national aggrandizement.

Within the armed forces it falls to the PSYOP professional to sensitize himself and his fellow servicemen to that intent, and to conscientiously measure all applications of his craft against it.

During the Vietnam War the 4th PSYOP Group - the in-country PSYOP element of the U.S. Army - functioned both as a direct-executor of JUSPAO/MACV-mandated PSYOP programs and as a source of PSYOP expertise and support to combat units in the field. The latter mission was addressed by deploying field teams of PSYOP officers and men to units down through the brigade level. Such teams planned and executed tactical PSYOP missions for their host units, but were also required to ensure that all host-generated PSYOP conformed to JUSPAO standards. Although extraordinary tact was often required of the junior-grade PSYOP soldiers in the execution of this “ethical censorship”, they generally performed this duty conscientiously. In the words of a U.S. Army Concept Team report:

The deployment of PSYOP battalions in each CTZ provided maximum support and responsiveness to force commanders in meeting PSYOP requirements. Moreover it allowed commanders an opportunity to evaluate military operations in terms of their psychological impact. There have been occasional conflicts in the operational control system. These conflicts occurred when command decisions were made to produce PSYOP material which was

¹³ Sparks, Kenneth R., “Selling Uncle Sam in the Seventies”. in Pollock, *op. cit.*, page #115.

considered by PSYOP unit commanders to be either counterproductive or in violation of U.S. policy guidance ... These conflicts were minor, and the advantages of the existing operational control system outweighed the disadvantages.¹⁴

From my own experience, most such “occasional conflicts” came about because of combat commanders’ consideration of propaganda of a sort prohibited by JUSPAO on cultural grounds - for example, themes that might offend Vietnamese sexual, religious, or ethnic conventions. Departure from truth was not regarded as a serious option.

If this were still the case today, there would be no reason for this paper. It is precisely because of evident interest in departure from this standard - particularly as concerns increased use of black propaganda - that I feel it timely. Compare the current policy statement concerning truth (quoted on page #9) with the comparable passage from the previous (1974) edition of the Army’s PSYOP manual:

While the audience may not believe the truth, it does not follow that falsehood should be employed. Truth can be underplayed or expanded without departing from a substantial basis of fact.

United States military PSYOP are committed to a program of truth. Distortion of facts and falsehood, while sometimes having short-term advantage, damage the overall campaign and destroy credibility.¹⁵

The Ethics of Machiavelli: Towards a new “Civic Humanism”

Especially pertinent to the study of ethics under conditions of political crisis and stress are the observations and recommendations of Niccolo Machiavelli, who sought to prescribe wise conduct (*virtu*) for Italian princes faced with unavoidable problems (*necessita*) brought about by factors beyond their control (*fortuna*).

Contrary to his popular image, Machiavelli was constantly and intensely concerned with the establishment of the **ethical** state, and his manipulative techniques were justified in his eyes by the “best political results under the circumstances” that he expected as the eventual outcome. **Precisely** quoted, the famous passage from Chapter # 18 of *The Prince* reads:

In the actions of all men, and especially of princes who are not subject to a court of appeal, we must always look to the end.¹⁶

In the case of American military PSYOP, the end is not merely the minimization of violence and opposition, but this in service of a more enduring audience perception that the ethics ultimately represented by the United States are more significant to that audience than are those of state-centered or class-centered systems. There are no rote actions or sloganistic statements which will suffice to convey this understanding; it must be conveyed in the very nature of the communication - an image, as it were, of civilization at its highest and most benign: what the ancients called *civic humanism*.

An infatuation with propaganda for its own sake - a strategy of bludgeoning audiences with the “means” under the assumption that the ends can thus be twisted into

¹⁴ U.S. Department of the Army, *Army Concept Team in Vietnam*.

¹⁵ FM 33-5: *Psychological Operations Techniques and Procedures*. Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, January 1974, page #43.

¹⁶ Machiavelli, Niccolo, quoted in Combs, James E. and Nimmo, Dan, *A Primer of Politics*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1984, page #7.

whatever image of convenience the propagandist wishes - is characteristic of Marxist systems, whose **actual** ideological ends are **fixed by doctrine** and thus not a subject for debate. In this very rigidity lies the critical weakness of contemporary communism.

Unfortunately, shaken by the “means *Blitzkrieg*” of the Soviet Union and its allies, United States propagandists are too often tempted to respond in kind - via unrealistic promises and oversimplified cant. To do so - to lower ourselves to the same insincere level as the communists - would be to prostitute what we have responsibly and carefully determined to be the truth. In such case our propagandists would well deserve the contempt voiced by Jacques Ellul:

The propagandist cannot believe in the ideology he must use in his propaganda. He is merely a man at the service of a party, a state, or some other organization, and his task is to ensure the efficiency of that organization ...

If the propagandist has any political conviction, he must put it aside in order to be able to use some popular mass ideology. He cannot even share that ideology, for he must use it as an object and manipulate it without the respect he would have for it if he believed in it.

He quickly acquires contempt for these popular images and beliefs; in his work he must change the propaganda themes so frequently that he cannot possibly attach himself to any formal, sentimental, political, or other aspect of the ideology.¹⁷

This is the charge of Glaucon in Plato’s *Republic*: that there **are no** “ethics” save as excuses for the desires of predators, and that propagandists are thus intellectual prostitutes who struggle to clothe such excuses in some rags of legitimacy. So indeed it is for Marxist propagandists.

But, as Socrates countered, there **is** a basis for political power other than wanton domination: the striving of the human soul towards dignity and decency for their own sake.

Unlike propagandists in the service of a flimsy ideology which by its very nature **cannot** survive rational analysis, **we** need not sell our souls. President Johnson’s remarks, quoted at the beginning of this chapter, are very much to the point. It is precisely the **flexible future** offered by the Lockean model - the ends suited to the needs and desires of the individual in each culture, whatever the traditional nuances of that culture - that the United States symbolizes at its greatest.

It is not an ideal towards which we have to struggle; it is inherent in the very **concept** of our national design. It will sell **itself** - as long as we explain it carefully, acknowledge it sincerely, and do not allow its essential worth to be compromised by incidents of momentary *fortuna*.

It would be easy now, amid the turmoil of ideological warfare, to dismiss the liberalism of earlier days as idealistic nonsense, and to repudiate the democratic opposition to state-controlled propaganda, along with President Wilson’s dream of “open covenants, openly arrived at”. But that would be throwing the baby out with the bath water.

During the war we discovered that truth is the best propaganda. Those who lose their integrity destroy themselves, if for no other reason than because they come to believe their own inventions; and that, as the Nazis found out too late, is the beginning of the end.

-Richard H.S. Crossman, M.P.

Director of Political Warfare

Political Intelligence Department,

Foreign Office, U.K.

Anglo-American Psychological Warfare Section, SHAEF

¹⁷ Ellul, Jacques, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men’s Attitudes*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965, page #196.

Appendix: Major Influences in Pre-Enlightenment Ethics

Origins of the Western Ethical Tradition

Until the Enlightenment of the late-17th and 18th centuries, ethical philosophy was completely metaphysical; standards of good and evil were accepted as being prescribed by one or more divinities. It was humanity's task not to determine ethics, but rather to understand and obey divinely-ordained ethics.

The ancient Egyptians perceived the Universe as actively controlled by conscious, natural principles or "gods" (*neteru* in hieroglyphic). To the Egyptians, all of "nature" (derived from *neteru*) was alive and the direct consequence of the wills of the *neteru*. Nature was intelligible not just through inanimate, automatic, general regularities which could be discovered via observation, but also through **connections and associations between things and events perceived in the human mind**. There was no distinction between "reality" and "appearance"; anything capable of exerting an effect upon the mind thereby existed. Justice and virtue were sought in manifestations of beauty, symmetry, and harmony, and were personified by the goddess *Ma'at*.

In contrast to the Egyptian view of humanity as being a harmonious component of nature - symbolized by the pharaoh's position as half-divine deputy of the *neteru* - ancient Mesopotamian tradition posited humanity as something estranged from the gods.

Virtue in Mesopotamia was thus understood as obedience to the willful desires of the god(s), not harmony with their natural principles. Mesopotamian kings sought the "right ruling" of their communities in accordance with the Akkadian principle of *Shulmu* (later the Hebrew *Shalom*), a term meaning not just "peace" but the community well-being that engenders peace.

In the Hebraic system, God is not intelligible through reason or logic, but rather through prophecy and the history of events, whether or not the events' outcomes seem situationally appropriate (*theodicy*).

The Hebraic presumption of a "covenant" between mankind and a divinity reflected the notion that mankind is given a "mission" and/or a "destiny", and that virtue lies in the fulfillment of that mission/destiny - whether or not it is aesthetically palatable or even understandable. Herein lie the roots of a certain kind of "mission-justified" thinking that is familiar to students of military culture.

The ethics of Plato reflect his commitment to *teleology*, the doctrine that purpose and design are apparent in nature, and that natural phenomena move inexorably towards certain goals of ultimate self-realization. [The opposite of teleology is *mechanism*, which describes phenomena in terms of **prior causes** rather than presumed destination or fulfillment. Modern science is thus mechanistic.]

In his *Dialogues* Plato, through the character of Socrates, endorsed the Egyptian and Pythagorean model of human virtue as a particularization of Universal principles (an application of his famous "Theory of the Forms"). Such Forms or principles could be apprehended through rigorous exercise of the higher faculties of reason (*dianoia*), leading to an intuitional or *nætic* apprehension of the good - and a simultaneous veneration of it for its own sake. This process Plato referred to as the *dialectic*, meaning self-teaching through the examination and refutation of logically-or factually-imperfect concepts.

In Plato's *Republic* Socrates is unable to directly refute Glaucon's charge that justice is merely a rationalization for the prevailing of the interests of the stronger. [As discussed in Chapter #4, this Glauconian approach is crucial to a consideration of PSYOP ethics.]

Socrates can only suggest, through the analogy of a perfectly-harmonious “republic”, that it is more natural for a man to be just if his *psyche* is healthy and each part is doing its proper work. The virtuous state is held up as “the *psyche* writ large”.

Aristotle, the most famous of the early mechanists, laid the groundwork for situational ethics by denying that virtue, truth, beauty, and the other Pythagorean/Platonic Forms existed in an absolute sense. Such values, as they applied to humanity, were rather to be sought in moderation between unacceptable extremes in specific situations: Aristotle’s doctrine of the “golden mean”.

The Separation of Ethics and Politics

Until this point in human history, ethics and politics were inseparable; the individual’s good and the community’s good had to be pursued together; there was no such thing as “personal ethics within an unethical state”, nor “an ethical state comprised of unethical citizens”. The sins of Œdipus necessitated not only his blinding but his exile, and Socrates’ challenge to the harmony of Athens was considered sufficient grounds to condemn him to death. Socrates himself acknowledged this principle, accepting his execution as a “cure” of his function as a kind of social “illness” - albeit one whose impact would ultimately strengthen the Athenian political culture.

In the Hellenistic era - the period following the conquests of Alexander the Great - ancient mankind lost its innocence. Elaborate philosophical systems dependent upon specific cultural deities were discredited when other cultures with different philosophies and different gods were seen to be doing just as well - and perhaps better.

Materialism was the order of the day, and the power of ethics to influence society was denied by the *Cynics* and *Skeptics*. If virtue had any place in human affairs, it was in one’s personal conduct. *Epicureanism* held that virtue could be found in the happiness of the soul, and that such happiness was to be pursued by disassociating oneself from the corruption of society. *Stoicism* also despaired of social ethics, but insisted that personal ethics were to be pursued by one’s labors within the social fabric rather than apart from it.

The importance of Stoicism to the subsequent path of Western civilization - and the United States - and PSYOP - can scarcely be overemphasized. Stoics, like Aristotle, sought validation of knowledge in sense-experience rather than through abstract logic or intuition. A wise man, said the Stoics, can distinguish reliable impressions (*kataleptika phantasia* = “grasping impressions”) from ethereal ones. Humanity is integral with nature; virtue is to be found in reason-based endurance of the natural flux.

Hence if evil comes to the good man, it is only temporary and not really evil, since in the greater sense it is natural. The Stoic thus accepts the fortunes and misfortunes of life calmly, seeking to avoid passionate loss of objectivity. The Stoics’ ideal was a gradually-evolving “world society” (*cosmopolis*) transcending geographic and cultural divisions.

Stoicism was the primary ethical force in the Roman Republic and Empire, and it is not surprising to find its core principles adopted by early Christianity. Augustine’s doctrine of the “two cities” reflected the Stoic notion of a virtuous soul co-existing with a flawed social system. By the medieval era, the “two cities” had been refined into Thomas Aquinas’ “hierarchy of laws”, with social and political “human law” placed firmly beneath [church-] revealed “divine law” and Stoic-derived “natural law”.

The Reformation: Rational Ethics Denied

While Machiavelli advocated the tacit manipulation of society for deliberate [and ultimately virtuous] ends, early Protestant theorists such as Martin Luther and John Calvin regarded ethics as being beyond the rational reach of mankind.

The basis for ethical behavior, they said, is that a righteous man will automatically incline towards such behavior, not because it is logically or empirically justified in itself. Salvation (= attainment of righteousness) is attainable only through the complete surrender of oneself to Christ.

This constituted a rejection of medieval scholasticism, and of the “logical ethics” arguments of Aristotle (whom Luther called “this damned, conceited, rascally heathen”) and Aquinas.

The impact of the Protestant Reformation was to remove the rational basis and responsibility for either personal or social ethics, replacing these with the notion of ethics as a suprarational article of religious faith - to be selectively invoked by spokesmen for that religion. Increasing dissatisfaction with such arbitrary proclamations, together with the Catholic/Protestant feuds that culminated in the terrible Thirty Years’ War, paved the way for the “revolution of reason” that characterized the Enlightenment.

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