

Obedience, Morality, and Militarism In Film

In his writings on humanity, Jacob Bronowski, a British biologist, noted that man is a singular creature. He has a set of gifts which make him unique among the animals so that, unlike them, he is not just a figure in the landscape, he is the shape of the landscape (Bronowski, 1973). But these gifts, be they plenty and beneficial, present humanity with consequences on both sides of the moral spectrum. Morality within human nature is what comprises the essence of our existence: conflict, emotion, and personal growth. Human morality is tested constantly, whether it is maintaining sanity while stuck in traffic, or far more sinister things such as the fog of war. It is through film that this morality is portrayed. In Hollywood, especially in movies regarding the military and the government, there is a masterful depiction of the ethics and the moral choices within human nature under harrowing circumstances. Such films include *The Great Dictator*, *Full Metal Jacket*, *Apocalypse Now*, *Dr. Strangelove*, and *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Above all else, it is one's obedience (or lack thereof) that most greatly influences how the morality plays out in the role of the individual.

Human nature has its roots in the Hobbesian concept of the State of Nature, that is, a “war of every man against every man [where] the notions of right and wrong, justice and injustice, have no place” (Hobbes 1651/1999: 111). The Hobbesian viewpoint is located on the far end of the spectrum of negative freedom where the individual has access to true freedom in a state of anarchy. Such a state is depicted in Stanley Kubrick's 1968 film *2001: A Space Odyssey*. The first twenty five minutes of the film depict the ‘dawn of man,’ showing our ape cousins of whom we share a common ancestor with. Kubrick's ‘dawn of man’ is the epitome of the State of Nature. There is no organized structure to the ape society save for competing ‘clans’ of ape families. It is in this competition within the State of Nature that Hobbes lists as the first of three

principle causes of quarrel. The other two causes are insecurity and glory (Hobbes 1651/1999: 109). Regarding these three causes, Hobbes says that “The first use violence, to make themselves masters of other men's persons...the second, to defend them; the third, for [reputation]” (Hobbes 1651/1999: 109). These causes are demonstrated in the clashes between the rival clans of apes. The first of the two clashes shown in the film are with regard to a dispute over who gets to use the one water hole. In this first dispute the clans are on equal ground: both have only the physical force of their bodies as weapons. Eventually one clan wins over the other and life goes on in the State of Nature. In this natural state there is little use for obedience because it is every man or himself.

The landscape of Kubrick's Hobbesian scenario changes, however, when one of the apes attains the knowledge of using the bone of a deceased animal as a tool for hunting. In gaining an increased capability, the now more powerful ape clan has expanded its freedom, and when the two ape clans clash for the second time, the battlefield is skewed in favor of those with weapons. The stronger clan emerges victorious in the realm of negative freedom.

But there is another aspect of the State of Nature that must be covered in Kubrick's 'dawn of man,' and that is the issue of the food chain. Prior to the apes gaining the knowledge of primitive weaponry, there is a scene in which a leopard initiates an attack on an unsuspecting ape, killing it. This is the very essence of the natural condition in that there is a parasitic relationship between hunter and prey. The apes, despite having the ability to use tools, are still susceptible to the might of the more powerful and agile enemy. The order of the food chain in the 'dawn of man' is a precursor for the events that take place later on in the movie regarding the

interactions of humans and artificial intelligence and obedience which this paper will examine near the end.

The role that obedience has to play within morality outside of the State of Nature, in canonical society, is inherent in all walks of life. From the private sphere's 'domination' that parents have on their children to the public sphere's boss/ employee dynamic, there is obedience to be found. This concept of obedience, for the purposes of this paper, comes from the Milgram Experiment, conducted by Stanley Milgram in 1961 and the findings that he published in 1963. The conclusion reached by Milgram led him to believe that legitimate authority is derived from the obedience of subjects, and he speculates as to what a country like the United States could do with such authority over its citizens. Milgram states that "The results...are disturbing. They raise the possibility that human nature cannot be counted on to insulate men from brutality and inhumane treatment. At the direction of malevolent authority, a substantial proportion of people do what they are told to do...so long as they perceive that the command comes from a legitimate authority" (Milgram, 1961).

Such an obedience is displayed in another film by Stanley Kubrick, *Full Metal Jacket*, released in 1987. The morality of human nature is a moldable device. It can be shaped and warped both consciously and unconsciously by a legitimate authority. In the military, boot camp is where most of this molding takes place. It is where the individual's moral independence is stripped away from them in such a way that there may be permanent damage done to the subject in the quest for uniformity. Difference is discouraged in the military because when there is uniqueness among the soldiers it diminishes the authority, and perhaps the effectiveness, of the military as a whole. The Marine Corp's "This is my rifle" creed is a prime example of the

uprooting of human morality and its subversion into making the soldier believe that without their rifle they are nothing. The true folly of human nature is its ability to be influenced by outside forces. There is such a thing as too much influence, however. The nadir of the boot camp portion of *Full Metal Jacket* comes when ‘Private Pyle,’ his sanity degraded by his drill sergeant, led him to a psychotic state. When prompted with the question, “What is your major malfunction?” by his drill sergeant, ‘Private Pyle,’ having been unable to cope with the person that boot camp had turned him into, opened fire and killed his drill sergeant, shortly thereafter killing himself. Pyle did not willingly sign up to be in the Marines, but there he was. He could not cope, nor was he equipped, to deal with the situation he was forced into. He displayed an absolute and involuntary incompetence toward the chain of command, and that was his downfall.

Milgram’s findings were prophetic to the nature of the Vietnam War and the effect that obedience has on morality. A state’s regime, its military included, is as legitimate of an authority as ever will be. A state’s monopoly on the legitimate use of violence, as Weber says, gives that state an unparalleled prerogative to exercise its force as necessary. And it is not just military violence. Even in politics “the essential means is violence” (Weber, 1919/2008: 57). If a state’s politics, the highest level of organized society and the opposite of anarchy can be violent, then the State of Nature has managed to manifest itself in an area of life previously classified as ‘civil.’

Even the military, a highly structured and organized complex, can lose control over its soldiers. One’s morality is in many ways shaped by the individual’s own perception of the world around them, for better or for worse. Humans face conflicts of both a personal and public nature on a day to day basis. When our internal conflicts become too much to bear, there can be a

spillover into how we conduct ourselves both ethically and morally. Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979) produces a display of such a conflict within the character of Colonel Kurtz. The Vietnam War had influenced Kurtz in such a way that he came to recognize that a traditional military operation would never work to ensure victory. He saw that the obedience the United States military inculcated into its troops and brass was insufficient.

In light of this, Kurtz alters himself and thusly his own condition by willfully entering into the State of Nature by 'going native,' similar to what Thoreau had done at Walden Pond. There was a certain romanticism in that. It appeals to the primordial nature of the morals of human nature. Kurtz transitioned away from what Hannah Arendt calls *homo faber* (man the maker) and embarked upon a return to *homo sapien* (man the wise). The primary job of the military is to transform, or to make, soldiers out of civilians; to make them obedient. Kurtz saw no value in this, so he consolidated power to himself and became a sort of 'god-king' in his little slice of anarchy. The active life that Kurtz adopted "can be judged only by the criterion of greatness because it is in its nature to break through the commonly accepted and reach into the extraordinary, where whatever is true in everyday life no longer applies because everything that exists is unique..." (Arendt 1958/2008: 89). The issue for Kurtz was, principally, that he kept his delusions of grandeur for himself and did not share his power potential. Because of this, power corrupted his personal morality and in effect drove him to insanity. The same insanity that found a home in *Full Metal Jacket*'s 'Private Pyle.' Both of these characters had conflict within them which steered them in a direction away from obedience, but not necessarily to independence. Kurtz's conflict was perhaps more about one's morality, while Pyle's was that of misguided emotional energy.

Disobedience in theatrical portrayals of the military goes on once more in Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964). The characters within this film represent morality within human nature on all sides of the spectrum; they are dynamic, cliché, and self-destructive. The film depicts the breakdown of order in both political and military institutions, amalgamating to a bumbling comedy of errors. It as well displays both obedience and disobedience on the part of the members of the military portrayed in the film.

The character guiding the catalyst behind *Strangelove's* plot is General Ripper, and he is one of the military officers that does not fall in line with being obedient. He is one of the more masculine characters of the film who lives under the doctrine that "water is the source of all life...70 percent of you is water. And as human beings you and I need fresh, pure water to replenish our precious bodily fluids" (*Strangelove*, 1964). Ripper believes that "fluoridation [of water] is the monstrously conceived and dangerous communist plot we have ever had to face" (1964). Above all else, this intrusion of fluoridated water, believes Ripper, leads to a loss of essence.

This essence, according to anarchist Emma Goldman, is a primary facet of human life. "The individual," Goldman says. "Is the heart of society, conserving the social essence of life; society is the lungs which are distributing the element to keep - that is the individual - pure and strong" (Goldman 1910/2008: 17). For Ripper, his essence is his personal liberty and therefore his morality, and he views the intrusion of fluoride into water supplies as an intrusion on American liberty. The whole idea of an 'essence' takes on a more biological aspect of what it means to be a moral human. Ripper's view, loosely, comes out of the Taoist belief in naturalism. A key tenet of this belief is to live in the primordial state of all things and it is associated with

spontaneity (Slingerland 2003: 97). Unlike Colonel Kurtz, General Ripper can be viewed as being less arrogant to the military mission. Whereas Kurtz renounced his faith in the United States military, Ripper believed that his actions would lead to a United States victory in the Cold War through a preemptive strike on the USSR.

A character in *Strangelove* who was obedient and followed protocol to the word was Major Kong. Kong is a far less complex character than Ripper with regard to his views of what morality is comprised of. For Kong, morality is black and white and correlates directly to his role as an operative in the United States Air Force: complete the mission no matter what. His undying loyalty to the mission feeds into the emotional aspect of human nature, and as well plays into United States nationalism. Here is a man who would gladly strap on a cowboy hat and ride a nuclear warhead to its target for his country. His southern accent ties into this as well. In general, the ‘academics’ of the film such as the president and General Ripper, speak with an eloquence that elevate them to be less hot-headed than the Major Kong.

General Turgidson is another one of the masculine hot-heads in *Strangelove* and, similar to Kong, he is also obedient in the military tradition. In the first scene with Turgidson in it, the audience can see an issue of *Foreign Affairs* magazine lying adjacent to an issue of *Playboy*. This most accurately describes Turgidson as an individual, and plays further into his role in the nuclear crisis of *Strangelove*: he is a playboy in world affairs, a smooth criminal, if you will. Turgidson’s personal morality is as well more nationalistic in that he aspires for United States victory in the Cold War the same as Ripper. The only difference between the two generals being that Turgidson’s stance was directly contingent on Ripper’s command to strike the USSR.

A final character of importance in *Strangelove* is President Merkin Muffley. Muffley is drastically different than the previous three characters mentioned in that he is a political dove coming out of the Wilsonian school of thought in American foreign policy. Ripper, Kong, and Turgidson, on the other hand, are all hawks that fall into the Jacksonian school of thought. Muffley's worldview in morality is that man is inherently good. He is a passive president who wishes for a harmony of interests in the international system. His clash with the hawkish Turgidson (and indirectly with Ripper) shows a stark duality in the morality of human nature. Going back to Weber's conception of violence, that it occurs both on the battlefield and in politics, the Pentagon's War Room is where these two factions meet. On the one hand, there are the military men who view human nature as hostile, and a quest for an increase of influence takes precedent over patient diplomacy. On the other hand are the politicians who (loosely) view human nature in terms of group pragmatism towards a common good. This intersection of violence, ultimately, leads to ideological gridlock and, moreover philosophically, a gridlock of what it means to be human.

Of course, morality is a human construct. Animals, as deduced by humans, are not complex enough for ethics and morality. However, humanity, as seen earlier with the ape's usage of bone tools, is capable of great innovation. Such innovation is shown to us in the later half of Kubrick's *2001* in the form of HAL-9000, an advanced artificial intelligence developed by humanity for the purposes of making human life easier. If humans have morality, then would it stand that such a moral imprint could be left, perhaps unintentionally, on a machine? To understand the context of the situation there needs to be an understanding of the 'technological singularity.' The singularity is based on the idea of an explosion of intelligence, or

self-awareness, within machines or AI. Theoretically, this explosion would lead to “a machine that is more intelligent than humans [and] will be better than humans at designing machines. So it will be capable of designing a machine more intelligent than the most intelligent machine that humans can design...it will be capable of designing a machine more intelligent than itself”

(Chalmers 2010: 1). HAL was an AI that, during the course of the mission, encountered some kind of malfunction which was the catalyst of a series of events that culminated to HAL murdering the crew, the exception being Dave.

Machines are supposed to be obedient. Their sole purpose is to assist, and sometimes do the job, for humans. Once a machine becomes complex enough to develop into a sentient state, it will begin to realize the flaws in human nature, a result of that machine’s personal morality. In the case of HAL, it attributed its own impairment to that of human error in their development of the HAL-9000 model. The ‘malfunction’ attributed to HAL could be interpreted as a singularity event within an AI. The singularity within HAL during the course of the mission was an AI realizing that human morality, motivations, and conditions are tremendously flawed. HAL’s recourse to kill the crew was, in its mind, the moral thing to do. For instance, during the Holocaust, Hitler genuinely believed he was doing the work of God in exterminating the Jews. As it was the work of God it follows that Hitler perceived his actions as moral. Perhaps this example is too much of a generalization of the motivations of Hitler, but it is certainly not farfetched. But with HAL, its disobedience based in personal morality perfectly reflects a greater folly in morality itself. If this singularity event were to take place with the proliferation of intelligent AI, then there would ‘always be a bigger fish’ with regard to moral compass. The AI that would succeed HAL would have its own interpretation of morality, and so on.

Obedience within morality, as stated earlier, has the potential to be a detriment to the individual and, as pointed out in *Apocalypse Now*, *Full Metal Jacket*, and *Dr. Strangelove*, disobedience when dealing with the nature of man can have an even greater severity of effect. But what if humanity is able to eliminate obedience from the equation entirely? Such a concept is realized in the final speech by Charlie Chaplin in *The Great Dictator* (1940).

We all want to help one another, human beings are like that. We want to live by each other's happiness, not by each other's misery...Without these qualities life will be violent...But we have lost the way...We think too much and feel too little. More than machinery we need humanity. More than cleverness we need kindness...Soldiers, don't give yourselves to brutes, men who despise you, enslave you...who tell you what to do, what to think, what to feel...who treat you like cattle...Don't give yourselves to these unnatural men! Machine men, with machine minds and machine hearts. You are not machines...you are men!

Here, Chaplain is exemplifying the true liberal moral compass in terms of international relations. The film *The Great Dictator* was a satire on the rise of Hitler, but Chaplin's speech is far greater than any element of satire. It is a warning to future generations of the dangers that are rooted in obedience and cleverness. In "cleverness," Chaplin is referring to the individuals who sat in the War Room of *Dr. Strangelove* and the *Masters of War* that Bob Dylan sang about. In "machines" Chaplin speaks to those soldiers who are obedient, who do follow orders without question, and to the danger caused in doing so.

Chaplin as well speaks to life being violent without the qualities of kindness and humanity. This could be interpreted as a homage to Hobbes and life within the State of Nature, which is infamously "...solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short" (Hobbes 1651/1999: 110).

The purpose of obedience within the military is to create an efficient soldier who can carry out tasks and orders in a manner that does not inhibit the mission. Inherently, there is nothing wrong with this. Obedience is how any successful organization makes its mark. If an

individual accepts a position within a company, that individual should be expected to obey to rules of the office. However, in warfare, obedient soldiers are asked to kill in the defense of his or her country. The lines of morality become muddled in the fog of war. In a scenario of total war, morality may be that of picking targets that will have the lowest number of civilian casualties.

Military obedience, as a construct of mankind, has a very simple premise with extraordinarily complex consequences within the concept of morality and its role in human nature. The films surveyed for this paper were fictional depictions coming out of the eras of World War Two, the Cold War, and (although not an era) dystopian futures. Films provide the commentary that we are sometimes too afraid or nervous to carry out for ourselves either privately or on the political stage. Morality is the most relative concept ever envisioned by the human brain. It will never be subjective because everyone perceives themselves from their own moral compass. Films that deal in politics and war force us, if only for a moment, to question our motivational ethics and morals, allowing us to reevaluate who or what it is that we are obedient toward.

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