TRANSCRIPT

A202/09

TRANSCRIPT OF KANT II "MORAL CONFLICT"
RECORDED ON 11TH NOVEMBER, 1971

VTM/6LT/70474 A202/9 T.V. 00521/2355

TAKING PART: Oswald Hanfling (O.U.)
Professor Bernard Williams, Cambridge,
Professor A. Phillips-Griffiths, Warwick

Michael Deacon)
Valentine Palmer) Actors

SCU
5.12.71

OSSIE HANFLING: Moral philosophers are sometimes criticised for discussing examples of moral obligation which seem, on the face of it, trivial. A favourite example which was around for some years was the obligation to return a borrowed book. In fact this example was so overworked that it became something of a joke, even among philosophers. Well, today we're going to the other extreme. We're going to watch a dramatisation of a conflict of moral reasoning, which led to violent and terrible consequences, and then afterwards we're going to consider some of the issues it raises. The piece is taken from 'Crime and Punishment' a novel by the great 19th Century author Dostoyevski. The book tells the story of a young man, Raskolnikov, who commits a terrible murder, and the scene we're going to watch takes place fairly early in the novel. Raskolnikov, who's contemplating doing the murder, goes into a tavern in St. Petersburg where he chances to overhear a conversation between two men, one of whome is, like himself, a penniless student.

OFFICER: Well, has she the resources to back it up?

STUDENT: Oh yes. She's rich all richt, rich as a Jew If If you want she'll let you have 5,000 roubles. But if you want to pawn somethong for a rouble, that's all right as well.

OFFICER: She sounds a very accomodating old lady

STUDENT: She's a bitch. Look - she'll only let you have a quarter, one quarter, of the value of anything you take in. And she charges 7 per cent a month.

OFFICER: I see.

STUDENT: This 'dear old lady' has a sister, Lizaveta. Now she treats her like a child. Makes her do all the housework. And that 'child's about thirty-frive thirty-five and at least six feet tall.

OFFICER: She sounds phenomenal.

STUDENT: It's really cruel, though. Lizaveta slaves away night and day, does all the cooking and sewing, and more than that, she works as a charlady and gives everything she earns to the old woman.

OFFICER: It sounds to me as if she has an altogether wretched life.

STUDENT: Of yes - it's bizarre. Mind you, Lizaveta's really - uncouth! I mean, she's extraordinarily tall and she's very long feet that - I don't know - kind of point outwards. Oh, she's clean, I'll give her that. The really funny thing is, though, she's always....

OFFICER: What, *pregnant*? I don't believe it.

STUDENT: Well, she's really not all that hideous. She looks goodnatured. And her eyes are quite lovely. Anyway, the proof of it is that lots of men find her attractive. She's so soft and goodnatured that she'll put up with anything - anything at all. Mind you, she really does have a very sweet smile.

OFFICER: I think you're rather attracted to her yourself.

STUDENT: Well, perhaps - but only - only because she's so peculiar. Still, I'll tell you one thing. I could kill that old woman. Take off with her money. And not feel the slightest prick of conscience.
No - serious! On one hand we have a stupid, senseless, worthless, spiteful, sick, horrid old

woman, who isn't only useless but is doing actual mischief. An old woman who doesn't know what she's living for, and is going to die soon anyway.

OFFICER: Yes.

STUDENT: And on the other hand, we have fresh young lives thrown away by the thousand every day for want of a bit of help. I could do a thousand good deeds with that old woman's money. Hundreds, thousands of people could be put on the right path. Dozens of families saved from ruin. Now I say kill that old woman. Take her money and use it in the service of humanity. And don't you think that one tiny crime would soon be wiped out by a thousand good deeds? One death for a thousand lives? Come on, come on, it's simple arithmetic, isn't it? Besides, what is the value of that stupid old woman's life when weighed in the general good of mankind? Absolutely nothing, nothing at all, no more than the life of a louse or blackbeetle, less in fact, because she's doing people actual harm. Do you know, the other day she - bit - Lizaveta's finger! She - she - bit it. I mean she - bit it. It almost had to be cut off.

OFFICER: Of course she doesn't deserve to live, But there you are - that's nature.

STUDENT: But the point is that we have to direct and correct the course of nature. If we didn't, we'd drown in an ocean of prejudice. Don't you see, without that there'd never have been a single great man. Well, people talk about duty, conscience. But what I want to know is, what do we mean by them, eh? No, hold

there's something else I want to ask -

OFFICER: No, you hang on a minute. There's something I want to ask you.

STUDENT: Well?

OFFICER: Well, you do all this talking, make all these fine speeches. But tell me - would you kill the old woman yourself?

STUDENT: Of course not. I mean it's nothing to do with me -- I'm only arguing the justice of the case.

OFFICER: Well, I think if you wouldn't do it yourself there's no justice in it all. Let's play another game.

HANFLING: Well, that conversation certainly had a great influence on Raskolnikov and his subsequent conduct, but of course it also raises some broader questions about moral problems, and the questions of some relevance to Kant's outlook Now I have with me today two philosophers with an interest in moral philosophy, and I'm going to ask them to discuss these matters. They are Professor A. Phillips Griffiths of the University of Warwick and Professor Bernard Williams of Kings College, Cambridge. I'd like to begin by coming straight to the relevance to Kant's outlook, and perhaps I could ask you first of all, Griff, what you think Kant would have made of that scene if, say, he'd been with us to see it, and what he would have said to the student's argument about what was the right thing to do in this case.

GRIFFITHS: Well, Kant claimed that anyone who was sufficiently in possession of his faculties to ask himself what it was right to do could find out by applying what he seemed to think was a not too difficult test. The first formulation of the categorical imperative, which is the supreme - for Kant - the supreme principle of morality - is act only on that maxim which could become by your own will a universal law of nature. So one has to ask can I will that the maxim on which I am acting can become a universal law of nature. Now I take it that the maxim, or the maxim which the student is proposing to act on, or as it turns out not proposing to act on in the end is in order to do good to others, to brighten other lives, I shall arbitrarily take the life of another. And the question is, whether one could will that that should become universally a maxim of all men's actions. And I think Kant would say, and I base this on what he says about other examples in the book, that if all men thought it permissible to take the life of another when then believed that this would be of some value to the welfare of others, that this would lead to such a general state of insecurity that in fact the general welfare would be harmed, not increased. And hence that the end of the maxim is in contradiction with what the result would be, so that it would be self-defeating. And hence it is contradictory to suppose a situation/which every man acted on this principle.

HANFLING: Yes, so that gives us apparently a rather simple straight-forward test against which we can measure this argument, and we find it doesn't work, and that's that, we reject it. But presumably the situation isn't quite as simple as that. Or is it?

WILLIAMS: Well, I think there's obviously a great deal to be said for this Kantian formulation, the categorical imperative, which Griff has referred to, of course when stripped of its elaborate terminology really is: the fundamental test, how would it be if everybody were to do that, or if everybody were to act on that principle, is the idea, isn't it? But I think that perhaps it's worth emphasising, and I think this is a very important point both in itself and in relation to the novel, though I think perhaps we won't want to spend a lot of time on this today, that it's absolutely essential to Kant's test, as it is to a lot of our moral reasoning, and after all he thought his test was implicit in our ordinary moral reasoning, or in a lot of it, that the consequences don't have to be actual ones. That is, if we asked the question how would it be if everyone did that, it's not appropriate to answer in Kant's view that they're not going to. The purely imagined test of everyone's going to is enough, and I think that's quite an important point about Kant's picture of our moral outlook. And of course it is rather different from Raskolnikov's position, because Raskolnikov thinks he has a special insight such that the fact that other people aren't going to do it just shows their limitations, their blindness and so on. So, for him, they aren't going to do it, is in fact a relevant consideration. But perhaps we'll leave that one side and go on confine ourselves to Kant's test, how would it be if everybody did it even if they were not going to, O.K.? Well, the thing I would first want to add to what Griff said, which I agree with certainly with his definition of Kant's outlook, is that the facts you have to appeal to in order to show that something pretty dreadful would follow from universalizing this maxim,

WILLIAMS (CONT'D): supposing that everybody acted like this, depend only on some very general features of human action. Namely first that we all have limited information, we all make mistakes and don't know what we're doing quite often, and secondly that we are in various ways biased, have special affections, have special conerns and so on. You see, this man set himself up as the executioner in the name of justice of this old woman, really, that's what he's claiming to be, but you know, he's first of all his knowledge of all such situations is enormously limited, and secondly he has particular reasons for hating this old woman and we gather to some extent being fond of her sister. Now if you were to - this is Kant's point - if you were to generalise this practise, you'd have absolutely everyboly setting themselves up as judges of justice, and who should be wiped out for the sake of what, and the result would obviously be a collapse totally of the social and moral fabric. I take it it that's the idea isn't it?

HANFLING: So where does this leave us exactly with regard to Kant's position? I mean does Kant have a moral - does Kant's moral outlook have some application here, or are we left no better than we would have been.

WILLIAMS: Can I make one remark - sorry, I'm going on a bit, but I'd like to know Griff's reaction to that. I mean, I think that what one's just said, what we've both said, is perfectly reasonable - I mean there clearly is some force in the point of saying if everybody acted on that principle, setting themselves up as unique judges, special judges of the justice and so on, acting as executioners, you know, everything would fall to bits, I think that is - that is a powerful one, but there's some

WILLIAMS (CONTID): sense I think in which one feels that it in a way misses the depth of this question, because the thing that frightens one about that student isn't that he's reached the wrong answer to the question, it seems to me, but that somehow he's embarked on the question. That's what I think frightened Dostoyevski, that it was the idea that people were prepared to consider the idea of wiping people out in order to forward utilitarian aims, making things better, that really, that ought to have been stopped before it even got going, that is that there shouldn't be a subject for discussions on such a project. And I think in a way Kant would not have totally disagreed with that either. What do you think of that?

GRIFFITHS: I think his second formulation of the categorical imperative-treat humanity in your own person and in that of others always as an end and never as a mere means, emphasises the unconditional absent value of the individual. So much so that it is never right to hurt or harm and certainly not kill another individual for the sake of any other, that is to say for the sake of any purpose outside that individual. Hence to consider whether one may have purposes with regard to the young or to the sister which would justify hurting, harming or killing the old woman is ruled out of court immediately on the basic principle of morality for Kant.

HANFLING: Yes, so what we have here is a balance of two considerations, one of which is the life of the old woman and the other is the benefit which will be achieved by the money, but for Kant these are not commensurate...

GRIFFITHS: Yes of course, but Kant...

HANFLING: No, one of them has an absolute unconditional value ...

GRIFFITHS: Yes...

HANFLING: One of which can't be set against .

GRIFFITHS: That's right. I mean cKant, of course regarded it as a duty to consider the interests of others and to further them, but for him it was an imperfect duty, that is to say in general one ought to have such a policy that an imperfect duty is overriden by a perfect duty, it is never right to kill for the sake of benefit to others.

WILLIAMS: So an imperfect duty, that's a term of art in the Kantian moral philosophy, is it - that means something that it is in general required of one that one should where possible advance, but the strict duty is something which is an absolute obligation in the particular case, to do or not to do, so that in the present case we'd have a conflict between you mean the perfect duty in this rather odd terminology, which is never to kill anybody, or at least in such....

GRIFFITHS: Never to kill anyone for the sake of benefitting others.

WILLIAMS: We'd better come back to that - as against the very general what's called imperfect duty of as it were pushing along the boat of humna satisfaction or utility and as Ossie put it just now these aren't actually meant to be put into the scales against one another. and for a Kantian the great sin of utilitarianism is that it's always prepared to weigh anything against anything. I mean, make me an offer is the fundemental maxim of indeed a lot of moral consciousness, but not for Kant, that's the point, you've got to say it's ruled out from the beginning, that's the - but you see, what

WILLIAMS (CONT'D): I'm unclear about now, for Kant, is what exactly is ruled out. It sounded from your exposition, I think it is the exposition of Kant's doctrine about treating people as ends, never as he puts it merely as means, is that you can't for instance bump somebody off to forward some other cause or to satisfy some other duty. Is that right? But what about situations - I mean that might be thought a rather pious and pure doctrine, because in fact there are circumstances in which people are just faced with choices of sacrificing the life of whone lot of people or indeed bringing about the death of one lot of people in order to avoid, as they suppose, some larger evil. I don't -

HANFLING: This is something that I wanted tobring in, to broaden this thing out a bit, because we seem to be agreed generally on the Raskolnikov case and on the unacceptability of the conclusion, but of course looking around the world today and so on we can see that there are people resorting to violence because they want to change things that they consider are wrong in their society, now in a way that's what the student in the scene there was proposing to do. He saw certain evils and he thought it morally right that he should resort to violence to rectify things as he saw it. Now there are people around the world today, terrorists and guerilla fighters and such like, we don't have to look far for examples. Some of them we sympathise with and I suppose some of them we don't, but how exactly do we decide, does the Kantian type of approach give us some insight here about who is right in resorting to violence and who isn't?

GRIFFITHS: Well it seems to me that, as Bernard said, the Kantian position is a purist position and it has an immense appeal. The utilitarian position is, as you say, make me an offer, and you can balance anything against anything, but it seems to me that - Kant talks about the ordinary moral consciousness, but a quite common human view is that the kind of calculation that the student engaged in is tawdry and wrong but that the Kantian purism is impossible and that perhaps its a matter of scale, where the stakes are high enough, when one's talking about the future of a whole society, or the welfare of a very large group, that at that point it is right, can be right, indeed it is a duty to engage in violence, violence which will in fact dispose of the innocent, perhaps not as directly as he was prepared to kill the old woman, but with the same effect. Now when you ask does Kant help us in this dilemma, it seems to me that what Bernard was saying in the beginning was right - in a way it rules it out, the answer of Kant is you don't start that kind of calculation.

WILLIAMS: Well, we've got to make a kind of distinction here haven't we? I mean, the point about engaging in political violence, and I'm speaking now of violence done by the objectors to a state, not violence done by the state itself, is of course that it involves the death of the innocent, I mean throwing bombs at a pub, burning up hospitals or whatever it may be to secure as is supposed some political end of justice and so on. Now in the case we were given of course the student didn't represent the old lady as being an innocent party as some spectator may, she was herself supposed to be the villain, so the analogy to the political case between this case and a straight political case, is not much murdering the innocent

WILLIAMS (CONT'D): in the cause it is supposed of justice, freedom and so forth, but as it were of tyrannicide....

HANFLING: That's an interesting point...

WILLIAMS: :....of killing the unjust persons themselves...

HANFLING: Sorry. That's an interesting point, because in a way it puts the student in a stronger position, doesn't it?

WILLIAMS: That's right..

GRIFFITHS: Of course Kant would deny this, because what Kant would say is, punishment is right, and if a person is immoral then that person ought to be punished. But that means you must not only act in accordance with the law, I mean it would be in a sense punishment the old woman by killing her, and perhaps morally she deserves death, but he would be acting in accordance with the law but not out of reverence for the law, because his reason for killing her would be to get other people money, and possibly himself, not wimply that she should suffer the amount of pain or harm that is appropriate to her immorality.

WILLIAMS: I think he's on stronger ground in the first sort of agargument we considered, both you know, one's bound to say who's the student to set himself up to quote'punish' this particular person, and of course it isn't punishment, it's just a private thing. and of course the lady is in a sense, though wicked or bad, or horrible, she's not in the same position as some venomous ruler of a state, by any means. I mean, she is a citizen who's being as nasty as no doubt countless other citizens are being .

HANFLING: Yes, except there is an important difference

HANFLING (CONT'D): between the two kinds of situations, but I mean one does feel that -- or at least one may feel in certain cases that there is justification for resorting to violence in the political situation, and I don't see why some of that sympathy shouldn't reflect back on the kind of situation that the student was in, because although there is the difference between political situation and just where one person was involved, nevertheless the student saw himself as righting a social wrong. I mean, he thought it was wrong that there should be all this wealth hoarded up by this old hag and these other people should go needy, and he thought that he ought to rectify this.

WILLIAMS: Well, I do think honestly that if we think it through more deeply we find a great difference. It seems to me that the doctrine about where is just rebellion, to use a very old-fashioned phrase, that much truth was said about it by for instance St. Thomas Aquinas. I mean in the tradion tradition where you say you resort to this only where there are -- where the tyranny is of great severity, no other means are available to change it and what, you know, that what you secure, the evils that you do are not worse than what you are trying to prevent and so on. Now in the case of this old woman who is doing this, many other means exist if one takes it seriously as a political act for stopping the things she is doing. You can get the sister to go away from her, you stop people going there to lend money and so on. Well if you say you can't stop money going - people going - there to get money from her because they are poor, well now you are touching on the genuine political issue -

WILLIAMS (CONT'D): inequalities in the society, and this may point to political changes in the society. But knocking off one old woman because you happen to be fond of her sister is in fact - is not serious as an approach to a political revolt, or a political issue.

HANFLING: But I mean - I would like to ask you you were saying - sorry - not serious, and that brings me to the thing I wanted to raise about the last bit in the scene here, and we'll have to be rather brief about this, but one thing I did want to ask you at the end of the scene the student. as you remember backs away and says oh I wouldn't actually do it myself, I was just theorising, now is this in fact some sort of Kantian insight coming through, or is it a piece of moral cowardice on his part?

GRIFFITHS: I can't see how it's in any way a Kantian insight.

HANFLING: Well, is he in some way seeing that/in spite of after all all his - er that his reasoning is superficial, that it's undermined by the sort of Kantian consideration...

GRIFFITHS: There's no suggestion that the student can see that his reasoning is superficial.

WILLIAMS: I think that in the end he feels he can't do it, and I think we touch round here on the frightfully important point that what feelings people have about what they find tolerable or not may be a lot more important than the abstract moral reasoning that they engage in to decide that issue.

HANFLING: Do you agree with that?

GRIFFITHS: I think in general it's true. I wouldn't say that this means one shouldn't engage in it, one should just do it better than the student does.

HANFLING: So there is an important role for both of these things. Well, thank you very much Bernard Williams and A. Phillips Griffiths for coming along and giving your views.