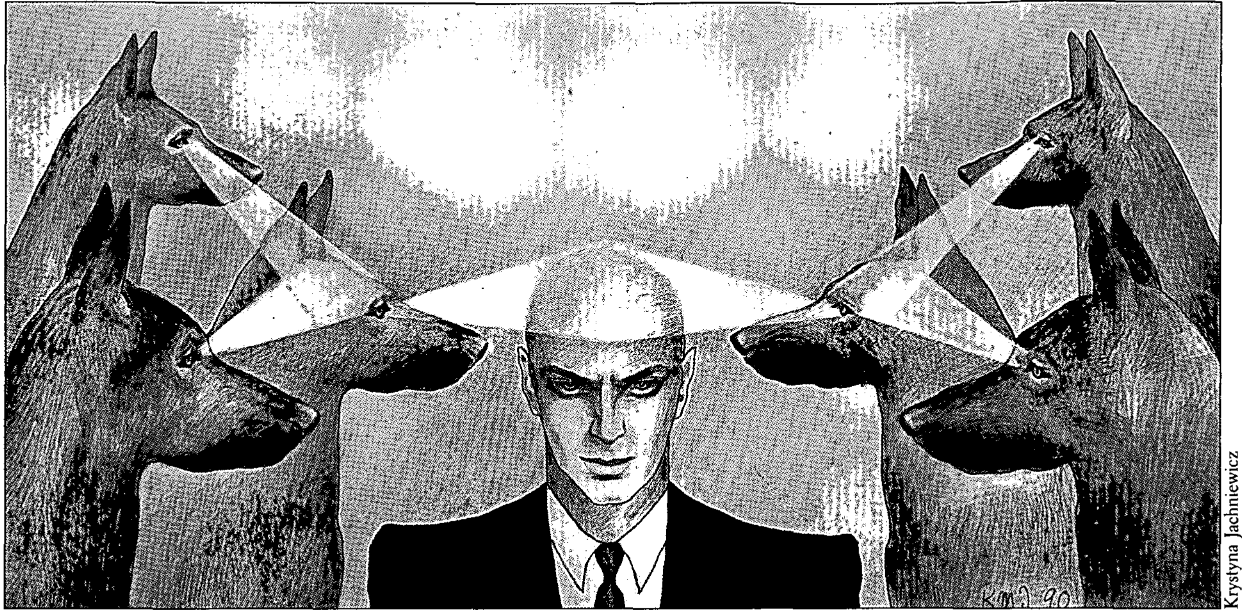
Krystyna Jachniewicz

Science, Wisdom, and Moral Judgment

by Thomas Fleming

Quis custodiet ipsos custodes? Juvenal's admonition to husbands has often been applied to government, but rarely with the full force of the original: "Go ahead and lock her up," the Roman satirist warned, "but who will watch the watchmen themselves? She's put on her guard and starts with them." Once a large number of frail mortals has empowered a smaller set to watch over their interests, what—or rather, since institutions always consist of power-seeking individuals, *who*—is going to prevent them from looking after their own, rather than the people's, interest? What is worse, if we are to follow up the metaphor, we are actually facilitating the corruption.

To prevent such corruption in high places, governments are turning to ethics specialists. But what are the qualifications for these positions? Chicago's "ethics chief," Gary M. O'Neill, had been a campaign fund-raiser and personal injury attorney in Louisiana before answering a newspaper ad placed by the Chicago Board of Ethics. Mayor Daley had offended the Board by recommending a candidate with "ties to city hall," and the Board—determined to have its own way—hired O'Neill as executive director on December 12, 1989.

On January 12, 1990, exactly one month later, the new ethics chief resigned, after it was revealed that he had been himself accused of campaign chicanery by the Louisiana Board of Ethics for Elected Officials. The ex-ambulance chaser's apology to the *Chicago Sun-Times* was that it was unfortunate when ambitious bureaucrats have "sad things happen in their lives."

Note the impersonal construction so popular with children and with those who are morally "forever young": as it says on the bumper sticker, s--t happens. Even if the ethics board had not asked about any skeletons in his closet, O'Neill knew it was his obligation to tell them about the problem in Louisiana. He cannot even allege that the whole affair had slipped his mind. He told NPR's *Morning Edition* that he considered candor as an option, but only because he thought his experience with an ethics investigation could be considered an asset.

So now the question is not simply who will watch the watchdogs, but who will watch the watchdogs hired to watch the watchdogs? It is an infinite regression toward a point that represents the extinction of our liberties.

As I write this on the twelfth of January, I believe I can predict at least one of the reactions to this petty scandal. Members of the ethics profession will seize the occasion and mount a campaign to insure that only a trained professional be hired to fill an ethics position. Because, there are now academic courses in medical ethics and legal ethics, and the same business schools that cheered on Ivan Boesky have instituted ethics requirements.

Ethics is a big business, too, for such Watergate alumni as Charles Colson and Jeb Stuart Magruder. Mr. Colson has made himself into something of a celebrity-theologian, but what his credentials are, he has never made plain. Like Chuck Colson, Mr. Magruder has got religion and makes

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his living as a parson. His Watergate experience stands him in good stead in Columbus, Ohio, where the mayor—on the theory "set a thief to catch a thief"—has appointed him chairman of an ethics panel. Columbus has its share of ethical dilemmas, and Magruder's appointment was sparked by a well-publicized local incident: when a million dollars worth of bills fell out of an armored car, Columbus motorists stopped to grab as much of the cash as they could. Mayor Rinehart—himself accused (though not indicted) of sexually molesting a thirteen-year-old girl—thought that what his city needed was the advice of an expert on public misbehavior, and the Rev. Jeb Magruder now spends part of his time raising the ethical consciousness of central Ohio.

Magruder spent only seven months in prison for conspiracy to obstruct justice and is now finishing a book on ethics that combines his religious with his political experience. I thought there were Son of Sam laws to prevent criminals from profiting from their past. The only one of the Watergate team who displayed any moral courage was G. Gordon Liddy, who took orders, kept his mouth shut, and went to jail, while these choirboys sang like birds to the Watergate Committee.

The problem with ethics professionals does not lie in the doubtful character of Gary O'Neill or the checkered career of Charles Colson. Even supposing they had both acquired philosophy and theology degrees from Yale or Chicago, there is no evidence to suggest that moral philosophers and churchmen are possessed of purer morals than pettifoggers and ward heelers. One of the oldest themes of satire is the long-haired ascetic (pagan as well as Christian) who cannot control his appetites; Paul Tillich, by moving his mistress into the house with his wife, was only following a time-honored tradition. But at least the ancients did not appoint some miracle-peddling sophist to advise the Empire on its ethics problems, and until recently ordinary people believed that good behavior was more to be valued than philosophical argument and that a good character was a stronger foundation for personal morality than any number of seminars and advanced degrees.

However, what ordinary people have taken for granted (and Aristotelians attempted to prove) was rejected long ago by most philosophical schools. The program began with Socrates, who seemed to believe that knowing the right and doing it were more or less identical; this mistake, relatively harmless in the hands of Platonists and Aristotelians, was compounded by the Stoics, who tended to confound right conduct with right reason and elevated rationality above the concerns of everyday life. But it was left to the moderns to reduce morality to the exercise of moral reasoning.

John Locke describes "the great principle and foundation of all virtue" as a man's ability "to deny himself of his own desires . . . and purely follow what reason directs as best." Locke was not a fool and realized that a rational, self-denying temperament could not be inculcated by exclusively intellectual means. The formation of character was as much a matter of habit and taste as it was a function of reasoning, but later moralists have not been so cautious, and it is possible to read through all of Rawls and Nozick without ever coming across a passage that acknowledges the nonrational dimensions of moral life.

The rationalist approach to ethics would be harmless enough—like a disease that is always fatal but confined largely to people who brought it on themselves, i.e., academics—were it not for its intrusion into everyday life by way of government schooling. Some conservatives like to think that schoolteachers are all disciples of John Dewey. Those were the good old days. As wretched a philosopher as he was, Dewey had his good points. His own watered-down version of pragmatism, for example, preserved at least some of the wholesome and pungent savor of William James. What James, at his best, could give his readers was a sense of flesh-and-blood human beings grappling with moral reality. Today's academic moralism is more likely to deal with such alien and irrelevant topics as whom to throw out of an overloaded lifeboat or what proportion—50 percent, 60 percent, 75 percent?—of our income we should devote to relieving famine in Ethiopia or Bangladesh.

The question is not who will watch the watchdogs, but who will watch the watchdogs hired to watch the watchdogs? It is an infinite regression toward a point that represents the extinction of our liberties.

The real culprit in the schools has been Lawrence Kohlberg, who designed (over a period of thirty years) a theory of moral development that begins with an obedient child and culminates in a sage whose every decision is an exercise in universal benevolence and disinterested rationality. To prove his thesis, whose sensible parts are hijacked from Jean Piaget, he borrowed Piaget's method of interviewing children who have been first separated from the families and communities upon which their moral existence depends. Kohlberg did not actually need any evidence for his belief in a steady progression from obedience to an acknowledgment of contract up to the Kantian golden rule which says that our moral actions must be totally disinterested. True morality for Kohlberg means that if I decide to do X, it is not because I or my family and friends will be helped, but because I think that X is always and under all circumstances the right decision. If the world really needs a garbage dump or housing project in my neighborhood, as a moral person I must welcome it, regardless of the danger and unpleasantness it poses to my children and neighbors.

But progress in moral reasoning is not the same as progress in moral living. Kohlberg, like the Freudian Erik Erikson, would have us believe that a moral logician who mistreats his family while serving the world is superior to the moral primitive who takes care of his family, keeps his promises, and risks his life for his country. In other words, Alvin York was wrong to lay aside his universal principle (pacifism) in order to defend his country—as he believed—against the wicked Kaiser. So were the other good men—William Jennings Bryan and Robinson Jeffers, to name only two—who opposed the war and volunteered their services.

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Kohlberg's feminist colleague Carol Gilligan has provided the best refutation of his and Erikson's schemes: it's just like a man, she argues, to make a hero of Gandhi, an abstract universalist who mistreated his wife. Mothers know better, or at least they used to, and women in general never make it to the moral stratosphere. They are stuck down in the muck of everyday loyalties and commitments. Ethics, as practiced by mothers, could never be a growth industry, because their morality is neither an ethical system rooted in logic nor a skill that can be taught. Moral development for women — and for men lucky enough to possess some of their sanity — is a growth in love. Their moral judgment contains more prudence than logic and arrives ultimately at the slow and painstaking distillation of experience that goes by the name of wisdom.

There is a difference between more or less exact sciences — mathematics, logic, chemistry — where the proper application of methods and rules is supposed to produce replicable results, and those branches of learning that study life. Here real science is possible, but it has to take account of organic change, and as Henri Bergson pointed out in *Creative Evolution*, organic life is characterized by growth and change — by what he called "duration" rather than mere time — and that even with all the information, it would not be possible to predict the state of earth's flora and fauna a century from now.

Bergson's argument is even more applicable to human life, where free will and intelligence encourage men to play at being lords of creation. Feed all the "data" on great poetry into a computer, and you will not get a good, much less a great, poem, and even a master poet at the height of his powers can fail miserably, and he will publish his monstrosity, unless he happens to be also a great critic.

Aristotle put the finger on the essential distinction, when he proved that mathematical precision was as out of place in ethical matters (and by ethics he meant to encompass nearly everything having to do with human behavior, including poetry and rhetoric) as rhetorical eloquence was in logical demonstration, and it was Aristotle who firmly situated prudence or wisdom (*phronesis*) rather than rationality as the central technique of moral judgment.

There can be no science of wisdom, because a science requires a set of rules and techniques, which, if properly manipulated, will yield the solution. But ethical dilemmas rarely offer a universal right answer. Is it ever right to take a human life? That, of course, depends on the situation, but it also depends upon the people involved. It may be generally right to shoot a thief running away with the family silver (although there are those who would dispute this), but what if the thief turns out to be my father or brother or a friend who has done me important favors?

Or consider this familiar case: a young man goes to work for a President upon whom the fate of the free world depends. Should he run a clean campaign and risk turning the country over to George McGovern, or should he cinch the election by cheating? Later, after he has been caught, the young man will be asked by the Watergate Committee if he had ever thought about ethics. Yes, Jeb Magruder explained, he had studied ethics with William Sloane Coffin. In the teaching of Mr. Coffin — it might just as well have been Michael Walzer or Robert Nozick — lawfulness takes at best second place, compared with obedience to a higher law, loyalty to principle and party. The same moral reasoning used to justify sit-ins at nuclear power plants also applies to break-ins at the Watergate.

Which takes precedence, loyalty to President and principle or the obligation to obey the law, obligations to family or loyalty to the state? One ancient philosopher posed an interesting dilemma: suppose a young man discovers that his father has found a way of stealing money from the state treasury. Should he turn him in? The answer is no, because the state needs obedient sons more than it needs money.

One may argue with Hecaton's priorities, but most people would not think much of a man who testified against his brother in a Senate hearing on a presidential appointment. These complications of family connection are obvious enough, but in real life the details often add up to more than the general rules. The sublime rationalists celebrated by Rawls and Kohlberg will always turn out to be monsters, if they get the chance. Robespierre and Sherman were both honest men and humanitarians, and Pol Pot had a dream even more sublime than Abraham Lincoln or Martin Luther King.

In Memory of Rita Hayworth

by Richard Moore

As the Hollywood sex queen almighty
pictured in LIFE in your black lace nightie,
you made us slaver, snigger, chortle.
Of course, we knew that you were mortal —
but Alzheimer's disease!
Jeez.

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