

Moral Manipulation: The Jail Within a Jail

An introduction to moral manipulation

“Sturdy--that was Elwood,” Turner notes, eloquently putting a word to our relationship with Elwood as we read *Nickel Boys*. Throughout the cacophony of punishment and death, Elwood stands as our sturdy ground to the outside world where our story begins and that same “outside” world that we believe awaits Elwood at the conclusion. When he is ripped from us, that sturdiness is, too, ripped away. And at this rip, I was placed into a state of torment, where all I could think was: it’s simply not **fair**. How could this pillar of values in such a tormented situation crumble at the hands of the wicked? But soon after I was shocked by the sudden instability at the end of the novel did I realize the instability was omnipresent. Through the looming threat of death, the constant violence, and the obstruction of love, Elwood, our sturdy pillar, began to lose his fundamental moral principle of love, exemplified through the words of Martin Luther King. Because just as a pillar cannot stand on an insecure foundation, the right to this sort of love is ripped from the tortured.

The threat of death as injustice

On Wednesday, March 18, 2020, I sat (and slept) through a dreadfully boring online driver’s ed course. While I remember very little, I do remember one potent note from the instructor about teens who get into car accidents: children don’t understand their own mortality. In my case, this is false. From Thursday, November 16th to Thursday, November 30th, 2021, I thought I was going to die. I had been diagnosed with a bone tumor in my spine on Thursday, the doctors told me it was most likely malignant (later learning my odds were 20:1 in favor of malignancy), and I had surgery two days later. While I now know it was benign, for those two weeks death loomed around every corner. An inescapable feeling of dread accompanied it. I at first believed I could equate my experience under the looming threat of death to those in *Nickel*, but I now know I cannot. Because I found solace in considering my legacy, and those who loved me. The boys of *Nickel* never received that privilege. Through punishment, secret graveyards, misinformation, and the sheer apathy of society around them, *Nickel* obscured any attachment these boys could have to the world during and after their deaths. While I was under the constant threat of death, they were under the threat of being erased.

How death contributes to moral change

And in this state and threat of erasure, it is downright impossible to stay true to moral principles. I consider how my own values have changed permanently from that initial period when I learned I could die. I was thrust into survival mode; For example, I no longer considered technical innovation and my undying futurism part of my identity. I lost the fire that led me to heated arguments with others about moral principles, and I was forced into a passive state. And my situation is simply with an existential threat of death. At Nickel, the threat of death is active. When Griff, whether through mistake or moral principle, refused to dive in the boxing match, he was killed. When Elwood demonstrated moral principle in writing a letter to the inspectors, he was killed. And even if you survive, the life you live after these threats is tortured and filled with a similar aversion to moral principals. Even after Turner escapes Nickel, he can't bring himself to speak out against their practices or even vote. And while he may bring himself to demonstrate moral action through principle by the end of the novel, I can't help but consider Elwood again in the conversation of moral decay through the threat of mortality

Relating moral manipulation to Elwood

It's easy to view Elwood as somewhat of a "Jesus figure," a martyr who stood for peace and love in the face of injustice through the teachings of Reverend King. Certainly his aversion to poisoning Earl and his early protests of "WE SHALL WIN BY LOVE" might suggest this. But we must remember the burden punishment forced on his soul. As he waits in his "jail within a jail," he "cannot make that leap to love. He understood neither the impulse of the proposition nor the will to execute it." Not only did he lose the privilege of upholding his moral values, but he lost the privilege of love - both in feeling and receiving. His only hope is in waiting for others to rise in the confines of his cell, and he retains a hope that someday the dining room will open. While this "hope" is a problematic piece of his moral education that I will address in my solution, I now return to this idea of a "jail within a jail." Perhaps it refers not only to the solitary confinement within Nickel, but also to the minds of the boys in its confines. Nickel has no walls because it is not the true jail. The jail within the jail is the blockage of morality and love, the

blockage that leads the boys to fight each other while Nickel profits. I therefore must append Descartes' famous line for the punished: "I think therefore I belong to my punishers."

Why King works

The only solace found by the tortured is in the wicked. The fellow tortured understand their plight, sure, but if one has truly lost all hope and attachment, these boundaries too fall away. Most lose their capacity to love and compassion for others in survival mode. Thus, those under constant punishment may be relieved in the knowledge that those who punish only feel validation by the punished. In loving our punishers, we withhold this validation. This way of thinking aligns fairly well with the teachings of Reverend King, who believed through loving those who punish we may invalidate the punishers and "wear [them] down by our capacity to suffer." But, in the words of Elwood, "What a thing to ask. What an impossible thing."

The injustice of enforcing King's morality

When I first read "The Song of Solomon," I felt troubled at Guitar Banes' response to violence with violence. I thought, ignorantly, that he should model the teachings of pacifism and nonviolence taught by prominent figures like Gandhi and MLK. But who am I to ask these things, and who are we to expect them? Responding to violence and injustice with love may work, and it may even be proven to work, but to ask a tortured man (or worse, a boy) to love his cruel assailant is in and of itself an injustice.

A transition to Philosophers

So what do I believe in going into the rest of this essay? I believe Elwood exemplified a personal form of Justice in his adherence to MLK's teachings and more importantly in hoping to change the state of the world for black people. This personal justice was ripped from him through cruelty: this is the greatest of injustices.

Hobbes: Self preservation in this novel

In a discussion of self preservation, Hobbes must always be the first to come to mind. How can we expect these children to uphold moral code if they are all forced into a state of war

(Hobbes, 76) through the threat of being “taken out back.” And when the society of contracts does not find room for these boys, where are they supposed to find solace? His solution might be to create a society within the society: to find a new leader willing to create new laws for those who exist in this new society of contracts that punishes all people for disobeying them. While I don’t believe in his solution, his “personal war” will become a theme throughout my Philosophical reasoning.

Plato: Why “ideal worlds” don’t work in this text

I believe Plato provides the most nuanced take on what justice “provides” for Elwood in consideration of his ethical principles. Because the two acts that I believe were the most just and most satisfying were the poisoning of Earl and Turner’s escaping. I would also consider Elwood’s letter and Turner’s speaking out against Nickel just, but the consequences of the former and uncertainty in the latter prevent me from calling these acts “satisfying” and mentally profitable. Plato also claims that Justice is certainly not “for the benefit...of one’s friends and the harm of enemies,” (Plato, 11) but rather doing good for all. Plato would, then, suggest the teachings of MLK and of loving the enemy in order to profit. While I have discussed why Martin Luther King’s teachings are effective, I realize “profit” is difficult to quantify in this instance. While a society could profit from these teachings of love, I’m still not convinced that an individual would profit. Additionally, how do we behave when an act of justice towards an enemy furthers injustice towards friends? Should we truly have no preference between those who act just towards us and those who act unjustly? Additionally, doesn’t the societal injustice done by the Nickel higher-ups by definition make them profit, not just monetarily but also in power, freedom, and happiness? Many failings of Plato’s arguments arise in an unjust society. If justice is punished severely by external factors, of course, justice is not more profitable than injustice. Ideal-world arguments will not serve solutions here. This line of reasoning using Plato also reveals why Martin Luther King’s teachings are unjust for the privileged to incentivize: those in an “ideal world” built by hope and outside world freedoms cannot push their teachings on those in the “unjust world.”

Kant - Gilligan: A philosophical reasoning behind social conditioning

My second line of reasoning, then, will be a more practical approach that shall begin with Kant and conclude with Stevenson. Firstly, the categorical imperative (Kant, 17) at a glance will not serve the boys in Nickel on an ideal world argument. Almost every act from lying, fighting, and poisoning the higher-ups serves to violate the categorical imperative. As the Kohlberg scale reveals, most of these boys are forced into levels of one or two through punishment and death threats. This stunting is the origin of the moral blockage forced onto Elwood and others by Nickel. While Kohlberg recognizes age in his scale, he fails to factor in the external circumstances that leave certain individuals unable to progress past certain levels. This is a place for Gilligan. While her writings focused mostly on women, I believe that she can be generalized to all those under social conditioning. Just as women are socially conditioned to be unable to progress past a certain Kohlberg rank (Gilligan, 71), children and especially black children are conditioned to be passive. In the case of children, Kohlberg understood that some moral stunting was to be assumed with age, more due to physiology and neuroscience than sociology. But in the case of race, social conditioning is present and exemplified through cases such as “bumptious contact,” where a failure to assume a passive state on the sidewalks could get one killed. Working Hobbes back in, the threat of death would push one into a state of turmoil among social equals and using Nietzsche, the punishment would break your spirit into passivity to those in power (Nietzsche, 81). These work in tandem to broaden Gilligan’s argument to race and those in incarceration: social conditioning stunts moral progression.

Stevenson: Cyclic injustice

The previous paragraph reads more as a proof of social conditioning than it does an argument that this conditioning is unjust. To return to justice, we must consider Stevenson. Trina Garnett was a victim of abuse and social conditioning due to racial, gender, and age factors. She was thrust down a pipeline of imprisonment for a single irrational decision (most likely due to this moral stunting) and inadequate legal support. This imprisonment led to further abuse, which led to further vulnerability, which led to further abuse. (Stevenson, 148) Stevenson highlights the cyclic nature of injustice. Take the case of Ian Manuel (Stevenson, 152), whose time in solitary confinement led to mental stunting which led to further time in solitary confinement through self-harm. Consistent with the meticulously engineered atrocities of Nickel, both solitary

confinement and frequent extensions of time sentences for “bad behavior” was used. Solitary confinement quite literally eliminates everything but the self, forcing even the strongest of moral compasses into a state of Kohlberg one: avoidance of punishment. Is it any wonder that Elwood’s firm denial of Martin Luther King’s teachings happened in solitary confinement? And returning to a Platonic line of thinking: while a society could profit from teachings of love in the face of injustice, the individual would not. And how can an individual recognize society when all but the self is stripped away in solitary?

Stevenson: Social conditioning and racism

Returning to social conditioning for a moment, Stevenson highlights an important factor of racial injustice in the case of George Stinney (Stevenson, 157). Stinney was sentenced to death for a crime, with little evidence brought against him, at age fourteen. While obviously an act of collective racism, the “reasoning” -- I use this word in the most sarcastic of ways -- in the mind of a racist jury member is important to consider as we attempt to dismantle it. Because even if a racist was able to draw some anecdotal or even statistical evidence that being black was associated with committing a crime, this would not be enough to convict a child of a crime and certainly not demonize a group of people. The statistic I sometimes heard thrown around as a racist “joke” -- again, as sarcastic as possible -- was “despite making up only 13% of the population, black people commit about 50% of crime.” I have already highlighted in previous essays the danger of thinking in statistics, but in this instance context is everything. Firstly, most of this crime is black-on-black. Secondly, **this crime is socially conditioned by those in power.** To reiterate: the threat of death pushes one into a state of turmoil and moral stunting among social equals and punishment breaks the spirit into passivity to those in power. The state of turmoil causes the crime, and the crimes aren’t even committed against those in power. Take the fight Elwood attempted to break up. This crime did not hurt those in power, but they still used it to socially condition Elwood in “The White House.”

Rawl’s solution

While I have done some Philosophical truth-seeking in terms of the origin and nature of the injustice in Nickel, Philosophical solution-building must still be done. The Philosophers

Rawls and Mill will aid in this pursuit, as they propose two extremes that form a gradient. Rawls's original position, where all parties are "rational and mutually disinterested," (Rawls, 13) could serve to put those in power on equal footing as those out of power. But in its current, practical, state, it actually serves as more of a tool to those in power than to those out of it. The proposal of blind justice in a state of moral conditioning is dangerous because it serves to give the impression of "reason" when a more accurate term would be ignorance. In the case of Trina Garnett (Stevenson, 148), enforced blind justice forced an otherwise morally just judge to contribute to a system of injustice by being unable to consider her age, mental illness, or social status. If social conditioning is to be ignored through blind justice, we might as well believe the statistical racism proposed in the previous paragraph. That being said, a true reform could justly use the original position if we chose to press "a reset button" on our current justice system.

Mill's justice solution

Mill's relativity in the face of justice is true to his Utilitarian self. When he notes "The law which confers on him these rights, may be a bad law," (Mill, 37) His assertion that laws and entire systems of "justice" can be unjust has clear applicability to justice reform in Nickel. The trouble in his relativism arises again in the presence of moral stunting due to unjust systems. If one is operating at a Kohlberg one, their version of justice may not be ideal in reforming the system. Their enforced passivity in the face of those in power returns to Nietzsche's idea that good and evil (and by extension justice) are defined by those in power (Nietzsche, 53). Those who are hurt by the system become vehicles to those benefiting from the system if all justice is relative. But if we can find a way to reverse moral stunting, Mill's justice may be our solution. This solution also makes sense in consideration of Mill's other views on justice, especially those concerning women outlined in "The Subjugation of Women." He believed that the claim that women were somehow intellectually inferior to men was based on the social conditioning and moral stunting they faced. Given Mill's childhood full of intellectual freedom and his opportunities making him everything he was, this anti-conditioning and equal opportunistic view will serve me well in finding solutions.

Why we can't press "the reset button"

If we could press a reset button on all societal laws and contexts and recreate everything from scratch, a solution to the problem of moral decay would be much simpler. We would use Rawl's blind justice system to create laws that would equally hold all accountable. And if we could somehow "wipe the slate clean," this would work just fine. But such a rework is downright impossible and also not the prompt I am attempting to solve. Because reform is never done in the absence of historical context, so why should my theoretical reform be done in this way? Relative justice, therefore, is the only solution in historical contexts.

An introduction to my two systems

I have mentioned my qualms with relative justice in the face of enforced moral decay. The two solutions that come to mind in resolving this dilemma are: a) "out of system" advocates who have not been subjected to the same moral and developmental stunting or b) the removal and harsh punishment of social conditioning, followed by a system of self-advocacy for the incarcerated and socially disadvantaged. While I believe that the latter is a more sound system, I will first consider the former. Then, I will propose solutions and a method of action for achieving the latter, culminating in my idea of what future society will look like.

Why out of system advocates don't work

Out of system advocates essentially concatenate the elimination of social conditioning and the system of self-advocacy. The concept aligns fairly well with the system we have now: wealthier people, predominantly white in the United States, pay for a better education where they learn about the injustices in this country and the systems in place. It's a practice that I am participating in at this very moment: writing an essay on how to "solve injustice" while on the outside of the system. My understanding was taught to me through handpicked literature, knowledgeable class speakers, and superb teachers, all of which can be accessed only through high tuition costs. Ideally, this education provides a privileged group with the moral freedom to engineer systems of accountability and reform that take into account the sufferings of morally and socially manipulated groups. The trouble with this system arises in two places: the historically money-focused values of this class of people and the inability to truly understand and design the proper systems of reform without feeling the impacts of the current system. In the

former, while certain moral principles and an emphasis on justice reform may be upheld in school, many members of this educated class will inevitably do as their parents did and think: “What did mommy and daddy do to make their wealth?” Additionally, they might hope to provide for their children the same education that they received, which would force them to make significant amounts of money and carry the torch of their forefathers. Preventing this would require significant amounts of money invested as motivation to reform the justice system, money which would be better spent...reforming the justice system.

But even if we could invest this money as motivation, those with intentions to make money or indeed even more honorable ones would fall victim to the latter issue of this system: the inability to understand moral manipulation and the true horrors experienced by the manipulated. In a culture so oversaturated with violence and atrocity, it's quite easy to become desensitized, especially as an outsider looking into these systems of violence. Thus, no matter the perspective gained through stories, conversations, and teachings, one will never gain a true understanding of those in need of support. Thus, I will now lay the groundwork for the removal of social conditioning. This way, we may create a system in which those personally affected by injustices may correct the system self-sufficiently.

How to remove social conditioning

The elimination of moral manipulation must begin in the formative years of life, and the influences a child has. This means the reevaluation of the values taught in the school system, further access to mandated reporting, and the elimination of fear of death and violence at a young age. Not all schools were created equal. We must push for more extensive education concerning systemic injustice in school systems in neighborhoods with a high density of people likely to be affected most by these systems, such as minorities and those without the means to “pay their way out.” A firm understanding of constitutional rights and the laws that surround injustices will be necessary in removing social conditioning. Moral philosophy should be taught and encouraged, but with less emphasis on hope and more emphasis on realism (and I mean colloquial realism, not philosophical) and pragmatic action. Sadly, Elwood's learning of MLK's values under the assumptions of hope for the future was a factor in his changing his principles. We must teach all Philosophy and values under the assumption: “These values may never be implemented on a

large scale, but we must still fight for them.” Values should also be intimately tied to action. You can’t simply “think” something, you must say or do something to demonstrate these values. Hope is what drives many to inaction and dismay at injustice, rather than fighting for a better future.

All of this education is also under the assumption that children are not in fear for their own lives. Ideally, the widespread teaching of moral philosophy would minimize the violence that benefits the higher-ups of an unjust society. To ensure protection from harm and safety, though, we must increase mandated reporting in schools and fund better access to non-profit mental health counseling. Destigmatizing mental health counseling is also vital in the fight against social conditioning. Through increased awareness of social conditioning factors and moral thinking through education and safer environments for those susceptible to injustice, we may commence with reform from the inside.

The self advocacy system

Mill’s relative justice can now be achieved through better access to justice reform for those inside the system. True anonymity must be preserved to ensure these acts of reform are not punished, and access to this reform should go unobstructed. Jails, schools, and especially juvenile detention centers should be the first place to implement access to reformation. This access should take the form of both Government officials sworn to anonymity and places for notes and letters, where punishments for tampering are severe. These complaints and proposals should be considered by the justice system on the basis of equity and accountability against those in power. If we can first prevent the moral tampering done against the incarcerated and socially disenfranchised, reform would naturally come from the inside. Consider again Martin Luther King’s movement for social justice. He quite literally wrote the most formative papers in this movement **from the inside** in “Letters from a Birmingham Jail.” I believe that his internal resistance to moral and social manipulation is unrealistic for most and unjust to enforce, and so the external solutions in the previous paragraph are necessary for promoting further reform from inside the system.

A Conclusion

Every injustice in *Nickel Boys* pales in comparison to the restriction of one's mind. Throughout the history of Philosophy, the self has been taken for granted as the one true constant in our lives. Hopefully, through introspection into the nature of moral manipulation and the solutions above, we may all have the right to free thought and love once again.