

ETHICS ROLL CALL

TO CHAMPION THE NOBILITY OF POLICING



Ethics Train-the-Trainer Class, September 10-13, 2012. ILEA Headquarters, Center for American and International Law, Plano Texas

Ethics Corner

An actually received email just last week! Imagine how it made us desire to sign up with these folks immediately:

“We provide a concept that will allow anyone with sufficient work experience to obtain a fully verifiable Unievrstity Dgree. Dcotorate, Bacehlor or Bcaholors. [sic]

Diploma from prestigious non-accredited universities based on your present knowledge & professional experience.

No time wasted!. Get a Promotion. At your Own Schedule!.

Think of it, within four to six weeks, you too could be a college graduate. Many people share the same frustration, they are doing the work of

the person that has the degree and the person that has the degree is getting all the money.”

After all, who in their right mind would want to obtain their degrees (or “dgerrees”) from a regionally accredited, fully legitimate institution of higher learning when, “within four to six weeks” they could have the same prestige and the same salary as that poor fool who did earn their degree from a legitimate college or university resulting from many years of hard work and real learning? Perhaps this kind of pragmatic thinking can drip over into the profession of policing.

Who needs to take real training and professional continuing education when you can just sign onto a web site and get a phony certificate of completion over the internet with people who obviously cannot even spell? You’d have to be a rather large fool to pass on that fantastic opportunity! What is the ethical nature of these folks being in business? Sigh.

The educated differ from the uneducated as much as the living from the dead.

Aristotle

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The Wisdom of Abraham (cont.)

By Dan Primozic

When Abraham Lincoln took office as President of the United States, he appointed one of his chief rivals in the election, William H. Seward, as his Secretary of State. Seward, evidently, failed to realize fully that he, himself, had not been elected president. He began his time in office with a profound and open mistrust of Lincoln's capacities to lead and an overconfidence in his own position and in his own wisdom. Seward wrote Lincoln a rather lengthy letter telling Lincoln what must be done about important matters such as domestic and foreign policy, the slavery issue, Fort Sumter, blockading the Gulf of Mexico, waging war with Spain, France, Great Britain and Russia, and especially, "devolve" the responsibilities for these projects on "some member of his cabinet," i. e. on Seward himself, who of course sought neither "to evade not assume responsibility." (William E. Barton, *The Life of Abraham Lincoln*, Volume Two, Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company Publishers, p. 30)

In response to this rude and arrogant missive Lincoln wrote in a return letter: "I remark that if this must be done, I must do it." (*Ibid.*)

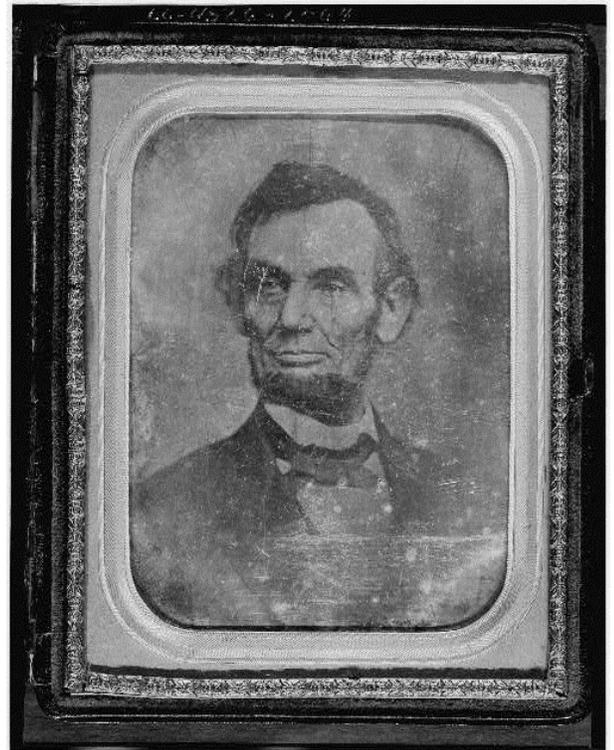
William E. Barton commented that

"Seward's letter was not more remarkable for its incivility to the president than it was for its bad statesmanship. It proposed a course of action on the part of the United States which would surely have involved us in a war with one or more European nations. After its discourtesy toward President Lincoln, the most notable fact was its calm assumption of superiority. . .

[Lincoln] calmly and definitively informed his subordinate that he himself was, and intended to be, the president; and then he pocketed Mr. Seward's communication and told of it to no one.

The finest traits in Lincoln's character were his integrity and his magnanimity. Not until Lincoln and Seward were both dead, and many years had passed, did the world know of this correspondence. (*Ibid.*, p. 31)

I would add to that only that this situation showed Lincoln's exceptional possession of the virtue of humility as did many other similar situations that we know about.



(Image from the Library of Congress, photograph taken in 1864)

Again, even when it came to his many rivals in his own appointed cabinet, Lincoln could draw upon his good humor and spot on stories that made his point. When Simon Cameron resigned his cabinet position as Secretary of War in 1862, there were those Republican senators who wanted Lincoln to remove all of his cabinet members and appoint seven new men. They thought it would somehow fix the deteriorating confidence of the country.

The president listened with patient courtesy, and when the senators had concluded, he said, with a characteristic gleam of humor in his eye:

"Gentlemen, your request for a change of the whole Cabinet because I have made one change reminds me of a story I once heard in Illinois, of a farmer who was much troubled with skunks. His wife insisted on his trying to get rid of them.

"He loaded his shotgun one moonlight night and awaited developments. After

*They know enough
who know how to
learn.*

Henry Adams

some time the wife heard the shotgun go off, and in a few minutes the farmer entered the house.

“‘What luck have you?’ asked she.

“‘I hid myself behind the wood-pile,’ said the old man, ‘with the shotgun pointed toward the hen-roost, and before long there appeared not one skunk, but seven. I took aim, blazed away, killed one, and he raised such a fearful smell that I concluded it was best to let the other six go.’” (*Ibid.*, p. 108)

From the passage above, we see again how Lincoln’s grasp of human nature and how human beings will respond to appropriate wit and humor served him well in dispersing the conflict that befell him. In fact, this piece of wit cited above worked so well that: “The senators laughed and departed, not questioning the president’s logic.” (*Ibid.*)

When it came to the pardoning of Union soldiers that were found guilty of desertion, Lincoln was moved to do so by compassion, to be sure. He pardoned some such soldiers simply because of their youth: “‘His mother says he is but seventeen,’” was his reason in one case. “‘I am unwilling for any boy under eighteen to be shot,’” he telegraphed in another case.” (*Ibid.*, p. 255)

But it is just as surely the case that his knowledge of human nature helped him refuse to sanction the death penalty in many cases of desertion from the Union Army. As Don Piatt, a newspaper writer of that time formulates Lincoln’s motivation here:

There was far more policy in this course . . . than kind feeling. To assert the contrary is to detract from Lincoln’s force of character, as well as his intellect. . . He knew that he was dependent upon volunteers for soldiers, and to force upon such men as those the stern discipline of the Regular Army was to render the service unpopular. And it please him to be the source of mercy, as well as the fountain of honor, in this direction. (*Ibid.*)

So it is clear that in addition to Lincoln being a man of integrity and virtuous character, his wisdom also included the fact that he was not a fool.

There will be another installment or two of “The Wisdom of Abraham” in future editions of the *Ethics Roll Call* as it is our hope that by giving a mere taste of Lincoln’s ethical mind and heart in the dispatch of his leadership, it will encourage our readers to study his ways more extensively themselves. We think it well worth the effort.



(Image from the *Abraham Lincoln Art Gallery.com*)

Brain Ethics

An associate professor of the social sciences at Harvard University, Joshua Greene, thinks he might have settled the long-standing dispute among philosophers as to the foundations of ethical and moral decision-making.

Philosophers of the “rationalist” ilk, from Socrates to Immanuel Kant, have held that when we make the best moral decisions, we use our minds, intellects or our rational faculties to do so. David Hume and others have argued that moral decisions are guided by the “sentiments” and emotions and not by reason at all.

Greene has joined brain-scans with psychological moral experiments to get to the bottom of how, in fact, we make our moral choices. From that research he has constructed what he calls a “dual-process theory:”

*We know too much
and feel too little.
At least, we feel
too little of those
creative emotions
from which a good
life springs.*

Bertrand Russell

Greene's "dual-process theory" of moral decision-making posits that rationality and emotion are recruited according to the circumstances, with each offering its own advantages and disadvantages. He likens the moral brain to a camera that comes with manufactured presets, such as "portrait" or "landscape," along with a manual mode that requires photographers to make adjustments on their own. Emotional responses, which are influenced by humans' [sic.] biological makeup and social experiences, are like presets: fast and efficient, but also mindless and inflexible. Rationality is like manual mode: adaptable to all kinds of unique scenarios, but time-consuming and cumbersome. (Peter Saalfeld, "The Biology of Right and Wrong: Moral Minded," *Harvard Magazine*, <http://harvardmagazine.com/2012/01/the-biology-of-right-and-wrong>)

In that interview, Greene presents a dilemma:

A trolley is headed towards five people and the only way you can save them is to hit a switch that will turn the trolley away from the five and onto a side track. But if you turn it onto the side track, it will run over one person.

Most people claim they would flip the switch because of a rational kind of cost/benefit analysis they have thought through, which philosophers would recognize as the result of a utilitarian type of ethical decision-making. But changing the dilemma slightly obtains a different result:

This time, you're on a footbridge, in between the oncoming trolley and the five people. . . The only way you can save those five people is to push this big guy off the footbridge so that . . . You sort of use him as a trolley stopper [and save the five people].

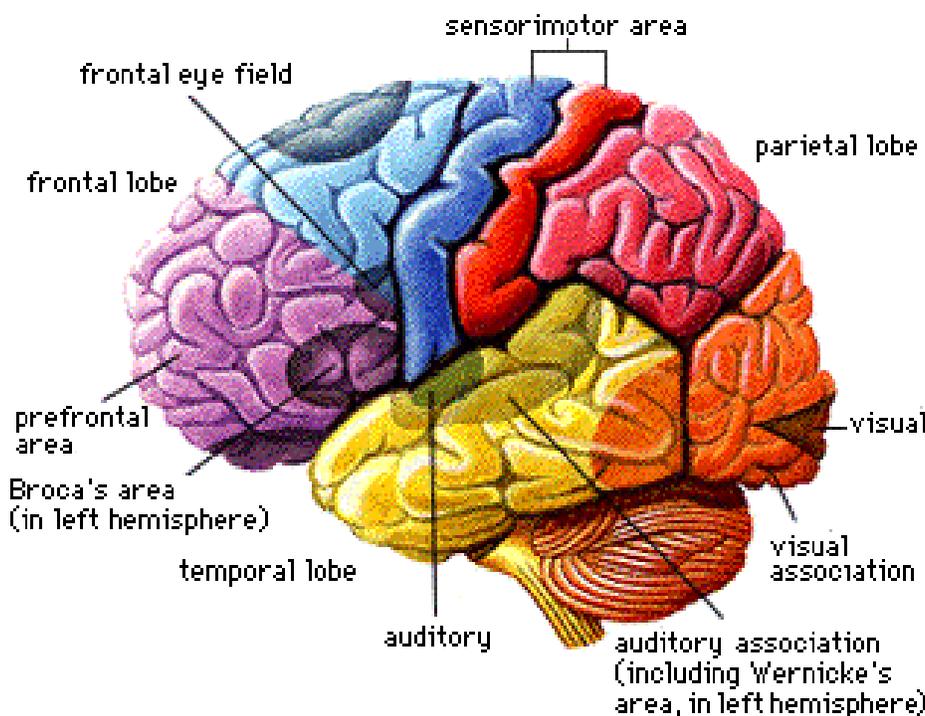
Greene was interviewed by an NPR reporter recently and the interview is worth your time if you are interested in this issue and what Greene and his associate found out. The place to find the interview is:

<http://www.npr.org/2012/09/20/161440292/why-pictures-can-sway-your-moral-judgment>

In this form of the dilemma, most people will not throw the big fellow to his death to save the other five people. Now they are using the emotional, more visual part of their brain to make that decision. The visual picture they have in their minds of throwing the man to his death does not sit well with them. It is just wrong to do so no matter

what the utilitarian calculation.

As it turns out, if a scenario containing an ethical dilemma is presented to us from a verbal framework, our brains will likely go into the rational, slow, "cumbersome" mode and try to reason the dilemma through to a resolution. However, if the dilemma is presented to us in a visual or pictorial mode, our moral response will come from the emotional, automatic part of our brain and will be swift and efficient.



Logic is a poor guide compared with custom.

Sir Winston Churchill

Greene's work will doubtless prompt much future research and spawn philosophical insights hitherto undiscovered. It has already sown a few new ideas for law enforcement ethics and ethics education for us here at the Center for Law Enforcement Ethics. We will discuss those ideas in upcoming editions of *The Ethics Roll Call*.



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