When I started teaching Business Ethics in 1975, it was a relatively new subject, previously treated as a part of Applied Ethics. There was a question of what should be included in the course. I was teaching working adults, in positions of middle management, in our Institute For Management. One question continually came up, “What should you do when your job requires you to do something that goes against your conscience?”

Since then this issue has become more and more urgent. Numerous states, now require pharmacists to dispense abortifacients and contraceptives against their consciences. In Illinois several pharmacists have already lost their jobs for refusal to do so. Catholic hospitals and social agencies are being required to carry out policies clearly contrary to Catholic moral teaching. Recently, The Ethics Committee of The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists issued a statement requiring physicians to perform abortions under certain circumstances, “Conscientious refusals that conflict with patient well-being should be accommodated only if the primary duty to the patient can be fulfilled . . . “ (ACOG Committee). In other words, if no other doctor is available to perform an abortion, then a doctor must provide the service in spite of his conscience. This statement may well become the basis for revoking a doctor’s medical licence.

While such problems have become more widespread in almost every field, they are not
easy to deal with. Solutions require prudence. A person cannot quit his job every time he has a moral conflict. On the other hand, one must not rationalize away his moral obligations. There are clearly times when we must be willing to undergo great hardships, even the loss of our life, to do what is right. Thus I have become increasingly interested in the question of courage to follow one’s conscience, or moral courage, at great personal cost. I thought immediately of St. Thomas More. I discovered that Erasmus had called Thomas More “the English Socrates” (Bolt 84). This intrigued me and I began to reflect on this comparison. The more I read about their deaths, the more similarities I found. But there were also significant differences.

The obvious difference is that St. Thomas More was a devout Christian while Socrates was a pagan Greek seeking the true God beyond Greek mythology with “a deeper and purer religious sensibility” (Benedict XVI). That is indeed a fascinating difference. However that would require a study in itself.

I will examine the nature of moral courage as illustrated in the deaths of these two men. My main sources will be the dialogues of Plato and the play “A Man For All Seasons.” by John Bolt. Both are fictitious reconstructions. However, they follow closely other historical accounts. Moral truth is frequently conveyed more effectively by fiction than by abstract statement.

Socrates avoided politics; More was the second highest official in the country.

Thomas More was deeply involved in public office. He had worked his way up through the ranks as a brilliant lawyer. Eventually he succeeded Cardinal Wolsey, becoming the first layman to occupy the office of Chancellor of England. He was thus second only to the King. Had he pursued the life of a scholar, as Erasmus urged him, it is highly likely that he would have escaped execution.

Socrates, on the other hand, avoided public office. He explains that his “voice” had
warned him to stay out of public affairs. In what seems like a prophetic passage, he explains:

“... for you may be sure, gentlemen, that if I had meddled in public business in the past, I should have perished long ago and done no good either to you or to myself. Do not be annoyed at my telling the truth; the fact is that no man in the world will come off safe who honestly opposes either you or any other multitude, and tries to hinder the many unjust and illegal doings in a state. It is necessary that one who really and truly fights for the right, if he is to survive even for a short time, shall act as a private man, not as a public man.” (Plato, 437; 31d6-32e3).

**Both had great respect for the law.** Both More and Socrates are distinguished by their respect for the law. While condemned unjustly, neither of them blamed the laws. Rather they defended the value of law.

In an oft-quoted passage in *A Man for All Seasons*, More gives his defense of law. Roper is aghast that he would give even the Devil the protection of the law. More responds:

“...This country’s planted thick with laws from coast to coast - - Man’s laws, not God’s laws –and if you cut them down-and you’re just the man to do it- d’you really think you could stand upright in the winds that would blow then? Yes, I’d give the Devil benefit of law, for my own safety’s sake.” (66)

In the *Crito*, when Socrates’s friends bribed the guard and arranged an escape, he refused to leave prison because it would violate the law. They respond that the law had unjustly condemned him. Socrates responds that it was the jury, not the laws, that had done so. He had no quarrel with the law. He then goes on to give his well-known arguments. First, we owe obedience to the laws out of gratitude. Our parents were married by them and we grew up and
were educated under them. Secondly, when we came of age, by choosing to live in Athens, we made a tacit contract to obey the laws. If we are willing to live under the protection of the laws, then we must agree to obey them.

**It is clear why More died, but not why Socrates died.** More was executed for his refusal to sign the Act of Succession, which required anyone called upon to take an oath, recognizing the offspring of Henry and Anne as the rightful heirs to the throne. He could have signed it, for he recognized Parliament’s authority to determine the succession. But to the act was joined a clause rejecting any foreign authority. This was clearly aimed at Papal Supremacy. Refusal did not entail the death penalty. Yet as the Duke of Norfolk warned him, “*indignatio principis mors est*” (Huddleston 6). Because of More’s prominence and popularity, Henry was anxious to have his support. When More refused, Henry’s minions laid traps to trick him into treason. Ultimately, he died because his conscience prevented him from recognizing Parliament’s authority to rule on spiritual matters, such as Papal Supremacy.

In Socrates’s case, the trouble came because his practice of philosophy was perceived as a threat to the leaders of the revolution. Due to his constant questioning in the Agora, he was thought to stir up the people. He also angered the authorities by embarrassing them in public.

This, however, did not seem to require the death penalty. Most scholars believe that he was expected to ask for and receive exile. By refusing to do this he apparently wished to force the Athenians to make a moral choice. Why did he think this a moral duty? The only answer we find is given in the Apology:

“Then if you were to say to me . . .:’We will not this time listen to Anytos, my dear Socrates; we let you go free, but on this condition, that you no longer spend your time in this search or in philosophy and if you are caught doing this again,
you shall die’ – if you should let me go free on these terms which I have mentioned, I should answer you, ‘Many thanks indeed for your kindness, gentlemen, but I will obey the god rather than you. . . .’” (Plato, 435; 2

The question remains why he thought the god required this of him or why he had to practice philosophy in Athens.? Clearly, he thought this a matter of conscience, but why?

**Both could have avoided death by compromise.** We see that Socrates could have avoided death by compromise. All he had to do was to stop practicing philosophy or practice it somewhere else. He rejected this on grounds of conscience.

Thomas More also could have avoided death. All he had to do was take the oath recognizing Henry as the supreme head of the English Church. He could easily have rationalized it. All the English bishops except John Fisher had already done so. Who was he as a mere layman to question their authority? The Universities and Parliament had recognized Henry as head of the Church. We must remember that the issue of papal supremacy was not nearly as clear then as it was after the Council of Trent. As Bolt depicts it:

CROMWELL The King is not pleased with you.

MORE I am grieved.

CROMWELL Yet do you know that even now, if you could bring your self to agree with the Universities, the Bishops, and the Parliament of this realm, there is no honor which the King would be likely to deny you (114)?

**Both resisted the arguments and pleas of their friends and loved ones.** The day before his execution Socrates’s friend Crito came to him to reveal their arrangements for his escape. When he refuses to co-operate in the plan, Crito tries to reason with him
“. . .I tell you, don’t give up trying to save yourself, and don’t worry about what to do with yourself when you get free, as you said in court. They will be glad of you in many other places, wherever you go. . . .

Then again Socrates do not think you are undertaking a right thing by throwing yourself away when you can be free. What’s the good of taking pains to do for yourself exactly what you enemies would like to do, and what those who tried to destroy you want? Beside, I think you are betraying you own sons also; it is in your power to bring them up and educate them, and now you will go off and leave them. . .” (Plato 449; 45b7- 45d1).

Socrates invites Crito to show him where his reasoning is faulty, or else accept his decision. For the rest of the Crito Socrates explains why it would be wrong for him to escape. He concludes, “Then let it be, Crito, and let us do [it] in this way, since this way God is leading us.” (Plato 459; 54e-54e2).

Like Crito, More’s friend, the Duke of Norfolk also tried to save him Norfolk tells him, “You’re behaving like a fool. You’re behaving like a crank. You’re not behaving like a gentleman – All right, that means nothing to you; but what about your friends” (Bolt 120).

The King is trying to use Norfolk to trap More. It is dangerous to be his friend. More advises him, since he can’t break off his allegiance to the King he should break off his friendship to him. Norfolk objects that he can no more break off their friendship than change the color of his hair. More then asks:

MORE What’s to be done then?

NORFOLK Give in.

MORE I can’t give in, Howard – You might as well advise a man to change the
color of his eyes. I can’t. Our friendship’s more mutable than that.

NORFOLK Oh, that’s immutable, is it? The one fixed point in a world of changing friendships is that Thomas More will not give in!

MORE To me it has to be, for that’s myself! Affection goes as deep in me as you think, but only God I love right through, Howard and that’s myself

(Bolt pp. 121-2.).

Socrates seems to look forward to death; More was resigned to it. Did Socrates or More fear death? It is impossible to say exactly what they felt, especially from the sources available to us which trend to paint their subjects in the best light. Both spent their last days in prison writing. Socrates was putting Aesop’s fables into poetry. More wrote “A Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation.” Both continued to joke up to the moment of death.

Plato presents Socrates unafraid of death. The Phaedo begins with his statement that the true philosopher “practices” death. He looks forward to being freed from the restraints of the body. At the end of the Phaedo, Socrates is the only one calm and collected. He continues to joke. When his friends ask how they should bury him, he responds, “How you like, if you can catch me and I don’t escape you” (Plato 519; 115c3). Later he tells his friends that for his death, that he owed a sacrifice of thanksgiving to the Asclepias, the god of healing. Offered the cup of hemlock, Socrates asks the executioner if there is enough for him to offer a libation to the gods. (Plato 520-21; 117b5-118a6).

Bolt portrays More as fearless in his cell. He continued to joke as he mounted to the platform to be beheaded. In the Spectator (NO. 349), Addison wrote “that innocent mirth which had been so
conspicuous in his life did not forsake him to the last. . .his death was a piece with his life. There was nothing in it new, forced or affected. He did not look upon the severing of his head from his body as a circumstance that ought to produce any change in the disposition of his mind” (qtd. in Huddleston 6).

**Neither of them accomplished any pragmatic good by their refusal to compromise.** We come back to the question of prudence. What was to be gained? In each case, their friends found good reasons for them to avoid death. The decision to follow their conscience had serious effects upon others. What good would they accomplish?

Socrates, although seventy, left behind a wife and two young sons. He was not wealthy. Who would care for them? Would his sons be properly raised? What was the point of his death? Nothing would change. He would be silenced and his enemies would triumph.

By not compromising, More impoverished his family. His death would make no difference.

Henry remained as King and became head of the English Church. The majority of the clergy supported him. Those who remained loyal to Rome were persecuted and driven underground. Wasn’t his stance impractical? An empty gesture? Bolt phrases More’s response quite forcefully:

**ROPER** Sir, you’ve made a noble gesture.

**MORE** A gesture? It wasn’t possible for me to continue, Will. I was not able to continue. I would have if I could! I make no gesture! . . . I’m no street acrobat to make gestures! I’m practical!

**ROPER** You belittle yourself, sir, this was not practical; this was moral!

**MORE** Oh, now I understand you, Will. Morality’s not practical. Morality’s a
gesture. A complicated gesture learned from books . . . (94).

Practicality is not the issue in either case. Nor was the death of either a mere moral gesture. Both men died as a matter of conscience. They could not have acted otherwise without violating their conscience. Are these then examples of the courage of conscience?

Aristotle defines courage based on the model of the warrior who faces death in battle without trepidation. “Properly, then, he will be called brave who is fearless in face of a noble death, and of all emergencies that involve death; and the emergencies of war are in the highest degree of this kind. “ (Aristotle 975: III, 6, 1115a34-1115a35). St. Thomas Aquinas remarks on this passage, “The same reason holds in the case of any other death that a person undergoes for the good of virtue. But he makes a special mention of death in battle because in that undertaking men more frequently suffer death for the sake of good.” (236).

Courage, then, involves facing death for the sake of any noble good. But there are important differences between the warrior and the martyr. The warrior goes into battle facing the risk of death or injury. But there is no certainty; he hopes to escape unscathed. He chooses to risk death for the common good. The same would apply to anyone who risks his life to defend his family or friends. The police officer also frequently puts his life on the line for the safety of the community. The martyr, on the other hand is required to act against his conscience. If he agrees, he will avoid death altogether. If he refuses, he is facing not the risk but the certainty of death. Socrates refused to stop practicing philosophy. St. Thomas More refused to take the oath. Both chose to die. The courage of the warrior is to choose to risk the danger of death for the common good. The courage of the martyr is to choose to die for the sake of conscience.
Why choose death? Obviously because it is preferable to the alternative, “death rather than dishonor”. To many this seems madness. Be practical. Compromise. What good can come of dying? Socrates was asked to stop doing philosophy, More to take an oath. Both were a matter of mere words. Neither was asked to commit some terrible crime. More’s daughter, Meg, can’t understand why he can’t take the oath:

MEG Then say the words of the oath and in your heart think otherwise. . .

MORE What is an oath but words we say to God? . . . When a man takes an oath, Meg, he’s holding his own self in his own hands. Like water. And if he opens his fingers then – he needn’t hope to find himself again. Some men aren’t capable of this, but I’d be loathe to think your father one of them (140.).

His daughter objects that in a good state he would be honored rather than condemned. Socrates followers expressed a similar sentiment. More gives a fine expression of the courage of conscience:

MORE . . . If we lived in a State where virtue were profitable, common sense would make us good, and greed would make us saintly. And we’d live like animals or angels in the happy land that needs no heroes.

But since in fact we see that avarice, anger, envy, pride, sloth, lust and stupidity commonly profit far beyond humility, chastity, fortitude, justice, and thought, and have to choose, to be human at all . . . why then perhaps we must stand fast a little – even at the risk of being heroes. (Bolt 140-41)

The courage of conscience is fundamentally a matter of choices. What is more important to us? According to Aristotle, courage is not a matter of being fearless but of what we fear. (974-
The worldly man sees death as the worst evil and will do anything to avoid it. The brave man realizes that moral evil is even worse than death. For death comes to us all sooner or later. We cannot escape it, but we can escape doing evil.

When the duke of Norfolk warns of the danger he is in, Thomas responds, “Is that all, my Lord, then, in good faith, between your grace and me is but this, that I shall die today, and you tomorrow” (Huddleston 6).

Socrates expresses the same view at his trial:

“Neither in court nor in war ought I or anyone else to do anything and everything to contrive to escape death. In battle it is often clear that a man might escape by throwing away his arms and by begging mercy from his pursuers; and there are many other means in every danger, for escaping death, if a man can bring himself to do anything and everything. No, gentlemen, the difficult thing is not to escape death, I think, but to escape wickedness – that I believe is much more difficult, for that runs faster than death” (Plato 444D 38e5-39a5).

Aristotle and Aquinas speak of courage in the face of death. I would argue that one did not need to face death to have courage. To choose what is right at the risk or certainty of any serious loss or suffering is also an instance of courage. Aristotle claims that virtues are good habits acquired by repetition. There are too few occasions on which even soldiers must face death for it to become a habit. Hence the virtue of courage must be acquired by repeatedly facing dangers other than death.

Soldiers risking their lives for the sake of duty are certainly courageous. So are nurses or
physicians who risk their career rather than violate their conscience. So are professors who jeopardize getting tenure or even their positions to express an unpopular view when duty demands it. So are employees who oppose company policy or blow the whistle on an employer, knowing it will endanger both present and future employment.

It is not a question of whether you live or die but of how you live and die. It doesn’t matter how long you lived, how rich you were, how popular or famous you were. In the end all that matters is what kind of a person you were. What did you stand for?

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