**English 122/121**

**Fredericton High School MORAL DILEMMAS**

**1. Jean Valjean's Conscience**

In Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables*, the hero, Jean Valjean, is an ex-convict, living illegally under an assumed name and wanted for a robbery he committed many years ago. He will be returned to the galleys if he is caught. However, he is a good man. He has established himself in a town, becoming mayor and a public benefactor. One day, Jean learns that another man, a vagabond, has been arrested for a minor crime and identified as Jean Valjean. Jean is first tempted to remain quiet, reasoning to himself that since he had nothing to do with the false identification of this hapless vagabond, he has no obligation to save him. Perhaps this man's false identification, Jean reflects, is "an act of Providence meant to save me." Upon reflection, however, Jean judges such reasoning "monstrous and hypocritical." He now feels certain that it is his duty to reveal his identity, regardless of the disastrous personal consequences. His resolve is disturbed, however, as he reflects on the irreparable harm his return to the galleys will mean to so many people who depend upon him for their livelihood -- especially troubling in the case of a helpless woman and her small child to whom he feels a special obligation. He now reproaches himself for being too selfish, for thinking only of his own conscience and not of others. The right thing to do, he now claims to himself, is to remain quiet, to continue making money and using it to help others. The vagabond, he comforts himself, is not a worthy person, anyway. Still unconvinced and tormented by the need to decide, Jean goes to the trial and confesses. Did he do the right thing?

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**2. The Overcrowded Lifeboat**

In 1842, a ship struck an iceberg and more than 30 survivors were crowded into a lifeboat intended to hold 7. As a storm threatened, it became obvious that the lifeboat would have to be lightened if anyone were to survive. The captain reasoned that the right thing to do in this situation was to force some individuals to go over the side and drown. Such an action, he reasoned, was not unjust to those thrown overboard, for they would have drowned anyway. If he did nothing, however, he would be responsible for the deaths of those whom he could have saved. Some people opposed the captain's decision. They claimed that if nothing were done and everyone died as a result, no one would be responsible for these deaths. On the other hand, if the captain attempted to save some, he could do so only by killing others and their deaths would be his responsibility; this would be worse than doing nothing and letting all die. The captain rejected this reasoning. Since the only possibility for rescue required great efforts of rowing, the captain decided that the weakest would have to be sacrificed. In this situation it would be absurd, he thought, to decide by drawing lots who should be thrown overboard. As it turned out, after days of hard rowing, the survivors were rescued and the captain was tried for his action. If you had been on the jury, how would you have decided?

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**3. A Father's Agonizing Choice**

You are an inmate in a concentration camp. A sadistic guard is about to hang your son who tried to escape and wants you to pull the chair from underneath him. He says that if you don't he will not only kill your son but some other innocent inmate as well. You don't have any doubt that he means what he says. What should you do?

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**4. The Fat Man and the Impending Doom**

A fat man leading a group of people out of a cave on a coast is stuck in the mouth of that cave. In a short time high tide will be upon them, and unless he is unstuck, they will all be drowned except the fat man, whose head is out of the cave. [But, fortunately, or unfortunately, someone has with him a stick of dynamite.] There seems no way to get the fat man loose without using [that] dynamite which will inevitably kill him; but if they do not use it everyone will drown. What should they do?

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**5. The Torture of the Mad Bomber**.

A madman who has threatened to explode several bombs in crowded areas has been apprehended. Unfortunately, he has already planted the bombs and they are scheduled to go off in a short time. It is possible that hundreds of people may die. The authorities cannot make him divulge the location of the bombs by conventional methods. He refuses to say anything and requests a lawyer to protect his fifth amendment right against self-incrimination. In exasperation, some high level official suggests torture. This would be illegal, of course, but the official thinks that it is nevertheless the right thing to do in this desperate situation. Do you agree? If you do, would it also be morally justifiable to torture the mad bomber's innocent wife if that is the only way to make him talk? Why?

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