

# Ibsen's Enemy of the People: Teaching Toward an Ethical Sensibility

Peter Kahn

Moral problems resist simple answers. This complexity holds for such prominent issues as the rightness or wrongness of nuclear arms or abortion, and for more ordinary concerns of how we ought to live our everyday lives. In teaching adolescents we should not minimize this moral complexity. Rather, teenagers should be encouraged to recognize it, and, equally important, to care about the various and often conflicting moral claims. In other words, we should teach toward what I am calling an ethical sensibility: the synthesis of intellectual perspicacity and depth and breadth of caring in the context of moral problems.

Toward this end, literature can provide a rich medium for ethical instruction. In this essay, I will provide a brief review of one literary work, Ibsen's *Enemy of the People*, sketching some of its most salient moral conflicts. Then, based on these conflicts, I will offer suggestions for both initiating and guiding class discussions, permitting the class to connect with "real" personal and social moral problems. My goal is to provide an approach to using literature in moral education such that morality becomes less of an intellectual subject to be mastered, and more of an integral part of our daily lives.<sup>1</sup>

## Ibsen's "Enemy of the People"

In the play Dr. Stockmann discovers that the town's baths, which are on the verge of providing prosperity for the town, are polluted: "That water's poison whether you drink it or bathe in it! And this is what we offer those poor invalids who come to us in good faith and pay good money hoping to get their health back!"<sup>2</sup> Dr. Stockman wants to disclose this

information to the general public. And though he receives initial support from Hovstad (the local radical publisher), the Mayor of the town strongly objects: "[W]e'd be left sitting there with all that expensive plant on our hands; we'd probably have to abandon the entire project. That whole town would be ruined, thanks to you!"<sup>3</sup>

The Mayor threatens to ruin Stockmann and his family financially if Stockmann follows through with his decision to make public the damaging information. The Mayor, as the town's authority, argues that it is his own responsibility to decide what information becomes public:

Mayor [to Stockmann]: As an employee you have no right to any private opinion.  
Stockman: That's going too far! Are you trying to say that a doctor, a man of science, has no right...! [continuing later]  
That source is poisoned, man! Are you mad! We live by peddling filth and corruption! The whole town's prosperity is rooted in a lie!"<sup>4</sup>

The Mayor temporarily silences Stockmann by pressuring Hovstad not to publish Stockmann's disclosure. Indeed, to further his meager position of power, Hovstad publicly attacks Stockmann's findings and character. In response, Stockmann calls a town meeting. But virtually all the townspeople oppose him; and they jeopardize his financial livelihood, even threaten him with physical violence. The play ends with Stockmann's upholding his principled course of action — to disclose the pollution of the Baths to people outside the town.

This reading of the play portrays an important moral perspective. There are actions, based on moral principles, that supersede the say of an authority.

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We need not look too far back in history to see glaring evidence of individuals giving way to the might of an immoral authority. Germans, for instance, in the midst of Nazi Germany. Surely, in such cases, individuals ought to resist authority.

However, in other scenes the play speaks well of authority. For instance, consider the following interchange between Billing (a journalist) and Horster (a sea captain):

Billing: But you take an interest in public affairs, I suppose?  
Horster: No, I don't know the first thing about them.  
Billing: I think people ought to vote, all the same.  
Horster: Even those who have no idea what it's all about?  
Billing: No idea? What do you mean? Society's like a ship; everybody must help to steer it.  
Horster: That might be all very well on dry land; but it wouldn't work very well at sea.<sup>5</sup>

Clearly an authority (be it in the position of a sea captain or government official) is not in itself evil, but indeed, often necessary if a society (of any size) is to function, let alone promote the welfare of its members.

This conflict between the individual and authority provides an educationally fruitful avenue for moral discussion. When should an individual oppose authority and when should he or she cooperate? In defending his actions in World War II, Eichmann said: "I obeyed. Regardless of what I

was ordered to do, I would have obeyed. Certainly, I would have obeyed. I obeyed, I obeyed.<sup>6</sup> Admittedly in teaching we often ask (if not demand) students to obey us (so that we can, for instance, keep order in the classroom). However, we must recognize that blind obedience is itself not a virtue.

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I would like now to examine Stockmann's motivation for acting morally. Initially, it appears his primary motivation is to right the wrong of people in authority who, for personal gain, are attempting to deceive and thereby endanger convalescents. Yet in the course of the play, Stockmann's opposition to authority, while remaining principled, also becomes obsessional: "If there's anything I just can't stand at any price — it's leaders!"<sup>7</sup> This obsession leads to unsettling actions. For instance, Stockmann's wife complains:

Yes, they've treated you disgracefully, I will say that. But heavens! Once you start thinking of all the injustices in the world people have to put up with...! There's the boys, Thomas! Look at them! What's going to become of them? Oh no, you'd never have the heart... [Meanwhile Ejlf and Morten have come in, carrying their schoolbooks.]

Dr. Stockmann: The boys...! [Suddenly stops with a determined look.] No! Even if it meant the end of the world, I'm not knuckling under."<sup>8</sup>

It is difficult to accept (at least wholeheartedly) Stockmann's decision to sacrifice the welfare of his family for greater good of a larger community (the convalescents). In philosophical terms, this difficulty can be framed in terms of general and special

obligations. A general obligation, such as exposing the pollution of the baths, is an impersonal obligation that "would be unaffected by exchanging the identity of the agent and the identity of the recipients with those of any other persons."<sup>9</sup> The point here is that general obligations must first be recognized, and then, as well as possible, reconciled. Stockmann's initial mistake is that he lets the general obligation dominate his moral and understanding of the problem.

Stockmann's mistake then snowballs when he says, "No! Even if it meant the end of the world, I'm not knuckling under." Stockmann no longer cares for the individuals who, supposedly, he is considering from the moral perspective. Stockmann states this position even more forcefully at the town meeting.

I love this town so much that I'd rather destroy it than see it prosper on a lie... When a place has become riddled with lies, who cares if it's destroyed? I say it should simply be razed to the ground! And all the people living by these lies should be wiped out, like vermin! You'll have the whole country infested in the end, so that eventually the whole country deserves to be destroyed. And if it ever comes to that, then I'd say with all my heart; let it all be destroyed, let all its people be wiped out!"<sup>10</sup>

Stockmann condemns not only the townspeople's actions, but their very lives and welfare. Thus, to an extreme, Stockmann promotes principled reasoning divorced from the sentiment of care.

### **Ethical Instruction**

The teaching suggestions are grouped into two categories: discussing the play, and generalizing from the play to life. Both categories offer means by which to encourage adolescents to think and feel their way into, and partly out of, complex moral problems.

**Discussing the Play.** I offer two different approaches to initiating a class discussion, each with advantages and disadvantages. The first approach builds on students' emotional

responses to the play; the second emphasizes an intellectual analysis from the start.

In the first approach, when students read the play, ask them to pay particular attention to whom they admire, respect, dislike, feel sympathy for, and so on. Begin the class discussion with feeling-oriented questions (e.g., "Whom do you admire most?" "Whom do you feel sympathy for?"). Have students explain their feelings and thoughts. For example, one student may admire Stockmann for upholding his principles, even in the face of personal sacrifice; another student may admire Mrs. Stockmann for caring for the well-being of her family. The goal here is for students to begin their investigation into the play from an emotional perspective. Then, through voicing their feelings and finding that other students have different and sometimes conflicting perspectives, a more analytical discussion can follow.

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The advantage of this approach is that it brings students' feelings (e.g., of sympathy) directly into the discussion. Thus, this approach attempts to engender emotional as well as intellectual development. However, the disadvantage is that by itself, the approach does not teach students to self-initiate a larger moral perspective. In other words, ideally a student should not wait until his or her viewpoint is directly challenged before trying to understand and reconcile other viewpoints.

Alternatively, a more analytical approach can be used. When students read the play, ask them to focus on the major positions Ibsen's characters take regarding right and wrong action. Then ask students to put themselves in

the role of at least two characters (or groups of characters), and argue in a paragraph or two, as convincingly as possible, for the rightness of each position. Now, with their written work in front of them, discuss with students the major arguments for each character. How do the characters justify their actions? How do they respond to the arguments of other characters? Students might outline positions such as those of Stockmann (fighting a crusade for the future convalescents, and against deception); the Mayor (on the positive side, concerned with the well-being of the town), and Stockmann's wife (concerned with the well-being of her family).

Either approach can be expanded with the following activities. First, ask students to evaluate the relative merits of each position. The goal here is not to settle on the one right position, but

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to recognize that different *valid* positions (e.g., Stockmann's desire to publish information against the baths, the Mayor's desire to protect the town) can adversely affect other people. Then ask students to think of solutions to satisfy, if possible, the claims of all the characters. Have them discuss the adequacies of each solution. (Perhaps creating another project by which the community could prosper without the need for the polluted baths is one such

solution.)

**Generalizing from the Play to Life**  
This group of activities attempts to connect issues in the play to similar issues in life's larger context:

(1) Ask students to think of current community, national, and international problems that parallel the problems in Ibsen's play. Possible events which an educator may wish to use to enliven or even initiate the discussion include the rightness and wrongness of abortion, companies polluting the environment, pornography, disposal of nuclear waste and the like.

(2) For a concluding activity, ask students to write about a conflict-laden situation they have personally experienced. Have them describe the conflict, the positions and feelings of the various actors, the outcomes, and — from the position of hindsight — other possible solutions.

## NOTES

1. J. M. McFarlane (Translation & Editorial), *Ibsen Plays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979).
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. J. V. Lang & C. Sibyll (Eds.), *Eichmann Interrogated: Transcripts from the Archives of the Israeli Police* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Inc., 1983, p. 198).
7. McFarlane, loc. cit.
8. Ibid.
9. James S. Fishkin, *The Limits of Obligation*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982).
10. McFarlane, loc. cit.

Author note: I thank James L. Jarrett, Batya Friedman, William D. Kahn, and Cecilia Wainrby for their comments on an earlier version of this essay.  
Editor's note: Stanley Milgram's research into *Obedience to Authority* is instructive regarding the conclusions reached in this article.

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