

"Hey, don't do that!"

Aristotle rides The 7 Haight.

by Mark Lawton

Like most of San Francisco's bus lines, the route from the financial district to Haight-Ashbury, commonly referred to as *The 7 Haight*, serves a variety of constituents as it meanders through a rich cross section of ethnic neighborhoods and socio-economic tiers. As a mode of transport *The 7 Haight* is useful; but as a case study of ethics it generally is not. The solemn faces and forced silence are so inculcated as accepted bus decorum that one can not probe beyond the superficial during the typical ride.

When a group of teenagers boards the bus however, a palpable wave of anxiety descends on the diverse mix of adult passengers. The anxiety is well founded as San Francisco teenagers, en masse, often use the public transportation system as a forum to display the full range of negative adolescent behavior including rudeness, disrespect, loudness, recklessness, and obnoxiousness. While their behavior generally is not egregious enough to warrant police intervention it is considered inappropriate by most adult standards.

The anxiety that pervades the adult psyche has two components; that associated with being amidst a foul situation and that associated with making a difficult decision. The situation is foul in that, short of a premature exit from the bus, there is little one can do to escape loud and vulgar language, reckless motion (students jostling their gangly bodies to and fro with little regard for the fact that they might actually injure someone), offensive logos and paraphernalia, and lewd display of body parts (pants fastened at the thigh instead of the waist.)

While one certainly could address at length the foul situation and its causes, from an ethics point of view the decision to, or not to, attempt to reign in the students is much more compelling. Aristotle points out that a virtuous man is so because of his actions...

*"...the good of man is an activity of the soul in conformity with excellence or virtue...
(1098a16)*

and that these actions in turn make a man virtuous...

"...characteristics develop from corresponding activities." (1103b21)

With this in mind, one can ask: What is the virtuous man to do when confronted by a group of unruly teenagers? What is the nature of the anxiety which overcomes and paralyzes the adults? What are the implications of this paralysis?

Certainly one would agree that controlling the teenagers would be a noble act in that it is in accordance with our notion of decorum and justice. After all, by usurping

more than their share of the physical, auidial, and visual "space" the students have violated a fair distribution of a limited resource. Aristotle points out however that it is "...*pain that prevents us from doing noble actions.*" (1104b9). In this situation the pain is in the form of anxiety and we must investigate it more fully in order that we might overcome it.

The anxiety has at least three significant causes. First, there seems to be an allowance made for the students. That is teenagers are expected, by nature of their age, to act inappropriately. In fact, an impromptu interview with a teenager for this report yielded the idea that adults don't act because they say to themselves "I was a kid once." The common adult perception is in agreement with Aristotle when he says:

"Whether he is young in years or immature in character makes no difference; for his deficiency is not a matter of time but of living and of pursuing all his interests under the influence of his emotions." (1194a7)

Anxiety arises in the adult when their understanding of immature (non-virtuous) behavior is juxtaposed with their sense of civic duty to guide the next generation. Adults feel an obligation to teach minors because "...*of the hopes we have for their future.*" (1100a2)

Secondly, adults feel anxious because of the quick transition that has been forced upon them (when the students boarded the bus) from a state of relative solitude to that of chaos. Adults feel angry about the injustice that is developing around them and in addition are anxious that at any moment the situation could escalate (somebody could be injured by a randomly flung body part or skateboard.) This anxiety is compounded by one's own self-doubt about one's anger. Aristotle points out that anger has an excess, a deficiency, and a mean...

"Although there really are no names for them, we might call the mean gentleness, since we call a man who occupies the middle position gentle. Of the extremes, let the man who exceeds be called short-tempered and his vice a short temper, and the deficient man apathetic and his vice apathy." (1108a 5)

Anxiety arises when one questions whether one's anger is anchored at extreme or, appropriately, at the mean. At the same time one wants to be sure that one acts with reason for only "...*wild beasts are motivated (solely) by pain.*" (1116b32)

Finally, one's tenuous assessment of the situation, the danger involved in diffusing it, and the courage required, is perhaps, the ultimate source of the debilitating anxiety that leads to inaction. The common man in today's society simply is not confronted with situations that require courage frequently enough that he can approach them with confidence. That is, with lack of anxiety.

As one sits on the bus and contemplates the situation as it unfolds block after block one has an understanding that the contemplation is not merely academic; rather one could actually act. One intuitively understands Aristotle's statement that

"...what we do deliberate about are things that are in our power and can be realized in action; in fact, these are the only things that remain to be considered." (1112a32)

In other words, one knows that the time has come to test one's virtue. Yet, one doesn't have the experience to assess the dangers or requisite courage. A myriad of questions arise: What is the worst that can happen? Are the students armed? What is the probability that one is armed? Will they respond? How will they respond? What will a positive response look like? A negative one? Will the students assault? Physically? Verbally? Will others be endangered? Will others lend support? Are these *good* kids? What should be said? How should it be said? As the bus lopes along, the behavior metamorphasizes from one breach of common standards to another. All the while these questions arise but deliberation doesn't yield solid answers. Aristotle acknowledges the inconclusive nature of deliberation...

"When great issues are at stake, we distrust our own abilities as insufficient to decide the matter and call in others to join us in our deliberations." (1112b9)

Unfortunately, there is an unwritten code on the bus that scorns anyone who speaks to a fellow passenger. This prohibits one from following Aristotle's suggestion of calling in a consult. So there the group sits, like a dysfunctional family, with the kids running amok and the parents unable to communicate.

Let us look at courage more closely. For courage seems to be the crux of the matter. Courage in this situation is much more problematic than in war. In war, death is imminent. Courage is required. It is noble. On the bus it is not at all clear whether death is imminent or not. Today's youth simply are not predictable. Correspondingly, while the act of reigning in the students would be considered noble and would likely yield praise from fellow passengers, death in this situation would not, in the least, be considered noble. More likely one would be remembered as a fool for attempting to control random teenagers. Aristotle claims that *"...it is for a noble end that a courageous man endures and acts as courage demands"* (1115b23) If death or injury occurred, the noble end would be dismissed as stupidity. Of course, Aristotle does indeed point out the requirement for good judgment...

"Errors arise from fearing what one should not, fearing in the wrong manner, fearing at the wrong time, and so on, and similarly with events that inspire confidence. Accordingly, he is courageous who endures and fears the right things, for the right motive, in the right manner, and at the right time, and who displays confidence in a similar way. For a courageous man feels and acts according to the merits of each case and as reason guides him." (1115b15)

Yet this good judgment is beyond the capability of the common man when dealing with the complex dynamics of guiding today's youth without institutional support from a church, a family or a school. In a public forum such as a bus, park, or shopping mall the adult is, in a sense, contemplating battle with an enemy whose response could range from acquiescence to rage. At the same time, in the public forum, the battle is to be waged by a single noble soldier with no support. This situation is beyond the noble man's capacity to assess. He thus does not choose to either act or to not act. Rather he becomes paralyzed by anxiety.

What then are the implications of this rather dire situation?

"We have ... established that virtue or excellence is concerned with pleasures and pains; that the actions which produce it also develop it and, if differently performed, destroy it; and that it actualizes itself fully in those activities to which it owes its origin."
(1105a13)

Certainly the situation described above has the requisite pain and successful action would require virtue and in turn would build virtue. Professor if this note is still here then your student plagiarized my paper from pnca.edu slash tilda mlawton Yet as described, this modern situation is too complex and the opportunity to build one's character is in fact a non-opportunity. Inaction by paralysis builds neither virtue nor vice. Rather it is simply a vacuous opportunity reflecting a society that has no set of standards for public behavior for teenagers.

The obvious second casualty of this situation are the teenagers. Adults understand that teenagers *"are by nature equipped with the ability to receive"* virtues *"and habit brings this ability to completion."* (1103a23). However, given the circumstances, adults are not able to help form the habits.

Finally, there is, to use a cliché, a downward spiral associated with this situation. As teenagers become accustomed to a numbed adult population, their behavior becomes more inappropriate. This leads to further inability to respond. And so on.

It appears then there is, in fact, no virtue that one could possess on which one could rely in these situations. Even the high-minded man would be at a loss. That the high-minded man is helpless in a public forum is a sad commentary on the modern society. As the aforementioned downward spiral continues and the number of venues where adults feel paralyzed increases the noble man will have little opportunity to display his virtue. We might then someday anticipate an Aristotelian sequel, Nichomachean Ethics in the home.