

The Life of Galileo - Study Notes for Encountering Conflict

Overview:

Just over half way through the *The Life of Galileo*, The Little Monk says to Galileo: "What would people say if I told them that they happen to be on a small knob of stone twisting endlessly through the void round a second-rate star, just one among myriads? What would be the value or necessity then of so much patience, such understanding of their own poverty?" What this quote illustrates, is the inextricable link between identity and tradition and culture - or what we could otherwise refer to as 'the way things have always been done around here.' We think a certain way about things and we have a certain way of going about our business - whether it's what time we like to go to work, or what we choose to believe about what happens to us after we die: these thought and behaviour patterns become fundamental to our sense of who we are because they are the basis for our goals and objectives in life. And how are we to react, as The Little Monk points out, if someone suddenly challenges ideas and ways that are core to our being and have been so since as long as we can remember?

The Life of Galileo is not an anti-church or pro science play. It's a play about change - why it happens, how it's managed and received, and what the implications of it can be. Without change there would be no conflict. Theoretically we could live in a world of total acceptance - where we assented to every idea and manner of action and had no dispute with any one. Conflict only occurs when an individual or group no longer agrees with the ideas or operations of others. They want to change something. So conflict is inevitable because we must always change.

Yet, not all change results in conflict. There are many areas of our life which are adapted to change or motivated by change. Some of us love updating our computer or phone - to have the most advanced gadget. But some of us don't like this - we are used to how our 'old' technology: we know how it works - and because of this change seems to be difficult or unnecessary. In many ways *The Life of Galileo* is like this. Galileo is a character who is habitually used to change and innovation in the way he thinks. He is an inventor who has worked with the arsenal of Venice to develop their military technology. He is someone who has always embraced the idea of innovation, and who hates the feeling of restriction that comes with doing and saying the same things, which he describes as being like a "muzzle" on a "threshing ox".

Galileo has his supporters. Not just his students, but tradesman who are motivated to innovate to make their work more efficient and profitable. People like Ferderzoni the lens grinder and Vanni the ironfounder who says:

"I'd like to take this chance to say that we manufacturers are behind you. I'm not the sort of fellow that knows much about the stars, but to me you're the man who's battling for freedom to teach what's new. Take that mechanical cultivator from Germany you were describing to me. In the past year alone five books on agriculture have been published in London. We'd be glad enough to have a book on the Dutch canals. The same sort of people as are trying to block you are stopping the Bologna doctors from dissecting bodies for medical research."

Looking at *The Life of Galileo* through this framework of change, it's tempting to reduce the play to a simple juxtaposition of Galileo and his supporters as the proponents of change and the Catholic

Church as the opposite. But it's not this simple. There are people within the church who believe in what Galileo says, but are compromised, just as there are in Galileo's own camp. Galileo's student Andrea is an instance of a zealot - someone who is initially sceptical, but who once becomes a supporter is more ferocious in his beliefs to make up for it. In Andrea's case, he becomes uncompromising in his attitude to promulgating the idea that the sun is at the centre of the universe. He is righteously disgusted then by Galileo's recantation. Andrea's zealotry is as bad as that of the Inquisition - he becomes implacable in his views, and fails to see that a new kind of science call for a new type of ethics. On the other hand, Cardinal Barberini, who becomes Pope Urban VIII, is a liberal thinker who was always inclined to believe in Galileo. It's Barberini's ascension to the papacy that gives Galileo the confidence to continue making the case for the sun being at the centre of the universe. But as scientifically inclined as he is, Barberini is compromised by the politics of the church. As The Inquisitor says to him, can he seriously begin his papacy by telling the church doctors everything they believed about "those scriptures can no longer be regarded as true?"

Galileo and Barberini are both pragmatists - they both know they need to do certain things to continue to be able to do what they really want to do. What's both heartening and disheartening about *The Life of Galileo* is how pragmatism is elevated to being the guiding principle in the change management process: The Pope needs to let Galileo be threatened with torture to maintain the strength of his papacy; Galileo needs to lie and recant in order to stay alive and continue his research; Virginia needs to give up her life to support her father.

The Characters:

Galileo: Galileo takes various approaches to conflict throughout the play. He is sometimes naive in thinking that the evidence will quash all objections. He is sometimes practical in thinking about the consequences of his actions on his daughter and his own life. And he is sometimes stubbornly principled. In a nutshell, Galileo represents many of the factors that impact on the typical human when involved in change conflict.

Virginia: A selfless character who supports her father throughout the play. Clearly she has aspirations to get married and lead her own life, but accepts that she needs to give this up to look after her father. Virginia shows us that change means people will need to make sacrifices.

Andrea: Andrea doesn't understand the science of heliocentrism to begin with, and then becomes zealot-like in his advocacy of it. If the change process was left up to Andrea, it wouldn't have happened.

Sagredo: Sagredo was a real historical figure who was Galileo's friend. His is a philosopher who warns Galileo that humans are "not open to reason." His advice shows us what is difficult about managing change.

The Very Old Cardinal: There are lots of characters in this play who represent various attitudes and approaches to change. The Very Old Cardinal clearly represents the abhorrence that traditionalists can have to any type of change: "Mr Galilei moves mankind away from the centre of the universe and dumps it somewhere on the edge. Clearly this makes him an enemy of the human race."