

Past and Punishment
Ellie Makar-Limanov, Huron High School Junior

Notes:

1. *The following is a fictional scenario taking place in the 1980s.*

You're a philosophy professor at a large, prestigious university. Frederick Smith is one of your fellow colleagues in the philosophy department. He is a well-published researcher, a respected colleague, and two-time winner of the Best Lecturer Award; his students love him and his classes are very popular. You respect Smith a great deal and frequently discuss research topics with him. Although you do not generally meet off-campus, you consider him to be a friend.

One day, by accidental means, a group of university students working on a research project discover that Frederick Smith had, in his youth, lived in Germany. They also discover that he been a Nazi.

Truly named Friedrich Schmidt, the professor had previously been a young engineer in Nazi Germany. He had also been a member of the Nazi Party. Schmidt had conducted pioneering research on electromagnetism; while Schmidt did not conduct his research with the explicit aim of creating weaponry, it was later utilized by Nazi scientists in their creation of military weapons.

In 1948, Schmidt was one of several hundred German scientists to be transported to the U.S.; this was the result of "Operation Paperclip" (1945-1959) — a secret maneuver run by the Joint Intelligence Objective Agency (JIOA) which transported German scientists for government employment. Some time after his transportation, Schmidt abandoned the field of physics and earned his PhD in philosophy. In 1971, he was hired by the university he currently works for.

As one of the most important faculty members, you have been chosen to be a member of a board that will be to decide whether or not the university should fire Friedrich Schmidt.

The board is in complete disagreement. Some members claim that, while Schmidt had previously been a member of an immoral group, and while he had, to some extent, aided in immoral crimes, it is incorrect to punish for his mistakes for the duration of his entire life. These members argue that Schmidt has since changed, and is no longer the person he once was. To support this view, there are testimonials from his students, who say that they have never heard him express Nazistic views during his lectures in class.

Others argue that Schmidt is still the same person and ought to be held accountable for his involvement in the Nazi Party. They claim that the university ought to promptly fire Schmidt as he had been part of a movement responsible for absolutely heinous crimes that range from racial supremacy to biological experimentation to genocide. They say it is imperative to show that the university does not support such behavior.

You yourself are unsure. The board has agreed to come to a consensus by next week. Should Friedrich Schmidt be fired?

Study Questions:

1. Psychological experiments conducted after World War 2, such as the Milgram Experiment and the Stanford Prison Experiment, showed that entirely regular people could quite quickly be made to act immorally and inflict pain on others. These experiments showed how easily people could be affected by the situation they found themselves in. Some argue that a large portion of those who became Nazis were just regular people who had been in the wrong place at the wrong time. To what extent does the situation excuse an individual's behavior?
2. Schmidt's research had been used in the production of warfare — how responsible is he for this? Is it always, sometimes, or never unethical to conduct research during wartime that could potentially be used for war?
3. What are your obligations as a professor and as a member of the university? Should the fact that Schmidt is such an incredible academic asset to the university affect your judgement? As a colleague and as a friend, do you hold any personal responsibility toward Schmidt?