**Introduction:**
The book *Ishmael* by Daniel Quinn explores the relationship between an ageing guerilla and a man seeking to change the world. Through a form of nonverbal communication, they discussed God, man, and how both relate to the destruction of the natural world. Daniel Quinn, winner of the Turner Tomorrow Fellowship Award, wrote this book to explore his views on the environment and what man can do to solve this issue and other major global issues facing the world today.

**Major Ethics/Leadership Issue: Captivity**

**Description:** Just as animals are captive in a zoo, humans are also held captive by a human-centric system that we’ve created—we are “captives of a civilizational system that more or less compels you to go on destroying the world in order to live” (Quinn, 1992, p.25).

**Point of View of the Author:** Humans do not necessarily see their existence as a form of captivity. By seeing the world as made for man, humans have divided themselves into groups and do conquer whatever they need, to guarantee their own survival. In the process of disregarding laws of nature and living by the laws of man, humans are creating a system that is destroying the earth at the expense of their own “survival”. In essence, the daily actions of humans facilitate their captivity.

**Contrasting Point of View to the Author’s:** Man is the reason that the earth was created. Man’s purpose is to create a paradise on earth for all people. Man has freedom to do whatever s/he needs to do in order to follow the path s/he thinks will lead to peace, prosperity and freedom for all. The laws of man prevail over the laws of nature in this perspective, because earth and nature can/must be manipulated in order to create the paradise man knows s/he is responsible to produce.
Analysis of Captivity as an Ethical Issue:

1. **Happiness**: Bentham and Mill would argue that the “greatest good for the greatest number” is doing whatever we need to do to ensure that the greatest number of people can live (Weston 2008, p.155). They would argue that our desire to accumulate leads to happiness because, despite what it may be doing to the earth, at the present time, more people are able to live and thrive in the world.

2. **Virtue**: Aristotle would want us to find the appropriate middle—we need to find a balance between doing what we need to do to survive as a species, while also protecting the earth so that we may continue to reap its benefits for a longer period of time. In other words, slow down the pace of destruction to ensure more years of existence for all of humanity. Confucius believed “the greatest virtue is humanity” (Weston 2008, p.179). He too, would recognize the value of human existence and utilizing the earth for our personal needs.

3. **Person**: Kant’s categorical imperative implies that we need to rectify the division between Takers and Leavers. Either both groups destroy the world in order to survive, or neither destroy the world—either everyone does it or no one does it. Kant would encourage Takers to think universally and remember the Leavers before taking any action to promote survival.

4. **Relationship**: This ethical perspective encourages us to see beyond the human-centric perspective that holds us captive. By recognizing the many forms of life that are impacted by our own quest for survival, we would develop a capacity to care and see the interrelatedness of all life, causing us to find alternative ways to survive and coexist. Noddings would emphasize that relationship is embedded in “receptivity, relatedness, and responsiveness” (Weston 2008, p.201).

5. **Catholic Social Thought**: “Human dignity is a result of human existence” (DeBerri & Hug 2003, p.20). In *Ishmael*, humans belong to both the Takers and Leavers groups, which means that life is dignified in both factions and should be considered and respected in decisions of survival. This perspective also notes that all life of the earth is part of creation, and we must express sincere care and concern for all creation in our decisions.

6. **Conscience**: The perspective of conscience would encourage humans to question their captivity to the system that they have created for survival. A moral conscience would help humans to evaluate and question our understanding of right and wrong before making decisions on how to live and exist. Gula (1997) suggests developing conscience takes a lifetime of learning.

7. **Service**: Just as Gandhi stood up to release the Indian people from captivity, he would argue that we should seek to release ourselves from our self-imposed captivity.

8. **Work/Personal Life Balance**: The pressure to produce and provide for one’s family causes us to uphold the system of captivity. The book references the Agricultural Revolution as the catalyst that created Takers and Leavers. The Takers had to work the land to create food to eat and sell in order to survive—thus destroying the earth in the process.

9. **Relationship with Family and Friends**: Due to our sense of special obligation to family, we will do whatever it takes to ensure their survival, even if it means compromising relationships with other forms of life, nature, or the earth.
10. **Light and Shadow:** By casting light only on humans in our system, there is a large shadow—in this case, destruction of anything that is not human (i.e. the earth, creatures, etc.).

11. **Theories of Justice:** Under Rawls’ Veil of Ignorance, we may not end up as humans, therefore we would not develop or argue for a human-centric system. This practice would bring about a different theory/perspective on creation and existence that would be more inclusive and less damaging to the earth—therefore releasing us from captivity.

12. **Rawls Theory of Justice:** Included above.

13. **The Presence of Evil in Leadership/Followership:** Humans are blindly following this human-centric system because it is classified as ordinary (Johnson, 2005). It is all we know, therefore, it is what we do. We do not question the bigger purpose of our system, which enables this form of evil to exist.

14. ** Forgiveness:** Once we become aware our captivity, we must forgive our ancestors for setting us on this path. It is important to acknowledge why our ancestors chose to set up a human-centric system, but it is equally important to redirect our actions to prevent ultimate destruction.

15. **Spirituality and Leadership:** It is important to recognize that through spirituality, humans have the power to wound or heal others (Herrera, 2001). In order to heal, we must depend on spirituality to recognize our interconnectedness with all life. This means thinking beyond our human-centric system and considering the larger impact of our actions.

**Critical Thinking Tools Applied to the Text**

**Facts and Sources:** Through a Socratic dialogue, Ishmael references evolutionary events and sites such as the Bible. The major events include: Evolution, Agricultural Revolution, Fall of Man.

**Inferences:** *Comparisons:* Ishmael uses comparisons to get his points across. The examples used by Ishmael compare human interactions to those of the animal kingdom. The use of comparisons makes these stories more relatable.

**Definitions:** For a better understanding of the story Daniel Quinn recounts, we have to keep in mind the following definitions.

- *Takers* – “Civilized” people. Particularly, the culture born in an Agricultural Revolution that began about 10,000 years ago.
- *Leavers* - People of all other cultures; sometimes referred to as "primitive."
- *A culture* - A people who are enacting a story.
Group 2 Reflection on Ethical Issue of Captivity:

Our human ability to think outside the box and question nature and its laws is what has allowed us to become the species we are today. However, with that ability comes the potential to make mistakes. Humans, or anything for that matter, aren’t perfect. Mistakes are made. Sometimes, we make mistakes before we realize it and we destroy something that we can’t grow back. In terms of the environment, maybe the human species has made a mistake. Is it possible to go back? Just a century ago, the environment was perceived to be whatever humans needed it to be. It seems that we understand our mistake now, but we are not sure how possible it is go back or even if humans want to go back. Our actions have created, and continues to sustain, our captivity to a system that is quickly depleting our natural resources. The way out of this predicament is not clear, but perhaps the first step is to realign our actions with the laws of nature in hopes of working in unison with the environment that we so desperately need to remain vibrant and alive.

References


