Case Study #2: Free Will and Police Shootings

Read the sections on d'Holbach and Sartre in the chapter on Freedom in our text and the attached pieces from The Washington Post. **The completed assignment should be three pages long, (approximately 2000 words) using 12 pt. fonts and single spacing with one inch margins. Please follow the detailed instructions provided with Case Study #1 which include rubrics and a sample completed assignment.** Each answer should be separated, numbered and proportionate to the number of points possible. This study is worth a total of 100 points

**Questions:**

1. **Paraphrase:** This is a news article but you need to see if there is a particular slant or bias embedded in it. To find the conclusion, you must answer the following question: Did former police officer Stephen Rankin have to shoot William Chapman according to Michael Miller in the article which follows from The Washington Post? You will have to make inferences based on the selection and positioning of the quotes and data presented in the article. What reasons does Miller offer in support of his conclusion – why did Rankin shoot Chapman? Remember, you’re not summarizing the whole article – you’re just looking for reasons that would support the conclusion implied by Miller. (10 points)

2. **Asking the Right Questions:** The big question here is whether anyone’s beliefs and actions based on those beliefs are freely chosen. But before you can answer this question about free will, you need to gather some evidence and critical information. What facts would you need to know about this case to make a reasonably informed judgment? In this section, note that you should be raising questions such as demographic, racial and psychological profiles of Stephen Rankin and perhaps police officers in general as well as those who have been shot by the police, the arrest, detention & incarceration rates by race, ethnicity & socio-economic status, etc. but not questions about d'Holbach or Sartre. **Provide as a bulleted list and pose in question form.** For this assignment, you do not have to do the research but you need to raise the kind of questions that would drive such a project. These should be research questions and as such should be data-driven, concrete and answerable. (20 points)

3. **Would d’Holbach have found Chapman’s shooting by Stephen Rankin was a voluntary action?** Defend your answer including specific details from d’Holbach’s hard determinism & provide citations from d’Holbach (primary source = d’Holbach’s writings and does not include secondary commentary from Solomon or from me) to support your answer. Include d’Holbach’s notion of what it would take for someone to be called free and be very specific regarding the causes which d’Holbach would regard as causally relevant. (30 points)

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1 This policy may be waived if extraordinarily strong justification can be presented and documentation is provided.
4. **Would Sartre argue that Chapman’s shooting by Stephen Rankin was a voluntary action?** Defend your answer using specific details from Sartre’s existentialism & provide citations from Sartre *(primary source = Sartre’s writings and does not include secondary commentary from Solomon or from me)* to support your answer. Be sure to include a discussion of Sartre’s point that we are still free even if our choices are determined by prior causes (which would include biological and neurological states) and might even at some point become utterly predictable if those causes are known. (30 points)

5. **Conclusion:** Where do you stand on this issue? Do you think that someone might be less culpable (responsible) if one has had a wealthy and indulgent upbringing? Briefly defend your answer without resorting to a repetition of points made in previous sections. (10 points)

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**Background²: Case Study #2**

**White cop convicted of manslaughter for shooting unarmed black man outside Va. Walmart³**

*By Michael E. Miller August 5 2016*

Former Portsmouth, Va., police officer Stephen Rankin in court. (WVEC TV via AP, Pool)

It was early on the morning of April 22, 2015, when Portsmouth, Va., police officer Stephen Rankin received a call about a suspected shoplifting.

Responding to the local Walmart, Rankin spotted a young black man walking through the parking lot. The policeman radioed his dispatcher to say he was approaching.

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² Please note that you are not limited to the background offered – you may feel free to use any credible/reliable source as evidence for your arguments. Please provide full citation for all research.
Sixty-two seconds later, after a scuffle, Rankin fatally shot that young black man, 18-year-old William Chapman II, in the chest and face.

On Thursday, a jury convicted Rankin of voluntary manslaughter, rejecting his claim that the shooting was justified.

The same jury, however, also rejected more serious charges and recommended a sentence of two and a half years for the former officer — a quarter of the punishment requested by prosecutors.

“It’s not enough,” Chapman’s mother, Sallie, said of the recommended sentence, according to the Virginian-Pilot.

At the time, the killing did not draw the type of national attention seen in other police slayings of black men.

Rankin’s trial, however, came on the heels of the fatal police shootings last month of Alton Sterling in Baton Rouge and Philando Castile in Falcon Heights, Minn. Tensions remain high over the issues of race and policing in America.

Some African American activists saw the trial as a litmus test for American law enforcement.

“The criminal justice system is hell-bent on favoring those in law enforcement,” James Boyd, president of Portsmouth’s NAACP chapter, told the Associated Press before the verdict. “We see these violent injustices happening time and again without any sense of accountability. This trial has implications for every citizen, but specifically for every black American in this country.”

Rankin’s attorneys unsuccessfully tried to delay the trial, claiming the ex-cop could not get a fair trial in the current climate. They also said the case should not be judged in the context of police shootings elsewhere in the country.

“The factual scenario is so totally different than what has happened in Baton Rouge and Minneapolis and with Michael Brown [in Ferguson, Missouri],” defense attorney James Broccoletti told the AP before the trial. “I don’t think it would matter if this individual were black, red, purple or orange. It was the conduct of the person that generated the response.”
Adding to the trial’s intrigue was the fact that Rankin had fatally shot an unarmed white man in 2011.

Judge Johnny Morrison did not allow prosecutors to tell the jury about the previous shooting, however. Instead, the four days of testimony focused on those 62 seconds last spring.

The incident began when employees at a Walmart in Portsmouth, a majority black city of 100,000 near Norfolk, called 911 at around 7:30 a.m. to report a shoplifter.

According to Rankin’s court testimony, the officer approached Chapman and said, “I suppose you know why I’m here.”

The teenager walked away briskly and put his left hand in his pocket, Rankin testified.

“I think he’s reaching for something and I need to detain him,” he said on the stand, according to the Guardian. When Rankin put Chapman on the hood of his patrol car, however, the teenager allegedly tried to get away.

“Take your hand out of your pocket or I’m going to tase you,” Rankin recalled telling Chapman.

“You’re going to tase me when I didn’t do nothing to you?” Chapman replied, according to video footage from Rankin’s Taser that was played in court.

Rankin tased the teen.
“Immediately he became enraged and he became very angry,” Rankin claimed in court. The two scuffled, and Rankin’s Taser was knocked to the ground.

Rankin said he pulled his pistol and aimed it at Chapman, who was roughly six feet away from him in the parking lot. According to the officer, he ordered Chapman onto the ground but the teen instead taunted him, saying “ Shoot me.”

Chapman then “came towards me aggressively,” Rankin claimed.

“I thought he was coming to kill me,” he testified, according to the Guardian.

The officer opened fire, striking the teen in his chest and face.

Some witnesses supported Rankin’s version of events, while others contradicted it.

“He was throwing fists like he was street fighting,” Paul Akey, a crane operator working nearby that morning, said of Chapman, according to the Guardian. “I saw the officer draw his weapon and the man was just throwing his arms up like he wanted to fight,” testified Steve Price, another construction worker. “He threw his jacket off and he proceeded to the officer kind of aggressively like he wasn’t done fighting.” The two construction workers, both white, also said Chapman “charged” the cop.

A black witness described the altercation differently, however.

Gregory Provo, a Walmart security officer, testified that Chapman never charged. Instead, he made a “gesture” or “jab-step” towards Rankin, as if to make him flinch, Provo said.

Whatever happened, it resulted in Rankin firing twice at the teenager.

“This is my second one,” the officer said after the shooting, a witness testified.

It was an apparent reference to the last time Rankin killed someone. In 2011, the officer shot and killed Kirill Denyakin. The 26-year-old hotel cook had been loudly banging on an apartment door where he had been staying with friends. After someone called 911, Rankin arrived and confronted Denyakin.

According to Rankin, Denyakin charged at him and reached into his waistband.

The officer said he was afraid the cook was reaching for a weapon.

Rankin shot him 11 times. A grand jury declined to indict the officer, however. Denyakin’s family sued Rankin for $22 million but another jury also sided with the cop.
The officer and his attorneys made similar arguments in court earlier this week.

“‘I thought he was coming to kill me,’” Rankin testified, according to the Norfolk Virginia-Pilot. “I felt I needed to save my life,” Rankin testified, adding that he didn’t want to hurt Chapman and that he tried to save the teen by performing CPR after the shooting.

“He didn’t have a choice. He didn’t have an option. He didn’t have anything else left to do,” his lead attorney, James Broccoletti said during closing arguments Tuesday, according to the Guardian. “It’s easy for us to ‘Monday morning quarterback’. It’s easy for us to look back with 20/20 hindsight and say ‘shoulda, woulda, coulda’.”

Prosecutors, however, asked why Rankin, a Navy veteran with martial arts skills and a two-inch advantage on Chapman, would feel so threatened by the teen. They claimed the cop acted with premeditation after Chapman resisted arrest and defied orders.

“The law does not say that because you do not comply, you have to die,” Portsmouth commonwealth attorney Stephanie Morales said during her own closing argument. Chapman, she said, should have “lived to face prosecution.”

Rankin “brought a gun to what at worst was a fistfight,” Morales said.

Judge Morrison did not allow prosecutors to inform jurors of Rankin’s involvement in the 2011 shooting, however. The judge also did not allow Rankin’s ex-wife to testify.
that he “fantasized about line-of-duty shootings,” according to assistant commonwealth attorney Brandon Wrobleski.

Similarly, Morrison barred Morales from mentioning “mobile messages” that Rankin sent to a police dispatcher less than an hour before shooting Chapman.

“I hate this job. The whole world. The city sucks and so does the rest of the world. People are just bad,” Rankin said in the messages, which were read during his bond hearing but not at trial. “I think the story was that God would have spared Sodom and Gomorrah if they could have found just 10 decent men....”

“An hour before he killed my son, that he hates the world, and he hates the people in it,” Sallie Chapman told WAVY after the bond hearing. “So that means he woke to kill.”

Even without that information, the jury of seven women and five men — eight black and four white — still heard four days of testimony. Rankin was charged with first-degree murder and using a firearm to commit a felony, but Judge Morrison instructed the jury it could convict him of lesser charges.

After 13 hours of deliberation, the jury did just that Thursday, convicting Rankin of voluntary manslaughter.

Prosecutors then urged the jury to punish Rankin with “every second and every minute of the 10 years that you are able to give him,” according to the Guardian.

Instead, the jury recommended the former cop spend two and a half years behind bars.

Rankin might end up receiving even less punishment. Under Virginia law, Judge Morrison may reduce, but not increase, the recommended sentence when Rankin returns to court for formal sentencing on Oct. 12.
The manslaughter conviction and recommended sentence was a double blow for Chapman’s family and supporters. Had Rankin been convicted of first-degree murder, he could have received life.

Some, however, hailed the conviction as a crucial moment for the Black Lives Matter movement. Rankin is only the 13th officer nationwide to be convicted of murder or manslaughter in a jury trial since 2005, the Virginian-Pilot reported. “We had to start somewhere,” Earl Lewis, a cousin of the victim, told the newspaper. “This was the beginning.”