“A Hero’s Courage: Facing Supererogation”

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As one of the cardinal virtues, courage has been praised and pursued from the earliest of literary and philosophical writings. It is the defining virtue of the classical hero, and is a favorite topic of some of today’s most influential works on heroism in American culture. That being said, the courage of a hero presents a number of problems in terms of moral duty, most notably with respect to the issue of supererogation. For this talk, I hope to accomplish three things: to discuss courage and its relation to the issue of supererogation, to briefly examine how traditional moral theories struggle with the problematic aspects of the issue, and to offer some theoretical and practical suggestions for understanding supererogatory courage by harnessing elements of pragmatism and existentialism. In the end, I will argue that while agent-based approaches make the most sense out of the difficulties of supererogation, there is an “existential” courage that still applies to the moral life that must be considered alongside classically-based solutions.

It seems that if we are to live flourishing lives in a flourishing society, courage will be indispensable. While traditionally Ancient philosophers focused on courage in the face of physical harm and confrontational situations, the elements of the classical approach relate to a wide variety of contexts. For any virtue, Aristotle argued that one must have that characteristic in order to flourish according to one’s telos. As a virtue of fundamental importance, courage is central to any human’s pursuit of eudaimonia, and it permeates all other dispositions of character. While multifaceted, if we think of courage as something like “an appropriate response of engagement to a danger, a risk, or a challenge to one’s well-being”, then we can see that whether one is engaged in battle, or dealing with a disease, or saving an endangered life, or
deciding to get married, without hitting the mean of courage one will fall into foolhardy excess or cowardly deficiency. Accordingly, for any person to thrive in any situation, some kind of courage (even if it is the basic courage necessary to make simple decisions) must be present.

This being said, in finding illustrations of courage that serve as models for our own pursuits and character development, we praise exemplary expressions of the virtue in the lives of heroes. Recently, the actions of Todd Beamer and his fellow passengers on United Airlines flight 93 are frequently referenced as heroic. Instead of passively sitting by and allowing the terrorists to fulfill their plans, Beamer helped bring the plane down regardless of any potentially positive personal ending that might have awaited him (had the terrorists really planned to safely release passengers). The sacrificial actions of those passengers seemed to go beyond the courage we think of as normal or required by the mandates of morality. Or look at the social and political examples of courage in Kennedy’s *Profiles of Courage*, or the life and work of Martin Luther King, or that of Nelson Mandela. We can find a host of examples that portray a courage that is expressed through difficult decisions, self-sacrifice for the sake of others, and the bearing of a heavy burden that is not required for one to bear.

Certainly these examples should remain as paradigms of courage. But a question arises: while a certain level of courage is necessary for me to flourish generally as a human being, do I have any moral responsibility to pursue a hero’s courage? Apparently, a hero is someone who displays a level of courage that goes beyond what the average citizen would display. Oftentimes it seems that in examining heroes we are deeming their courage to be commendable and worthy of emulation. But in terms of what is right for me to do, what is morally required, must I go beyond the normal standard of courage and pursue greatness? In other terms, as the final episode of *Seinfeld* explores, could there be such a thing as a “Good Samaritan Law”? Can I be required
to do something that is right to do but not wrong not to do? Or is it really wrong to not do it? In
terms of the major approaches to moral theory, modern approaches struggle with this issue in
terms of supererogation: going above and beyond the call of duty. While an in-depth study of the
matter goes beyond the purview of this talk, a brief discussion of how supererogation is
problematic for modern moral theory may provide some initiative for recasting the ancient
approach for current times.

Typically, the two dominant modern approaches to moral theory can be classified as
consequentialist and nonconsequentialist. Take Kant’s deontological approach, for example. For
Kantianism, one’s duties are rooted in reason and are discovered in the categorical imperative.
That action is right whose maxim can be willed to be a universal law. The ultimate test of moral
duty is the universalization principle. If I can will that all other people should act as I am about to
act, based on the same maxim, then my action and its maxim passes the moral test. When it
comes to courage, this approach faces at least two significant issues, not the least of which is that
its conception of morality focuses on actions and principles, not character qualities. Modern
moral theory signals a significant departure from the agent-based approach found in classical
theories. It is no wonder that, at least on the surface, the employment of such theories can feel
awkward around the virtues. One can judge the rightness and wrongness of actions based on a
universal mandate; one can even speak of right and wrong principles that serve as the basis of
such actions. But since actions and their founding principles are the focus point, dispositions –
which speak of a habit of character – are difficult to incorporate (Kant even undermines the
moral worth of actions stemming from disposition, habit, inclination, etc., since intentionality is
suspect with these). If the question at issue is what it means to develop courage and what
expressions of courage morality requires, act-based theories like Kant’s will only be able to focus on the latter portion of this inquiry, and only to the extent of actions universally required.

This leads to another pertinent concern for deontological understandings of supererogation: it is not only the praiseworthiness of the developed virtue of courage that seems cryptic in an act-based setting, but also the praiseworthiness of actions that are not universally morally required. Since for Kant the only expression of moral value is duty to universal moral law, there seems to be no room for the personal, apparently “optional” nature of supererogatory acts. If an act is not required for any rational agent to perform, one cannot say it fits in the moral realm. The hero’s actions produce multitudinous positive effects, and perhaps even stem from universalizable principles. But there is nothing morally imperative about the hero’s actions, and thus Kant’s theory must wrestle with supererogation in the midst of perfect and imperfect duties, “oughts” and “cans”, and various other philosophical maneuvers. Perhaps Kantianism can find ways to maintain respect and praise for supererogatory acts of heroism while maintaining a lower standard of requirement for the universal public. One might, for examine, reference his discussion of the “kingdom of ends”, which perhaps transcends the specificity of a baseline universal morality.

For the consequentialist Utilitarian perspective, the prospects of supererogation seem highly problematic, and either undermine the entire theory or lead one to reject the notion of going beyond one’s ethical duty. Since for utilitarianism the moral good is always found in some kind of maximization, usually of satisfaction (pleasure) vs. dissatisfaction (pain) for all involved in a situation, a utilitarian not only must deal with the act-based nature of his theory, but also with its maximization principle. There is no “above and beyond the call of duty”, since one’s duty is always to act in maximally beneficial ways. Heroes who are praised as performing
extraordinary acts of courage, if they indeed were doing morally praiseworthy deeds, would then actually be doing merely the right thing – that which benefits the most people. If calculations show that the bystander who runs into a burning building to save innocent people is acting in a maximally beneficial way, then it is not a supererogatory act, but rather just a morally required act. And, if you were present, and depending on how your skills and prospects factor in to utilitarian calculations, such a response could be required of you as well. If Todd Beamer and his fellow passengers had not acted the way they did, Utilitarianism would deem them not merely lacking in heroism, but actually morally despicable. The maximization principle really eliminates supererogatory heroism altogether, as one cannot act more courageously than what morality requires, and this ultimately makes the majority of us out to be morally incompetent at best and, at worst, regularly culpable of sins of omission.

Again, while this is merely a cursory treatment of modern moral theories and supererogation, the fundamental issue of how such theories can make room for virtues of character is persistently problematic. Classical approaches to morality such as Aristotle’s virtue ethics seem to handle the issue of supererogation with more tact, though a number of issues still remain. Aristotle discusses how courage for one person may look different than courage for another, and justifiably so. These differences are rooted in social roles and moral maturity. While I am to aspire to be courageous in terms of my social role and the expectations of someone in my position, it is not morally obligatory that I act as someone in a more demanding role and more mature state of character must act. This is most clearly seen in the case of a child’s courage vs. an adult’s courage, where while both may qualify as rational agents, the expectations of courage for one are not the same as the expectations for the other. Both must find the mean between excess and deficiency, in terms of fulfilling their functional purpose, but that mean will look
different for each because of their different stations in life. This difference of expectations might also be exemplified in cases of demanding and dangerous work, such as that of a soldier or firefighter, where the expectations of courage might be higher than those for a different citizen. It certainly seems as if morality does not require all of us to be soldiers or firefighters, and thus it seems we are not required to act at the level of courageousness that these people “find” is their duty. Aristotle, and anyone who believes in human nature as something universal and capable of fulfillment, will argue that there is a basic courage required in order to thrive as a human being; but its instantiation in different ways of life will look different from person to person. Perhaps some people should engage in more demanding roles of courage, for the sake of a thriving society, but no individual person is morally required to. The concept of moral maturity implies that we should aspire to thrive in courage as we grow into the roles of adulthood, but the general standards of human nature are such that there is much room for heroes who choose more demanding ways of life.

Let us see where such an approach might lead us. If I exemplify courage qua human being, and do so in a way that is consistent with the mean, then I am living (and should thus be acting) morally. But in the classical mind, this cannot be divorced from my station in life. If I am a soldier, my virtue of courage will be expressed in appropriate activities on the battlefield. If I am a senator, my courage will be exemplified through appropriate actions and attitudes with respect to the political world, my commitments and beliefs, and to the welfare of the public. Each way of life requires difficult choices and actions, but also sets the standards and practices within which one finds their duties, skill sets, goals, methodologies, and the attitudes required to thrive. All of these elements set rather clear boundaries of success and the corresponding virtues required for achieving it. The right action is simply the one that a wise, mature, courageous
person would do in a given role. Thus, within one’s station, it seems one could not go above the demands of duty, but merely thrive in the expression of virtue. This leads to a further insight. In speaking of heroes “finding” their duty and calling, we may be able to realize a unique feature of heroic courage. If you were to ask most heroes about the courage and decisiveness with which they operate, many (most? all?) will say that they are acting out of an internal sense of duty, not that they are doing something extraordinary. At least from an outsider’s perspective, it seems that policemen, for example, don’t congratulate each other for their “heroic” deeds. In choosing their societal role, they choose a code of behavior and a set of expectations that they find binding. Perhaps it is possible for a policeman to express extraordinary courage in an extraordinary circumstance, but this speaks more to the circumstantial opportunity than the hero’s courage. We can imagine an award given to an officer by his fellow officers recognizing a special act of courage, but we can also imagine him saying, “I was just doing what any one of you would do if given the same opportunity.” For the citizen who performs a courageous act, such as sacrificing her well-being for the sake of others, such actions rarely if ever occur randomly but rather stem from decisions about a way of life that lead to the maturation of courage and which have prepared her for such a choice – elements that are part of what it means to be a human being engaged in natural moral progress.

Therefore, one way of understanding a hero’s courage is that its praiseworthiness is not to be found in the fact that it goes above and beyond what duty requires, but rather in the fact that it exemplifies a choice made by the agent to embark upon a way of life that instills a higher sense of duty. The fundamental courage of the hero actually predates any particular courageous act, because 1) it is gradually and consistently developed in the life of the individual in terms of general human moral maturity, and 2) it is found within a particular way of life that carries with
it expectations, duties, and guidance for behavior and personal progress. Thus, we might begin to speak of a type of courage that is required not for actions within a particular way of life, career, or social station, but instead is required for making commitments to those very ways of life themselves. It is the courage required to enter into relationships, embark upon a journey, or take up a vocation. In light of certain existential concepts, such as Kierkegaard’s approach to the ethical, we might call this “existential” courage. And it is here that I believe a pragmatic and existential understanding of courage can help us better understand the hero and provide encouragement in our own pursuit of virtue.

William James, in his famous essay “The Will to Believe”, argues that there is no way of avoiding the role of passions, especially fear and hope, in facing intellectual decisions. While the Cliffordian evidentialist mindset is extremely useful for many of the decisions we need to make, it is ultimately driven by a passion: the fear of error. It is often the case that withholding a decision because of a lack of evidence is justifiable – pragmatically, when there is clearly much more to lose in choosing than there is in refraining from choice. But when it comes to the most existentially pressing issues, such as marriage, or vocation, or (ultimately the point of James’s article) religion, withholding belief due to a fear of error is just as risky – perhaps more risky – than courageously committing to something that transcends available evidence.

The pragmatist in me thinks that once purposes, practices, and standards are instantiated in a particular way of life, there is no supererogation. There will be better ways of achieving those purposes than others, and there will be corresponding dispositions that will more likely bring about these ways. Pragmatists might also argue that the general needs and desires of humanity, taken as a whole, limit (though very broadly) the ways of living that will promote satisfaction of these needs. So the scholarly life, or the business life, or the manufacturing life, all
fit within the tested means to human progress, and the murderous life, or thieving life, or even couch-potato life have all proven to frustrate human purposes. One can courageously embark upon ways of living that further the human condition, and within those ways of life one can also act courageously. But the courage within the vocation or social station cannot be supererogatory, because there is only the duty expressed through the practical constraints instantiated in that way of life. The bravest firefighter, or most courageous activist, is simply the best expression of one who has maturely grown in virtue, and thus the morally required response to such examples (in classical terms) is to pursue such growth in maturity. Becoming the kind of person who would act in such honorable ways is what morality requires. However, what is most commendable about such examples of heroism is the existential decision of heroic agents to embark upon the life of high standards in the first place, and the acceptance of a “growth chart” for courage that itself is not morally required because it is instantiated in particular (not universal) ways of life. The hero could have chosen a passive life, an easy life, or a mediocre life. Instead, she chose an engaged life demanding courage, and more particular stations and vocation that demand more of her. Perhaps the human mean of courage could be found in mediocre living, but the extraordinary courage of the hero – and its profound benefit for others – is only available to those who first express an existential courage that transcends the limits of lowest common denominator ethics.

But this is why many, certainly in Christian circles, think of the notion of “vocation” as having a religious element to it. There are pragmatic constraints that limit viable career choices, no doubt. But for many (fortunate?) people, there are options for how one will live and what career they will commit to. The existential courage we’re considering fits here because most of us know that there is an “easy way” out, where less will be demanded of us, and a “harder way”,
perhaps a “better way”, where the demands of the calling will enable us to engage in a higher level of human being. It leads to making promises and commitments that, once made, involve “higher” duties but which from outside the commitment are above and beyond the standard call of duty. The evaluation of vocational choices is not nearly as clear as evaluations *within* a way of life that carries standards and practices within it. But there is something praiseworthy about committing to more demanding ways of living, both because of personal fulfillment and growth, and also because of the measurable benefits for others that demanding vocations produce. On the other hand, shrinking away from the “duties” of a higher calling not only diminishes one’s benefit to others, but reduces one’s ability to thrive as a human being. Without the challenges of commitment, we waste away. As Kierkegaard said, “To dare is to lose one's footing momentarily. To not dare is to lose oneself.”

And so, this leads me to believe that a hero’s courage is not merely the virtue that directly results in the actions we deem courageous, but more fundamentally is the existential courage involved in embracing a way of life that demands greater things. This certainly shifts the issue away from some of the problems modern moral theory faces when dealing with supererogation. But it also speaks of the necessity of enlarging our conception of ethics beyond the minimalism of modern theory, and to embrace classical and contemporary approaches that engage the whole person and the existential situation of man. Existential courage is to be encouraged as a virtue necessary for human thriving, though the variety of ends that arise in the human condition, the choices of which are up to subjective determination, rule out making any particular one of them our duty to pursue. The main point is that the hero’s courage first demands the pursuit of ends in a way that transcends the minimum requirements of modern morality, and aims at what can be expressed as a “higher calling”.
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