Courage, Cowardice, and Conscience

James G. Hanink

Introduction

Are we keener to avoid cowardice than to become courageous?

If so, perhaps it is, in part, for three reasons. First, we are often clearer about what cowardice is, and why it is vicious, than we are about what courage is, and why it is virtuous. Second, we are often more confident about how to avoid cowardice than we are about how to become courageous. And, third, we are often more able to identify cowards than heroes.

Puzzling examples come to mind. Some are ready to dismiss terrorists as cowards. But suppose terrorists profess to die for a freedom that we cherish? Some would call them courageous, and what are we to say? Obituaries record losing battles against cancer as “courageous.” But suppose an ethicist sees physician-assisted suicide as a courageous reform? What are we to say? We applaud valor, but warn that fools rush in where angels fear to tread. So what are we to make of John Brown, Joe Hill, and Jesus the Christ?

Is it time, then, for an examination of conscience? For many, conscience itself is as confusing as any puzzle about courage and cowardice. Remember the caveats. Hamlet observes that “[C]onscience does make cowards of us all.”¹ H. L. Mencken offers a Freudian gloss: “Conscience is the inner voice that warns us that someone may be looking.”² And isn’t that someone, the onlooker, often quicker to decry the coward than to emulate the hero?

Proposal
I propose an inquiry into the interplay of courage, cowardice, and conscience. My first step is to offer heuristic (and Thomist) definitions of courage, of cowardice, and of conscience. Next comes a sketch of three profiles in courage: Sophie Scholl, of the White Rose Conspiracy; Franz Jägerstätter, recently beatified; and an extraordinary woman named Flora Brooks. After presenting these cases, I consider the charge that they do not, in fact, illustrate courage but rather deepen our confusion about it. But I will argue, case by case, that this charge is mistaken. I further urge that a close analysis of these cases supports the thesis of the unity of the virtues. This classical thesis, in turn, helps us distinguish between true and false martyrdom.

**Definitions**

*Courage* is the virtue, or strength of character, by which we overcome any fear that leads us to act against reason. (*S.T.* II-II, q. 123, a.1) In contrast, *cowardice* is the vice, or weakness of character, which leads us to fear too much what our reason tells us to endure. (*S.T.* II-II, q. 125, a.1) And why should reason direct us? It is because reason is our chief avenue to what is real. Practical reasonableness forms the virtues and fits us for living well in the real world; that is, it fits us for the moral life. *Conscience*, in turn, is the perception (*synderesis*) and reasoned application of moral principles to particular cases. (*S.T.* II-II, q. 79, a.13) In this regard, conscience is one’s last best exercise of practical reason about the moral good. Although conscience is fallible, it is still binding. For to say that one ought not to follow one’s conscience is to imply that there is a compelling moral ground for not doing so. Yet this is only appeals to conscience by another name.

**Profiles in Courage**
First comes the case of Sophie Scholl. Scholl, then a 21-year old student at Munich University, was executed on February 22, 1943. Along with her brother, Hans, who died with her, she was a member of the White Rose Conspiracy. The little band, chiefly students and their friends, issued a series of leaflets calling for resistance to Nazi rule. A custodian caught Sophie and Hans distributing leaflets at the University; the Gestapo acted swiftly. Along with another student, Christoph Probst, they were charged with treason and, within days, beheaded. In the weeks to follow, three other conspirators, including Kurt Huber, Sophie’s philosophy professor, were tried and executed. Indeed, Dame Philosophy had revealed herself in the group’s leaflets. We find therein the language of Aristotle, Schiller, Goethe, Lao-Tzu, and Novalis. We find, as well, in the fourth leaflet, the accusatory closing words. “We will not be silent. We are your bad conscience.” Refusing to be silent, they were silenced. The Nazis dismissed Scholl and her friends as defeatists.

And after the war what did people say? The theologian Dorothee Sölle, a teenager at the time of their execution, tells us that the conspirators were portrayed as “highly idealistic people with little sense of the realities of power and politics. For many years I believed that this was true. […] What could they hope for?” A quarter century after the executions, Inge Scholl, the surviving sister of Sophie and Hans, wrote: “It is rare that a man is prepared to pay with his life for such a minimal achievement as causing cracks in the edifice of the existing order.”

Was Sophie Scholl courageous or merely foolhardy? Did she act on conscience? Was she a hero or an adventurer?
Scholl acted in accord with reason. She saw the truth about Hitler’s war and her people’s complicity in genocide. She saw what steps she could take and what consequences she could expect. Sophie Scholl had everything to live for; she harbored no death wish. Yet the fear of death did not stop her from the sharpest resistance open to her. It seems, too, that she did act on conscience, a conscience that fashioned her resolve. She identified the relevant principles of solidarity and personal responsibility, and she applied them to the demonic crisis in which she found herself. Sophie Scholl was a hero. Indeed, one could make a strong case that the White Rose offered the moral equivalence of the bravest of soldiers in the most just of wars. But even if we reach this last verdict, can we see ourselves engaging in such resistance? Must a hero stake all? Perhaps it would be enough to avoid cowardice.

We might also consider a second profile in courage in terms of just such a moral equivalence. It is the case of an Austrian farmer, Franz Jägerstätter. The father of four daughters, he was executed on August 9, 1943, at 36 years of age. He was killed a few months after Sophie Scholl and in the same way. Jägerstätter’s adolescence, biographers note, was not that of acolyte. On the light side, he had the first motorcycle in his little village of St. Radegund. But he also fathered a child out of wedlock.

Jägerstätter’s gradual conversion to high resolve featured a dream he had in 1938. He writes

“I saw a beautiful shining railroad train that circled around a mountain. Streams of children -- and adults as well -- rushed toward the train and
could not be held back [...]. Then I heard a voice say to me: ‘This train is going to hell’ [...]. At first this traveling train was something of a riddle to me but the longer our situation continues, the clearer the meaning of this train becomes for me. [I]t is a symbol of nothing but National Socialism. [...] I would like to call out to everyone [...] ‘Jump out before the train reaches its destination, even if it costs you your life.’”

Yet Jägerstätter answered his own draft call in 1940 and spent six months in training. After a furlough home, though, he refused further submission. Against the advice of priests and a bishop, he held fast to what the sociologist Gordon Zahn called a “solitary witness.” There is no record of any other German Catholic selective conscientious objector who similarly resisted.

And after the war’s end, what did people say about Jägerstätter? At first, very little. But Franziska, his wife, saved his writings, and they formed the basis of Zahn’s research. Fr. Albert Jochman, a chaplain who met with Jägerstätter, was later to report that “[T]his simple man is the only saint that I have ever met in my lifetime.” Others came to agree about his sanctity. On October 26, 2007, in a ceremony in Linz, Austria, Benedict XVI caused the following to be read: “We comply with the request [...] that Franz Jägerstätter, martyr and family father, from now on can be invoked as Blessed Franz Jägerstätter.” Hitler, too, was an Austrian; Linz was his birthplace.

But the Church with saints is also a Church with sinners and lunatics. Joan of Arc, a soldier saint, heard voices and doubtless dreamed her dreams. So have knaves and
madmen. What about Jägerstätter? Was he courageous or merely foolhardy? Did he act on conscience? Was he a hero?

He acted in accord with reason. Like Sophie Scholl, he saw the truth about Hitler’s war and his countrymen’s acquiescence to it. He saw that his own response must be refusal. Jägerstätter knew that resistance meant death. He loved his wife; he loved his daughters. He did not seek death. Yet the fear of death, a fear that distinguishes the sane man from the fanatic, did not push him back aboard the Nazi train. It seems, too, that he did act on conscience; its reasonableness forged his resolve. He understood the moral principles at issue: the negative and absolute duty regarding the intentional killing of the innocent and the positive duty of solidarity with the victims of violence. He honored these duties in the lethal reality in which he found himself. He was, then, a hero. His resistance offers the moral equivalence of the bravest of soldiers in the most just of wars. But even if we reach this last verdict, can we see ourselves taking such a course? If Scholl and Jägerstätter alike were heroes, must one be hero? Must one stake all? Perhaps it would be enough to avoid cowardice.

In death, Sophie Scholl left behind her parents and a sister. In death, Franz Jägerstätter left behind a wife and four daughters. A third profile in courage presents us with a wife who, in a sense, was left behind by a husband who did not die. Consider Flora Brooks. Almost 40 years ago, Brooks learned that her husband, Johnny, had been wounded in Vietnam. His doctors did not expect him to live but he did. Flora, who married Johnny just three weeks before he was drafted, has cared for him ever since. She does so in their home, in Stockton, California.
Johnny can’t move by himself. He communicates only through eye contact. Now 58, Flora Brooks spends a large part of her day nursing Johnny. A news report tells us that “She fills syringes with the liquid food she injects into husband’s stomach tube every two hours, suctions his mouth when he coughs, dispenses a small pharmacy of medications, drains the catheters.” The report also answers a question likely to cross the minds of ordinary readers. “Flora Brooks knows that many people in her position would have prayed for an easy death. She prayed for her high school sweetheart to live, regardless of what their life might hold.” In Brooks’s own words, “I’m way thankful. I’m the one that’s still saying, ‘Please God […] don’t take him yet.’” In a recent first-person essay, she tells us “I thank God every day for allowing Johnny to be here […] with us, living at home, surrounded by the love of family and friends.”

The Vietnam War is long over. Flora and Johnny Brooks, once a young couple, keep going -- a day at a time. What are we to say of Flora? U.S. troops with profoundly disabling injuries are returning now from Iraq and Afghanistan. It seems that her story “resonates” with young military couples. But what does that mean? Surely it terrifies some of them and bewilders many others.

Is Flora Brooks courageous, or is she caught in some kind of instinctive reaction? Does she act on conscience? Is she a hero, or is she a prisoner of bonds that ought not to bind, not now?

The Greeks call no man happy until he is dead. Perhaps no man or woman is. But surely those who do not know Flora Brooks have too little on which to base judgments of virtue or vice, of conscience, of heroism or emotional disorder. Yet one can imagine how
such judgments, in time, could be made. Even now Ruth Brooks, Johnny’s mother, makes them. Ruth Brooks, in substance, suggests an evaluation much like the following.

Flora, her daughter-in-law, acts in accord with reason. She sees what her husband needs; she sees that she can respond to his needs. She holds in mind and heart the vows that she and her husband exchanged. Their vows took sober note of both injury and wholeness, of both better and worse. They took public vows that reach until death does part them. When they exchanged these vows, neither could foresee the graveness of Johnny’s injury. But Flora knew that the vows, taken honestly, led where both must follow. And now what? No, Flora does not have everything to live for; but she has what she holds closest to her heart -- she has that. She knows what her life has come to be.

With a new generation of young couples facing comparable war-injuries, she says “My heart goes out to them because they’re just starting this journey.” Yet Flora, each day, faces down the fears that might tempt her to walk away or to hope for Johnny’s “easy death.” It seems that she does act on conscience. It is a conscience that gives courage. She identifies the principles of fidelity and personal responsibility, and she applies them to her husband. She is not, to be sure, a war hero – though her husband may well be. But perhaps, in a way, she is still more heroic. Her courage includes a patience tested by sorrow. St. Thomas identifies such patience as the virtue that prevents sadness from breaking one’s spirit. (S.T. II-II, q. 136, art. 4.) But even if we reach this verdict, can we see ourselves sustaining such a course? Must we be heroes of endurance? Is it not enough to see that the injured receive care? Must we give it ourselves?

**Second Thoughts and First Replies**
My verdicts in the cases of Sophie Scholl, Franz Jägerstätter, and Flora Brooks face sharp objections. So, in each case, I will raise what I take to be the most serious objection. With the objections stated, I will begin an answer to each of them.

Sophie Scholl could not seriously affect the course of war, and she knew as much. What sense did it make to die for, as her sister put it, a “minimal achievement?” Practical reason is about ordering means to an end. Her means were disproportionate to changing the course of the war. So she did not act reasonably; she was foolhardy rather than courageous. Perhaps she did act on conscience, but she had wrongly formed her conscience. Sophie Scholl was not a hero.

Nor could Franz Jägerstätter expect to derail the Nazi war-train. But his case is more dubious than Scholl’s. In a time of peril, he abandoned his duty to care for his wife and three young children. Duty to one’s family takes priority over an ultimately futile protest. So he did not act reasonably, and neither did he act courageously. If he acted on conscience, it was a conscience he had wrongly formed. Franz Jägerstätter was not a hero.

And Flora Brooks? She cannot heal her husband’s injury. Yet her case goes beyond mere futility. Suppose we admit her claim to be acting autonomously. She nonetheless acts with a false consciousness. She has her own life to live, and she has lost control of it. The chief truth at stake is that she must be true to herself. If she speaks of conscience, it is a conscience vitiated by false consciousness. Flora Brooks is not a hero.

Now if Scholl and Jägerstätter and Brooks are not heroes, then we need not follow their disordered examples. Nor need we worry about our hesitancy in identifying heroes.
Wouldn’t it suffice to avoid being a coward? Isn’t a decent normalcy enough?

While I console myself with such objections, they share a weakness. Each one misconstrues the agent’s end in acting. Because of this, each objection finds the agent unreasonable in choosing the means to the action’s intended end. Absent reason, of course, we lose sight of what is real. Virtue dissolves. Conscience is counterfeit. So let’s review, then, the cases at issue.

Sophie Scholl, minimally, helped cause “cracks in the edifice of the existing order.” But doing so was not her only end. She sought, first of all, to show how one might witness to the truth. To do so, she had to speak publicly; she had to speak the full truth; and she had to speak it in the face of power. She chose eminently reasonable means to achieve this end. The lesson she taught is invaluable.

Franz Jägerstätter taught this same lesson and another, as well. He feared the hardships his family would face without him. But he thought that he could give no greater gift to his family than the example of a conscience that held inviolable the lives of the innocent. To do so he had to refuse the Nazi war machine. He chose the most direct and personal means of doing so. His witness is invaluable.

Flora Brooks teaches a different lesson. It is a distinct and deeply democratic lesson about courage. We cannot speak of courage without reference, at some point, to war. For courage is a response to fear. Ordinarily, of course, we fear death more than anything, and war brings death. When we reflect on war, we think of soldiers and the courage that the heroes among them show. And we think of traitors and their cowardice, if it is justice that they betray.
But the soldier, if the war goes well, can attack at will and with hope of victory. In contrast, the courage of endurance, when one cannot press for victory, calls for a still greater resolve. Indeed, St. Thomas argues that the principal act of courage is endurance, that is, “to stand immovable in the midst of dangers rather than to attack them.” (S.T. II-II, q. 123, a. 6). Endurance, he notes, points to an enemy who is too strong for one to attack. Often that enemy is already on the attack, and endurance means a long struggle rather than a quick triumph. Nor is endurance passive. Thomas observes that “Endurance denotes […] an action of the soul cleaving most resolutely to the good, the result being that it does not yield to the threatening passion of the body.” (S.T. II-II, q. 123, a. 6, ad. 2).

By way of example, insofar as Gandhi’s satyagraha, or truth force, was creatively successful, it supplanted violence with the courage of endurance rather than attack.¹⁸

The good to which Flora Brooks cleaves is the mutual good of spousal vows. Bertrand Russell, for one, dismisses such a vow as morally irresponsible.¹⁹ He recounts for us how, one fine day, while on a longish bicycle ride, he fell out of love with his wife. The moral of his story seems to be that we can’t control our deepest feelings, and love is among these feelings. So we ought not to promise what we can’t control. Derek Parfit has dismissed such vows as logically impossible. Over time, we become different persons. We cannot, logically, make a promise for the persons we will become.²⁰ Pace Russell, love is more than a feeling. Contra Parfit, a vow is a promise, not a prediction. Qualitative change, moreover, presupposes numerical identity. Otherwise, why ask “Will you still love me when I’m 64?”
Flora Brooks strikes us as extraordinary, but perhaps this is because she seems so very ordinary. We can perhaps better understand her if we appreciate her as a woman who teaches us that in spousal love we freely bind ourselves, and that ordinary people have long done just this. They have been extraordinary enough to do so. Brooks, indeed, seems to see her vows, in the words of G.K. Chesterton, “as paying her the compliment of taking her at her word.”

*The Unity of the Virtues*

Admittedly, my replies to anticipated objections are short and *not* sweet. Many will find them unpersuasive. Some will say that my profiles in courage in fact profile foolish martyrs who have put themselves forward for martyrdom. To do so, they will warn, is to play a variation on the strategy of today’s suicide-bombers. Scholl and Jägerstätter and Brooks do not resort to violence against others, yet they do violence to themselves. In this there is nothing heroic but much to exploit. The uneasiness with which we react to their stories testifies to our own quite appropriate psychological balance. (Note: the question of who is a martyr and who is a suicide is not an easy one. Indeed, with a positivist disdain for intention, Emile Durkheim treated every martyr as a suicide.) After a fashion, the objection that disputes the practical reasonableness of my profiles, and thus reassures us of our own equilibrium, might seem to appeal to the unity of the virtues. Scholl and Jägerstätter and Brooks each violate prudence. In addition, Jägerstätter violates parental duty and Brooks violates autonomy.

But it is the unity of virtues, I would reply, that requires that we take with utmost seriousness the witness of these three. Were Scholl not to leaflet the students of Munich,
she would violate solidarity and personal responsibility. Were Jägerstätter not to refuse the draft, he would be complicit in the killing of the innocent, and thus violate justice. Were Brooks not to put fidelity at the center of her life, she would violate a vow that only a free and responsible person can make, a vow which forms her vocation. The suicide-bomber, in stark contrast, characteristically dies in committing a crime against the innocent. There is, indeed, a second crime in that such a terrorist deliberately objectifies his or her own life.

And yet the questions remain. Could we act as did Scholl and Jägerstätter and Brooks? Must we? Such questions lead to the question of grace. Paradoxically, Scholl, Jägerstätter, Brooks teach us that while grace is free, it is by no means cheap.  

James G. Hanink  
Loyola Marymount University

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See, for example, Cicero in *De Finibus*, Book V. xxii, 67: “[T]his complex of interfused virtues can yet be theoretically resolved into its separate parts by philosophers. For although the virtues are so closely united that each participates in every other and none can be separated from any other, yet on the other hand each has its own special function.”


Ibid., x.

Ibid., 103.


12 “A Couple’s Sacrifice” by Juliet Williams, Daily Breeze A8, 11/11/07.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 “Our Hero, Our Miracle,” by Flora Brooks. Viewed March 11, 2008 on Recordnet.com

16 Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, Bk. 1, Chapter 10, 1100a10.


21 G.K. Chesterton, “A Defence of Rash Vows,” in his The Defendant (Project Gutenberg, EBook #12245. May 3, 2004. Originally from The Speaker, 1901. With permission.) Chesterton elaborates: “The man who makes a vow makes an appointment with himself at some distant time or place. The danger of it is that he himself should not keep the appointment. And in modern times this terror of one’s self, of the weakness and mutability of one’s self, has perilously increased, and is the real basis of the objection to vows of any kind.”

22 Joseph Pieper notes that the early Church, nourished by the blood of martyrs, commonly taught that one ought not to seek martyrdom, thinking it presumptuous to do so. See his Fortitude and Temperance. Translated by Daniel F. Coogan. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1954), 14-16.

23 For Durkheim’s analysis see Readings from Durkheim. Edited by Kenneth Thompson. (New York: Routledge, 2004), Part Four Suicide, 83-84.