

VIRTUE AND HEROISM

by

JULIA ANNAS



The Lindley Lecture
The University of Kansas
October 23, 2015

The E. H. Lindley Memorial Lectureship Fund was established in 1941 in memory of Ernest H. Lindley, Chancellor of the University of Kansas from 1920 to 1939. In February 1941 Mr. Roy Roberts, the chairman of the committee in charge, suggested in the *Graduate Magazine* that

the Chancellor should invite to the University for a lecture or a series of lectures, some outstanding national or world figure to speak on "Values of Living" -- just as the late Chancellor proposed to do in his courses "The Human Situation" and "Plan for Living."

In the following June Mr. Roberts circulated a letter on behalf of the Committee, proposing in somewhat broader terms that

The income from this fund should be spent in a quest of social betterment by bringing to the University each year outstanding world leaders for a lecture or series of lectures, yet with a design so broad in its outline that in the years to come, if it is deemed wise, this living memorial could take some more desirable form.

The fund was allowed to accumulate until 1954, when Professor Richard McKeon lectured on "Human Rights and International Relations." The next lecture was given in 1959 by Professor Everett C. Hughes, and has been published by the University of Kansas School of Law as part of his book *Student's Culture and Perspectives: Lectures on Medical and General Education*. The selection of lectures for the Lindley series has since been delegated to the Department of Philosophy.

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Virtue has become prominent in ethics in the last few years — both in philosophical discussions of ethics and in our broader culture. Not many years ago the very term ‘virtue’ was, as Bernard Williams said, regarded as comic; most people were unsure how to use it except in reference to Victorian prudery about sex. Now virtue ethics is a central part of ethical philosophy as that is taught in universities. Virtue has proved to be a rich and fruitful topic in ethics. There have been rewarding discussions about virtue between philosophers and developmental psychologists, anthropologists have influenced and been influenced by virtue ethics and we find virtue in the titles of large numbers of self-help books. In philosophy itself, we have explored the resources brought by a virtue approach to areas of ethical philosophy where the traditional approaches have not done very well.

I want to look at a virtue approach to a striking issue. It’s a familiar phenomenon that we recognize as being of great ethical interest to us, but the traditional moral philosophy approaches, which narrowed the field before it was opened up by interest in virtue, can make little sense of it. I will be asking whether an ethical approach based on virtue can do better, and I hope that the discussion will produce light on the more general question of what we expect an ethical theory to do for us.

I am interested in *heroism*. This is more complex than we might think from the fact that it turns up all the time in ordinary discourse. Dictionary definitions vary considerably, and different accounts of heroism don’t even seem to converge. I will return to this, but I will begin with examples of what (I hope) anyone would consider heroes, and work from these. One is Nelson Mandela, who overcame the resentment and bitterness that would be the natural result of long imprisonment (during which his family broke up) and led South Africa to reconciliation rather than civil strife. Another is the well-documented behaviour of the inhabitants of the small French town of Le Chambon, who during the wartime Occupation sheltered fugitive Jews, welcoming and helping them despite the obvious severe risks. One fictional but plausible example which we will meet, since it is much discussed in the philosophical literature, is that of a soldier who, seeing that a mishandled grenade is about to explode, throws himself on it to save the lives of his fellow-soldiers who would otherwise have been killed.

We recognize these as examples of heroism. This is perhaps one of the major ways in which ethics explicitly touches our lives. Heroes form part of children's reading, and they are often introduced to a historical topic by reading the lives of heroes in that area. Heroes in a country's history get debunked (think of Christopher Columbus and Andrew Jackson) and new heroes are established (think of Martin Luther King Jr and Cesar Chavez) and this is important to us; we care about who our heroes are. We might expect heroism to be important to ethics as it is studied and taught, but we find that it is not. Indeed, ethical philosophers have found it difficult to make sense of it. This is a very striking example of philosophical thought appearing to fail us.

What is the problem? Why is it difficult to make ethical sense of heroism? One general thought is that ethical theory should apply equally to everyone, with no exceptions or limitations. Ethical theory is concerned with what anyone should do, or the character anyone should have; it can't be about what members of a social or intellectual class ought to do or the way they ought to be. It has to relate to everyone in an egalitarian way; otherwise we don't have an *ethical* theory. But when we think of heroes we think of the *exceptional*. A hero is by definition different from other people in a distinctive way. Sometimes heroes are thought of as exceptional people; sometimes they are thought of as ordinary people with exceptional courage, or compassion, or some other trait to an exceptional degree. In some way or other heroes do what most people are not up to doing. Clearly heroism will need careful consideration, but surely there has to be some place for it in an egalitarian ethical theory. It is disappointing when our theories are unable to give an account of heroism, or give one that strains the theory. We need ethical theory to make sense of our lives, and of the people that we admire; and heroes and heroic actions are central examples of what we admire.¹ So if an ethical theory gives us an obviously unsatisfactory account of heroism, we are entitled to take that as a defect in the theory.

This raises the question, What do we want from an ethical theory in the first place? I've said that we want it to make sense of our lives and, among other things, of the people we admire. Philosophers have different starting-points as they construct theories of ethics, and this makes a huge difference to the ways they will think of heroes and heroism.

Suppose that what you are most anxious about in your life is what you ought to do. You want to act rightly, and worry that your grasp of what you ought to do is not adequate. Maybe, you think, it just reflects the conventions, including the prejudices, of the people who brought you up; you want something better, and so you desire a theory of ethics, or morality as this approach is often called, because you want to be told, by

a reputable source, what it is that you should do. Ethical thinking, on this approach, is basically about *what to do*, what actions we should be doing. We start worrying about ethics when we start being anxious as to whether we are doing the right thing, and what we are hoping for is to find what *is* the right thing to do. What an ethical theory does for us, then, is to tell us what to do. Now, we might worry that this is giving an ethical theory the role that parents have for small children, namely to tell them what to do, and it's strange if an ethical theory does not give the person who holds that theory a more adult role than that. But I shall pass over this point here.²

One very common way in which a theory tells us what to do is by giving us rules and principles to follow, rather than specific commands on each occasion. In this way it helps us to do what we should do by organizing the world for us, ahead of our actions, in terms of the kinds of thing we should and should not do. Some kinds of action, we find, are *required*: they are actions we should or ought to perform or are required to perform, and are often called our *duties* or *obligations*, such as caring for our families. Other kinds of action are *forbidden*: obvious examples are murder, theft and lying. As they stand, these rules are too general to be helpful when we are wondering what we should or shouldn't do; is this tactful remark a *lie*, for example, or is this killing in self-defence *murder*? This is a systematic problem with this type of rule in terms of kinds of action, but it is another point to pass over here. What matters for an account of heroism is that there is a third kind of action, namely those that are neither required nor forbidden — neither actions which we should or ought to do nor actions which we should or ought not to do. The vast majority of actions belong here; having cereal for breakfast this morning was not something I was required to do, but neither was it forbidden. Similarly with most of our unexciting actions. These are gathered together as the class of the *permissible*, neither required nor forbidden.

This idea, of an action's being permissible, is less clear than it may seem at first. Firstly, permissibility is a rather opaque notion here. We understand what it is to require or to forbid an action, but no thoughts about actual permission are helpful towards understanding permissibility, so we lack the intuitive help that we get with requiring and forbidding towards understanding what is going on. There is nothing enabling us to understand what *unifies* this class of permissible actions.

And the class divides into two. There are actions which it is, unproblematically, all right for me to do and all right for me not to do, such as having cereal for breakfast. There is no requirement for me to do this, and no reason to regard it as something I ought not to do. But not all actions falling into the class of the permissible are like this. Some actions are neither required nor forbidden, but the idea that they are all right for me

to do and all right for me not to do seems completely inappropriate. It's not your duty to sacrifice yourself, or to run great risks, to save a stranger, and it's certainly not your duty not to do it. However, to class it as permissible is weak and inadequate. It even seems insulting to class an action in which someone ran great risks to save a stranger as an action which was all right for her to do and all right not to do. This is, if classified as permissible underdescribed, to say the least. It's heroic!

This is where heroism fits in, when thinking about ethics, we start, as we have done, from the issue of what we should and shouldn't do. It doesn't seem a very suitable place, and the problem here has been seen and discussed since a famous article by an Oxford philosopher, J.O. Urmson, in 1958.³ The article was called 'Saints and Heroes,' but I will focus on heroism only, leaving aside what is distinctive about saints, since the idea of a saint is a religious one, and it creates confusion to import it into an ethical discussion.⁴ Urmson introduced the example I mentioned, of the soldier throwing himself on the grenade to save his fellow-soldiers, and he points out that it is not adequately accounted for by the position that actions must fall into the required, the forbidden and the permissible. This was the first time the issue was noticed in academic ethical philosophy, and as soon as it is pointed out it is strikingly obvious. For example, suppose we are praised for doing what we should do and blamed for not doing it, or for doing what we shouldn't do. Should we be neither praised nor blamed for doing actions which are neither what we should not what we shouldn't do? That fits actions like having cereal for breakfast, but something is missing if this is the best we can do for heroic actions like running great risks to save a stranger, or falling on a grenade to save your fellow-soldiers.

There's a term which gives a name to this problem; this kind of heroic action is *supererogatory*.⁵ 'Supererogatory' is not a term used much, if at all, outside academic ethical philosophy, and it may sound suspiciously like an artificial term whose use suggests that the issue is better understood than it is. We bring in the idea of supererogation to make a place for heroism, but it is not clear how supererogation can help us to understand heroism. Still, it marks the place where heroism has to fit in a moral or ethical theory which takes its basic task as being that of telling us what to do, so it is worth exploring the idea in exploring of heroism.

Supererogation as an ethical category has a history which we can trace. The (unattractive) word comes from the Latin translation of the Bible used in Western Europe, in the parable of the Good Samaritan. The idea's origin lies in the Western Roman Catholic Church's teachings about sin and what the sinner can do to make up for it. Indignation at some interpretations of the idea, and the uses to which they were put in

the later Middle Ages to defend the practice of selling indulgences, gave rise to explosive debates about supererogation during the Reformation. There, the main issue was the question whether we can in our relationship to God do more than is required of us, or whether we are doing no more than is required of us however much we do. The latter is the view held in the 14th Article of Religion in the 17th century Anglican Church: ‘Voluntary Works besides, over and above, God’s Commandments, which they call Works of Supererogation, cannot be taught without arrogancy and impiety.’⁶ The theological debate, with Roman Catholics defending and Protestants attacking the idea, has faded, but the philosophical descendant of the theological idea of supererogation still has supporters.⁷ The claim is that we should distinguish among permissible actions between the *merely* permissible and the supererogatory. They are not required, so they are not our duty to do, but they are admirable, and we admire the people that do them. In the modern philosophical version of the debate, this is where our admiration for heroes fits.

There has been extensive argument as to whether the category of supererogation really does fit in an ethic which is focussed on the rightness of actions. We admire the soldier who falls on the grenade, but why exactly? If he did the right thing, why wasn’t it what all the other soldiers ought to have done? But we don’t blame them for not doing it; we don’t think it was required of them, or their duty. So we admire him for doing what we don’t blame them for not doing. But since what he does is the right thing (it’s not forbidden and it’s not merely permissible) why *isn’t* it required of them and of everyone else in the situation?

Various solutions to this problem have been suggested. Probably the most common is that we keep the level of actions that are required of everyone fairly low, because that way most people will take their duties seriously and do what they are required to do most of the time. We admire heroes who see themselves as required to do actions which most people would not be up to doing, but these actions would be *required* of everyone if we held everyone to a higher standard, and then most people would feel overwhelmed and give up.

There is much that is puzzling about this answer, notably the question of who ‘we’ are who can somehow stand outside the issues and decide what the level of requirement is to be for everyone. Further, where do the heroes get the idea that they should do the heroic action, since nobody else in the circumstance around them shares that view? Why don’t they infer instead that they would be *wrong* to do what nobody else in the circumstances thinks is required?⁸

I want to press here a different kind of objection, one I have found not in the philosophical literature but in a book by Andrew Flescher, a

professor of religious studies,⁹ though it's not a religious point but one that philosophers ought to have taken account of. When people who do heroic things and survive are asked afterwards why they acted as they did, they typically say that they did nothing extraordinary, that they just did their duty, that they did what anyone would do. Flescher gives some examples of answers given by rescuers of Jews in the Holocaust:

'I don't think I did anything that special. I think what I did is what everybody normally should be doing. . . . It is common sense and common caring for people.'

'I did nothing unusual; anyone would have done the same thing in my place.'¹⁰

Indeed, we actually expect this of people who do heroic actions. Someone who says, 'Well, I knew that I was good enough to do it, unlike other people' automatically casts doubt on the heroic nature of the action, which now looks more like an exercise in arrogance. Heroic actions are often done by individuals in circumstances when nobody else acts, but heroes are not people who think that they are the only people around good enough to do what needs to be done.

But on this view of ethics these people we admire as heroes are mistaken. They were *not* actually doing what anyone else would have done; they were doing something going beyond that. Urmson says, of the soldier throwing himself on the grenade to save others,

'[If] he were to survive the action only a modesty so excessive so as to appear false could make him say, "I only did my duty," for we know, *and he knows*, that he has done more than duty requires.' (Italics mine)

Heroes typically do say exactly what Urmson takes to be false modesty: that they only did what they ought, what anyone would have done. This approach to ethics lands us with the position that these people are *wrong*. They are in fact doing far more than is required of them, but they present it to others, and to themselves, as though it were what is simply required of them, and of anyone else in the situation.¹¹ Why would they do this? They are too modest to realize what they have done, is the suggestion; or perhaps they are self-deceived. The hero *really* knows, at some level, that he or she is doing something extraordinary, but refuses to recognize this. It is an unwanted, and mostly unrecognized, implication of this, that heroes are unaware of the magnitude of what they have done, and so

rather dim, or aware of it but self-deceived or actually hypocritical about it, which is no more attractive.

Whatever their motivation, we are left in a strange position. We admire heroes, but we reject their own account of why they acted; we know better, and they *really* know better, or should, but should also deny what they know. We aspire to be like the heroes; we take them as ethical models and try to be like them. But we can't take them as ethical authorities, since we don't believe what they say about their own actions. Heroes on this account, are great as aspirational models; we aspire to be like them and to do what they did. But we reject their own account of what they did. This is, to put it mildly, unsatisfactory.

Within an ethics whose focus is on what we do, and the rightness of actions, giving an account of heroism is problematic. The category of the permissible lacks unity, the notion of supererogation does not help, and we are put in a situation where we admire heroes, and take them as ethical models, but discount their own perspective on what they do.

Other theories avoid these problems by denying that there is such a thing as supererogation, that is, doing what is admirable but goes beyond what you ought to do. They stick with the idea that ethics is basically about what you ought to do, which actions are the right ones to perform, but they hold that if something is the ethically best thing to do, then you should do it. This is often stated in terms of the *morally* best thing to do. There is then no gap between something's being admirable, the best thing to do in the situation, and its being what you ought to do. We are back to the idea that actions meet us already sorted into the required, the forbidden and the permissible, with the claim that actions which are not merely permissible, but good and admirable, are actually required; the permissible just is the category of the *merely* permissible, all right to do and all right not to do. This idea of the 'ethically best' action is a very general one. I've left it at a high level of generality, because a number of different theories belong under it, and the differences between them matter less in this connection than does this point where they converge.

If there is no gap between what is ethically best and what we ought to do, the right thing to do, then despite the fact that only heroes do what is ethically best, they are still doing the right thing, and the right thing to do is the same for everyone. The fact that most of us fail to do this is just then a reflection on our limitations and failures. We are limited in the information that we have and in the ways we are able to process it, so we may be unsure what to do in a given situation, and so unwilling to act. Further, we tend to be too protective of, and focussed on, our own concerns and interests, and this gets in the way of a clear view of what, in a given case, actually is the ethically best thing to do; we give our personal

concerns more weight than we should. Most of us would not fall on the grenade, although that is the action which in the circumstances would (*ex hypothesi*) be the ethically best thing to do. The hero who does fall on the grenade is then doing the right thing, while others fail to do this. There is no place in this approach for heroism, or need for an idea like supererogation. The person we think of as a hero is just someone who does the right thing; if they stand out it is only because in that situation other people failed to do that.

This approach does justice to something that the previous approach had problems with: we can straightforwardly believe the hero who says afterwards that she did nothing special, just what they ought to do. On this approach they are simply correct.

Problems are obvious, however, and despite much sophisticated argument they are resistant to solution. On this approach the person we take to be a hero is someone who achieves what many others don't, and we should aspire to be like her or him, but this is because theirs is merely the basic right level to be. We are not doing decently and, in following the hero, aspiring to do better, but simply failing to get things right ethically in the first place, so a hero serves to encourage us to not to excel, but merely to get up to par. Only the people we think of as heroes actually get things right, and this renders the theory very demanding.

There is an immediate result of this. A theory is not one that we can live by if it requires us all to change our lives utterly and become the kind of people that we take heroes to be. If it starts from what we ought to do, but then explains that in terms of conditions of success that only a few people actually meet, people we regard as heroes, it is not a theory that ordinary people can accept as a theory to live by. It is completely unclear how we could become like the people we take to be heroes; the obvious implication is that we should all regard ourselves as failures.¹² To make the theory usable we need to have ways of trying to put the theory into practice indirectly.¹³ We reduce the demandingness of what it is that we ought to do so that it does not put too much strain on our feeble epistemological capacities or our weak motivation. As Urmson puts it,

‘The basic moral code must not be in part too far beyond the capacity of the ordinary men [sic] on ordinary occasions, or a general breakdown of compliance with the moral code would be an inevitable consequence; duty would seem to be something high and unattainable.’¹⁴

However, if we should really all be doing what our heroes are doing, our admiration for them becomes oddly problematic. Admiring and emulat-

ing heroes is part of the way we live our lives. A theory of this kind may allow us to do this, but has to insist that really we should not be praising heroes but doing what they do. Thinking in terms of heroes is even somewhat self-protective; in admiring them we distance ourselves from them. Heroes really deserve no special praise, and we would realize this if we all acted as we should. This puts us in a troubling position: the theory we should live by requires such exertions of us that it is not the theory we can actually live by, and we reconcile ourselves to this by pretending to ourselves that we are not up to doing what the people we regard as heroes are capable of doing.

Virtue ethics comes in here, as a distinctive ethical theory which, unlike the approaches I've indicated, can account for heroism without the strain we have seen in other kinds of theory. I will sketch very briefly what the main features of virtue ethics are, with an eye to the place it finds for heroism. Virtue ethics has not, any more than other forms of ethical theory, devoted a lot of time and energy to the issue of heroism,¹⁵ so I am to some extent going out on a limb with my claims here.¹⁶

An ethics in which virtue is central is concerned with the question of what we ought to do, just as much as other forms of theory. We should do the right thing, and this is what we ought to do, what we should do. But rather than attempt to explicate this by appealing to the ethically best thing to do, or to the idea that our actions come to us already bundled into required, forbidden or permissible, virtue ethics appeals to *virtue* to explain *why* we should do what we ought. Why should I do this? Because it's the brave thing to do, or the generous thing, or the fair thing to do.

We can see that it matters a great deal, right at the start, which conception of virtue is in play. Several versions have been developed, and it makes a great difference to the theory from this point on which is selected. I shall pass over the many other versions and deal only with the version that I myself defend, which is the Aristotelian (or neoAristotelian) version of virtue. On this position, a virtue is a disposition of a person to act in certain ways — bravely, generously, tactfully and so on. It takes the form of a disposition to do brave, generous, tactful, etc actions which is reliable and stable, and to do them characteristically — where this means 'as a matter of character'. A brave person does not have to be someone who regularly performs brave actions; rather, she reliably responds by acting bravely when this is needed. Bravery is a matter of how you respond when this is what is needed, not how often you have acted bravely.

Virtue is not merely a disposition to act, but to act for certain reasons; it is, in the jargon of ethical theory, 'reasons-responsive'. The person who acts bravely does so because she responded to a situation which presented a reason to act bravely, rather than in some other way. Virtue is not, however,

to be construed as simply acting on a reason in a purely cognitive way; it involves having the right feelings and emotions. The virtuous person, as opposed to the person who is merely self-controlled, responds bravely without having to fight down feelings that are opposed to the response; he acts in a way which is ready and unselfconscious. The virtuous person thus acts, to adapt Aristotle, in the right way, from the right reason and with the right feelings, in an unconflicted and frictionless way.

That the virtuous person meets all these conditions is not, of course, an accident. To understand what a virtue is we need to understand what its history is. I am not generous just because I have developed a routine habit of giving to good causes. There has to be a certain kind of development, generally called habituation. This is a kind of practical learning, and is like learning to acquire a practical skill. As Aristotle puts it, learning to be just is like learning to be a builder; we need to learn skills of making and acting by making and acting. There is something to be learned, and at first we learn by imitation and by following simple instructions and rules, such as 'Do it this way, not that'. Eventually, in practical skill as in virtue, we acquire mastery; we comprehend the reasons for what we do and are able to proceed on for ourselves. And further, as with practical skills, we reach a point where we can examine what we have learnt reflectively and critically, and develop it in new directions.

In this practical learning, it makes no sense for virtue (or skill) to learn only how to follow rules requiring or forbidding certain types of action. These are useful at an elementary stage, but we need to learn not just how to act in similar types of situation, but how to respond to factors which will be present in radically different kinds of situation. Generosity is required in giving money, but also in giving time and effort; we learn not just to write cheques but also to recognize occasions when what is demanded is personal effort, and we learn that generosity is not shown in giving if this is done condescendingly. It takes time and experience to do this well, as it does with practical skill.

Given this conception of virtue, how does appeal to a virtue explain why an action is right or wrong? 'Right' and 'wrong' are thin and uninformative terms. I want to do the right thing, but what is the right thing to do? Approaches which divide actions into required, forbidden and permissible run into systematic difficulties. It is easy to see how we get more information about an action when we find that it is cowardly, brave, generous, mean, aggressive and so on.¹⁷ We are familiar with the idea of actions, and people who perform actions, being cowardly, brave, mean and so on, and this gives us have the material to understand why particular actions are right or not.

There is a standard objection to virtue ethics: we get this understanding from the virtues that are taught and current in the society we grow up in, and this will leave us with a conservative attitude to ethics. The first part of this is clearly right; we get our conceptions of the virtues from the societies in which we grow up, from our parents, peers and the general culture. But it does not follow — and this deserves emphasis — that we will just go along with this. We also learn from books, movies and other people views that are critical of the society's norms; and in any case no social tradition is uniform, since all of them contain different interpretations of the basic norms and the traditional forms of the society. Virtue ethics *can* take the form of dispositions to obey a given society's norms, but if so that is due not to the nature of virtue but to other factors. In most developed societies the habituation which leads to the formation of virtue involves rational reflection on the norms of the society in which the person has been habituated to become virtuous — that is, brave, generous and so on. I will take this point for granted and not develop it further here.¹⁸

We learn what to do, then, by being first told what to do when we are young, and gradually coming to understand the reasons for this by coming to see right actions as coming from and expressing the virtues. As we saw in the account of habituation, this is different from coming to find universal rules or principles, and then being left on our own to work out how to apply them in difficult situations. Rules telling us what kinds of action to do or not do aren't prior to virtues: the virtues are not dispositions to follow rules of this sort. Nor are virtues prior to rules of this sort. The virtues are not definable in terms of kinds of right and wrong actions; they are deep dispositions of character which are expressed in a wide variety of different kinds of situation. As we learn to acquire the virtues, we learn that the virtues require us to do certain things; being just or fair, for example, requires us not to favour one of two equally deserving people for personal reasons. We also learn that the virtues require us to aspire to do and to be better than we are. The idea that a right action is a virtuous action, and that this is one that a virtuous person would characteristically do — that is, acting in character — is not like the claim that a right action is one that conforms to a rule or principle that everyone should obey. The rules that matter for virtue ethics are the virtue rules, which tell us to act in ways that are fair, brave and so on, and this already requires the intelligence to recognize what is relevant in a number of different situations, not merely to recognize a type of situation.

Virtue ethics is demanding; we learn how to act by learning to follow the virtue rules, and these are *rules*; just, generous and tactful actions are demanded of us. But virtue ethics is also aspirational. In learning to be just and generous we learn that we are always striving to do the right thing in

situations that require justice and generosity. We can't rely on a theory to tell us what to do; we have to resolve this for ourselves every time. We need experience to become just and generous, but there is no guarantee that experience will help rather than hinder us; we must always do the work for ourselves. This continuing aspiration is sometimes described as aiming to be, or to be like 'the virtuous person', which can be misleading. There can be no actual virtuous person, because this is an ideal — the ideal of always doing better, which each of us does in our own way, in our own circumstances. Nobody can be virtuous in all circumstances, because nobody can live in all circumstances; each of us tries to live our lives virtuously in the circumstances we have.

How satisfactory is the account which virtue ethics gives of heroism? Take the heroic actions of the inhabitants of Le Chambon. They acted to shelter and save Jews in Occupied France in a brave and generous way; they acted virtuously, in dangerous circumstances. Afterwards they simply said that they had done the right thing, which was open to anyone to do. It is important, as already stressed, that they did not think of themselves as exceptional people; they acted heroically, but saw themselves as doing what anyone should do, not as being better than other people. If we believe what they say, rather than admiring them but discounting their own perspective on what they did, then they are right; they just did what anyone should do.

However, we come right away to a problem we have seen. Should we think that they just did what they should, and that they don't deserve extra praise? They were just virtuous, and it's the many other people in Occupied France who deserve blame for not doing what anyone could see was required (along with others acting similarly in similar circumstances). Virtue ethics so far has not improved on other types of theory; virtue seems to be demanding the same level of commitment from us as from the people we regard as heroes, and hence not really making space for heroism at all.

There is an obvious reply: virtue comes in degrees. Other people in Occupied France exercised some virtues in other areas of their life, but when it came to helping Jews escape they were much less virtuous than the people of Le Chambon. These people were *more virtuous*, or virtuous to a greater degree. This is a fairly natural way of thinking about virtue, and it leads us to see heroes as people who have the virtues we have, but more so, and who in demanding circumstances are better equipped than we are to respond well. We often think of friends in such terms as, 'She's more generous than I am' or, 'He is kinder than I am,' and these thoughts serve to explain why she responded readily to a request for help which I

responded to reluctantly, or even tried to avoid, and why he was successful, where I was not, at comforting a child who had fallen off a swing.

But this reply runs into difficulties. We now seem to be saying, or implying, that the people of Le Chambon were not like us; they were braver and more generous than most others in the circumstances. They are being taken to be exceptional, people who exercised an exceptional degree of bravery and generosity. This sounds intuitive, and chimes with some of our ordinary ways of thinking. But now we are going back to the problematic stance of admiring them for being more virtuous than we are, but discounting their own perspective on themselves and what they did. We admire them for exceptional virtue while not hearing their own words, which say that they were not exceptionally brave or generous. So far virtue ethics does not appear to have less strain accomodating heroism than do other theories.

We can get help at this point from looking harder at the concept we are occupied with, heroism. What is involved in thinking of heroes as exceptional people? I will introduce complexity by recounting a discussion I was present at some years ago at a conference on ancient philosophy. One of the talks involved the ancient idea of heroism, and the speaker, who taught in a Department of Classics, remarked that the students to whom she taught the *Iliad* had problems with seeing Achilles as the hero of the story. Achilles, she said, is clearly seen as the hero by Homer and in the ancient world (where he was taken as a model by Alexander the Great). Achilles is the best warrior, the fastest runner, the foremost of the Greeks, the archetypal winner. In a famous passage there is a description of how his father Peleus raised him 'always to be the best and to excel among others'.¹⁹ Achilles' mother is a goddess, Thetis, so he is in a different league from mere mortals like us. It is because he is so exceptional, so much the outstanding warrior, that he cannot put up with a slight put on him by Agamemnon, the leader of the Greek army. His anger at this slight is what structures the whole story of the *Iliad*.

Many of her students, the professor continued, saw the hero, or 'the real hero' of the *Iliad*, as Hector. Hector is the eldest son of King Priam, and the foremost Trojan warrior. He knows he is not going to survive combat with Achilles, the exceptional warrior, but nonetheless he unhesitatingly leads the Trojans against the Greek invaders, defending his city and fellow-citizens. In a famous and moving scene he goes into battle after saying farewell to his wife and baby son, saying that what is most painful to him about the thought that Troy will fall is the fate of his family when he is dead. Hector is a thoroughly human and humanized figure, as opposed to the half-divine Achilles. Not only is he presented in a domestic scene, behaving tenderly to his baby son, but he is also a good, thoughtful

person; after his death Helen recalls that when other Trojans abused her as the cause of the war Hector would defend her. Achilles is a warrior who exists to compete and win. Hector is the warrior who never wanted the war and does his best to act well in a situation that he did not seek.²⁰

The professor's case was that in taking Hector as the real hero of the *Iliad* the students were exhibiting what she saw as a feeble weakening of the idea of heroism. They weakened the idea, she complained, to the point of seeing perfectly ordinary people as heroes. Many, she said, told her things like, 'My mom is my hero,' and she added, 'Seldom is mom an astronaut.' Modern students, she concluded, are raised to find heroism in ordinary people, and thus they fail to 'get' the idea of heroism that we find in works like the *Iliad*, where the hero is someone outstanding, above our mediocre level and certainly not your mom.

These comments turned out to be quite divisive, and led to lively debate. Setting aside the issue of whether students seeing Hector as the real hero of the *Iliad* are missing what is intended in the original, the disagreement that resulted about Achilles and Hector is revealing about our contemporary notion of heroism. Where do we find heroes? Which can serve as ethical heroes?

We find both the Achilles type and the Hector type as heroes in our culture, but we find them in different locations. We admire people who *excel* at what they do, and sporting figures are often called 'heroes' because they win competitions. The admiration for someone who outstrips others in some sport is based on their physical excellence, which is the easiest kind of excellence to discern. Although it is clear that this has little to do with being an ethically good person, seeing someone as a hero of this kind often focuses on admiration of the person generally, so that many are shocked and disappointed when one of these sports 'heroes' turns out to have cheated, or to be an abusive spouse. There is also the phenomenon of movies based on comic books, which have heroes who excel in combat and fighting. Often the powers they have are ones that humans don't have; these are the 'superheroes'.²¹ In a competitive culture such as ours Achilles is a common model, and we often have confused expectations that people outstanding in physical ways will turn out to be ethical models, despite frequently being let down.

The outstanding excellence model is not confined to physical excellence; we find that people who excel in other fields can be called heroes. Thus we find books for children called 'Heroes of Science,' and the like. These figures are often presented as models for the young to emulate, and there is the same problem when some turn out to be ethically repulsive. 'Heroes' of science and the like are often the people who were the first to discover something or make something, so there can often be a contest

over who is the 'real' hero where there is a contest over who was really the first to do or make whatever it is. The prospect of finding heroes of the outstanding sort in any given field depends on the extent to which that field can be plausibly portrayed as competitive. This seems to be why there is less tendency to see outstanding 'heroes' in fields like literature and the arts, where the competitive model does not fit. We do have the Romantic idea of 'genius', applied to figures like Beethoven, but Beethoven's being a genius does not come at the expense of someone else's not being a genius. Some composers, writers and poets make breakthroughs in artistic technique, but their significance differs from that of breakthroughs in science or technology: there is not the same importance attached to just being the very *first* person to do something, and indeed the first person to invent a literary genre or trope may not be much good at it, so that their successors are the ones who develop the possibilities.

We find the Hector model in a different area of our culture, in stories about people who rescue others in natural disasters, or who undertake tasks of great difficulty to help people escape from situations of injustice, in their own country or others'. We can note here that a hero of the first (Achilles) kind may not act well in situations of great difficulty and stress, as Achilles himself illustrates. Indeed many scientist 'heroes' have put up little or no resistance to political misuse of their results.²² Many heroes on the Hector model, who have rescued others from fires and floods, or have refused to tolerate injustice to themselves or others, or have volunteered their time, money and expertise to help in places where they are needed, turn out to be quite ordinary people who may not be outstanding in any obvious way, and may indeed not be ethically outstanding at all. A well-known example here is Oskar Schindler, who heroically rescued many Jews from the Holocaust but was otherwise a quite mediocre person. It is a feature of this sort of hero that it is the very ordinariness of the person which makes their heroism remarkable. There are, of course, some heroes who have acted well in difficult situations who have in fact already excelled in some way, and sometimes in a difficult situation excellence is needed. But in most cases no outstanding talent is needed to be a hero of the second type.

Clearly the people of Le Chambon were not heroes in the Achilles sense. Nor is Urmsen's soldier who throws himself on the grenade. They are not outstanding people, or people of exceptional character. I suggest that they fit the Hector model, and that this is the right model for us to understand ethical heroism. They are acting well and responding well to a situation they haven't chosen, and wouldn't choose, to be in. They illustrate for us particularly well the situation of people of ordinary virtue who are faced with an extreme situation and do the best they can, in circumstances

where most people don't do what they do, and so don't even rise to the level of ordinary virtue.

Heroes — that is, heroes on the Hector rather than the Achilles model - challenge us not to become outstanding but to stick by the level of virtuous development we have when the situation becomes challenging. It is difficult and challenging situations which test the level of virtue that ordinary people have. In a country occupied by an enemy force it is difficult for most people to sustain the level of bravery that they can maintain in peace time. There is the obvious difference, for example, that in doing certain things which were not risky before, you now risk danger and sometimes the threat of death. The level of bravery developed before may not be stable or robust enough to deal with this. The people who continue to be brave in these changed situations have not acquired extra bravery; they continue to be brave, as they were before, but also now in the changed situations. A hero in this situation is not someone of outsize virtue; she is just someone who continues to act decently, bravely and so on. What most people fail to do is to sustain even the everyday level of decency and bravery that they did before. (This is *not* to say that we are in a position to blame them; changed situations bring a variety of challenges, and bravery may well not be the only crucial factor in many of them.)

We can now see defects in the Achilles model as a model for virtue. Virtue is not competitive in the way that physical excellence is. If Achilles is the fastest runner, then others are slower than he is. But virtue is not competitive, zero-sum, in this way. Nelson Mandela endured years of imprisonment without becoming bitter and vengeful, and this is a great achievement of character. But this is not like coming top in a competition; an ordinary person who overcomes and forgives a personal wrong can be as virtuous than Mandela. Mandela's example may inspire the person (as it well may) but inspiration to develop a better character is not a motivation to acquire more of what Mandela has. We do say, as noted, that someone is more generous, or a better person than I am, but this is not to be understood in terms of quantitative comparison. Still less is it to be understood in terms of degrees of progress towards a determinately pictured 'completely virtuous person'. Mandela acted well in circumstances far more oppressive than any that most ordinary people face, and hence is an inspirational hero. What he inspires us to do is to act well in our own demanding circumstances, and so to become someone with a robust acquisition of virtue. He can't inspire us to do what he did, since we are not in his circumstances, and it would be foolish to wish to be in his, or to seek out oppressive or dangerous situations in hopes of acting heroically in them. He inspires us to be more ethically resilient in our own difficult and demanding situations.

We aim to be like our heroes not in wishing to be faced with difficult or horrible circumstances like theirs, but in wishing to sustain whatever virtue we have developed when we are faced by challenging circumstances of our own. We aspire to ‘do what they did’ not in doing the same kind of action, but in having the same strength of character in doing our own actions. The hero who inspires us and whom we aspire to be like does not have to be an achiever like Achilles. She is rather somebody, perhaps quite ordinary, whose virtue is sustained and expressed even in exceptionally difficult circumstances. (It might even be your mom, if your mom has a difficult life, as many do.)

We may be drawn to the model of the pre-eminent and the achiever by the way we talk about heroes being *more* virtuous than we are, or *better* people. But we should not let this way of talking get us to think that my degree of virtue is the kind of thing that can be measured against those of others, or that acting in certain kinds of situation can increase your level or amount of virtue. Suppose that I do one generous action, this being exactly what is appropriate, and you do six, this being again exactly what is appropriate. Does this make you more virtuous than I am? Obviously not; how virtuous each of us is, is determined by the reasons we responded to and the readiness with which we did it, not how often we did it. Similarly a 40-year old who has lived in a consistently virtuous way is not merely thereby more virtuous than someone of 18. If she is, it is by virtue of learning from greater experience, not merely from having been virtuous for longer. Length of time can sap virtue as well as strengthen it. What matter is how your experience leads you to reason and act when action is needed. Virtue ethics does not discount the consequences or the scope of actions, but distinguishes them from the issue of what it is to act virtuously.

Is virtue ethics more successful than the other approaches I have sketched at giving an appropriate place to heroism? It’s clear by now that the answer depends on our model of heroism. If we think of the Achilles kind of hero, virtue ethics does not seem to do better than the other models. The hero does the right thing, where we fail to do this, and we admire this and are inspired by her example. But how can we be inspired by hero who achieves what we are not capable of achieving? The outlook is even more hopeless if we are told that what she achieves is merely what we ought to be achieving.

The Hector model is the model of heroism that best fits our ordinary ethical thinking, and it also fits the virtue ethics approach. The hero does the right thing in difficult circumstances, but does not think of himself as being exceptional. When we admire him we are not being inspired to try, unrealistically, to be exceptional, still less to seek out situations in which to act in exceptional ways. Rather, we are being inspired to remain stably

at our level of virtue rather than giving in to considerations that we know should not defeat us but often do. We try to become better people in living as we do now, but doing a better job of doing so bravely, generously or in otherwise virtuous ways. Virtue ethics does justice to the fact that we can be heroic in different ways, depending on where and how we are situated. We are failing in a multitude of ways, given the complications of our lives, and need diverse kinds of inspiration to do better in the ways we are failing. Correspondingly, heroes of the Hector type are a varied bunch.

At the same time, heroes expand our horizons by showing us virtue exercised in circumstances that we do not expect to face. Learning of Mandela's many years in prison makes us realize how fortunate we are not to have to go through that, and when we admire him for responding so well to this terrible situation we have enlarged our view of what is, as we say, humanly possible. This directs us back to our own situation, not with the literal-minded idea of emulating Mandela by seeking comparable circumstances in our own lives, but in facing our own circumstances with an expanded view of what is possible for us. Virtue ethics does not direct us to admire the heroism of the people of Le Chambon while refusing to accept their own account of themselves. We should indeed act as they did, focussing on their virtue in those circumstances and applying it to our own circumstances intelligently.

Heroism of the Hector kind is built into virtue ethics, given its model of how we learn to become virtuous. We develop as virtuous people in a variety of different situations as we grow, mature and are faced by a changing world. We face constant challenges and struggle to acquire and to keep exercising our virtues. Living virtuously is never fully achieved but always requires of us a drive to aspire and to keep up our ability to deal with an ever-shifting world around us. We are inspired by people who do well in circumstances that defeat others, but this does not open up a gap between us and them such that we think that we have to be able to do the same kind of actions that they did, or else give up on being good people. In virtue ethics the ideal is not hopeless dangled in front of the ordinary person who then has to make do with a second-rate level of ethics. We are all aspiring to the ideal, in non-competitive ways. As Aristotle puts it, when we all strive to be virtuous this is a competition in which everyone wins.²³ Virtue ethics is a theory which illuminates our ethical life for us and directs us how to live it better. The account of heroism that we find in virtue ethics fits with our everyday views, and does so with less strain, both theoretical and practical, than other theories of ethics.

Notes

1. We despise villains; I will not be giving an account of villainy or wickedness in this paper. That is part of a larger project of studying the nature of vice, which does not straightforwardly fall out of an account of virtue.

2. I say more about this in my 'Why Virtue Ethics does not Have a Problem with Right Action.' *Oxford Studies in Normative Ethics* 4 (2014), 13-33.

3. J.O. Urmson, 'Saints and Heroes', in A.I. Melden, *Essays in Moral Philosophy*, University of Washington Press 1958, 198-216.

4. There is a broad sense in which we might call someone a saint whose actions are striking from the ethical point of view, but this tends to be limited to actions which are strikingly self-sacrificing (as when we take a mother who has raised many children to 'be a saint').

5. Urmson does not use the actual term *supererogatory*, but his article is rightly regarded as the beginning of serious attempts to focus on the issue.

6. The opening part of the Anglican eucharistic prayer in its original 17th century version very clearly rules out supererogation: 'It is very meet [appropriate], right, *and our bounden duty*, that we should *at all times, and in all places*, give thanks unto thee, O Lord...' (italics mine). The achievement of giving thanks to God all the time, everywhere, is here not something to aim at as an ideal, but is just our duty, what we ought to do. (The modern version is quite different, and leaves aside the supererogation issue, which few people today are even aware of.)

7. Roger Crisp, in 'Supererogation and Virtue,' *Oxford Studies in Normative Ethics* 3 (2013), 13-34, gives an excellent account of the theological origins of the idea of supererogation, and its somewhat anomalous status in philosophical ethical debate.

8. Thomas Hill, 'Kant on Imperfect Duty and Supererogation,' *Kant-Studien* LXXII (1971), 55-76, argues that Kant's ethics makes room for supererogation; Marcia Baron, 'Kantian Ethics and Supererogation,' *Journal of Philosophy* LXXXIV # 5 (1987), 237-62, argues that Kant's distinction between perfect and imperfect duties actually excludes supererogation, indicating that it is not needed as an ethical category. J.P. Vessel, in 'Supererogation for Utilitarians,' *American Philosophical Quarterly* 47 (2010), 199-219, argues that a distinct category of the supererogatory can be accommodated by versions of utilitarianism.

9. *Heroes, Saints and Ordinary Morality*, Andrew Michael Flescher, Georgetown University Press, 2003.

10. Two of the examples from Flescher, p. 139; he gives the references in an endnote.

11. As Flescher puts it (p 50), 'In spite of Urmson's sympathetic depiction of heroes and saints with respect to the *value* that they place in their heroic and saintly acts, Urmson insists that heroes and saints err by taking this evaluative decision for a judgement about what morally *must* be done... Heroes and saints do supererogate, even if they do not acknowledge the concept of supererogation.'

12. In the 17th century theological debate about supererogation, the Calvinists did, consistently, take this view, namely that it should be normal to think of yourself as a complete failure spiritually, and that it is completely unclear that or how you can improve. Contemporary theories which take the analogous posi-

tion, that it should be normal to think of yourself as a complete failure ethically, generally add the optimistic claim that we can improve, but it is not clear what grounds the optimism.

13. This has been a focus for consequentialists since Sidgwick's notorious claim that his version of utilitarian consequentialism would best be brought about in ways that deny and suppress its statement.

14. Urmson, p 212.

15. Rebecca Stangl, in 'Neo-Aristotelian Supererogation,' *Ethics* 126 (2016), 339-365, argues for an account of supererogation within the 'target-centred' account of virtue by Christine Swanton. She calls this 'neo-Aristotelian' because she argues that it is consistent with 'the doctrine of the mean', but it is not Aristotelian or neo-Aristotelian in the sense of accepting Aristotelian points about the structure of virtue which I lay out below (the kind of disposition virtue is, and the way it is learned) and so is not about the type of virtue ethics I am defending.

16. I have learned much from the relatively sparse literature on virtue and heroism, particularly Roger Crisp (above, n 7); Gregory Trianosky, 'Supererogation, Wrongdoing and Vice — On the Autonomy of the Ethics of Virtue', *Journal of Philosophy* (1986), # 1, 26-40; Jason Kawall, 'Virtue theory, ideal observers and the supererogatory,' *Philosophical Studies* (2009), 179-196. I have also learned from work on supererogation, particularly David Heyd, 'Supererogation', Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/supererogation>); Terence Horgan and Mark Timmons, 'Untying a Knot from the Inside Out: Reflections on the "Paradox" of Supererogation', *Social Philosophy and Policy* (2010), 29-63.

17. More is said about this issue in my 'Why Virtue Ethics Does Not Have a Problem with Right Action' (see n.2).

18. For more on this topic see my *Intelligent Virtue*, Oxford University Press 2011, chapter 4.

19. *Iliad* Book 11 784: *aien aristeuein kai hupeirochon emmenai allon.*

20. A caution to the scholarly: this distinction does not quite correspond to everything in the *Iliad* itself. Aristotle, in talking about 'superhuman' and 'god-like' virtue, a state beyond human virtue which corresponds to a state beyond human vice, brutishness, uses Hector as an example, quoting a line where Hector's father Priam says that he was more like the son of a god than the son of a mortal (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1145a15-22; the line is *Iliad* XXIV 258). It is interesting that for Aristotle Hector is a better example than Achilles of 'godlike' virtue; by Aristotle's day Achilles' defects had been forcefully illustrated, particularly in drama.

21. There is an interesting subculture of 'real superheroes', people who dress as comic-book superheroes and attempt to act as 'good guys' in dangerous areas of cities. Predictably, this often does not work well.

22. Robert Oppenheimer is a good example of a brilliant scientist who was, until too late, compliant with political demands to use his discoveries as weapons of utterly destructive war.

23. *Nicomachean Ethics* IX chapter 8, where the idea is developed.

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