

The Virtue of Courage

Douglas N. Walton



Intelligent human action is goal-directed, but when pain, fear, or danger intrude, it is difficult to sustain the mental equilibrium to follow through, even if the goal is very important and the action critical. Hence, the need for courage. As Aquinas put it, the virtue of courage is "to remove any obstacle that withdraws the will from following the reason."¹ Such overcoming of dangers, pain, and obstacles is well illustrated by the following incident.

Sgt. John L. Levitow was on a C-47 cargo aircraft flying a night mission over Vietnam in February 1969 when the plane was hit and damaged, wounding all the occupants of the cargo compartment and throwing them against the floor or fuselage.² One crewman had been launching flares, and the explosion threw an ignited flare from his grasp into the cargo compartment. The plane was out of control, and the flare rolled wildly from side to side. Levitow had moved forward to help another badly wounded man, even though he himself was stunned by the blast and had over forty fragment wounds in his back and legs. Seeing the smoking flare

1. Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, (London: Burns and Oates Ltd., 1922), II.-II., Q123, A.3.
2. *The Congressional Medal of Honor: The Names, The Deeds* (Forest Ranch, California: Sharp & Dunnigan, 1984); 100

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SHOSTAL ASSOCIATES, NEW YORK

The Good Samaritan, Vincent van Gogh

rolling in the aisle, but being unable to grasp it, he threw himself on it. Hugging it to his body, he managed to drag himself to the rear cargo door and hurl it out of the plane. For saving the aircraft and its crew from certain destruction, Levitow was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor.³

It was necessary to remove the ignited flare from the aircraft if the crew were to survive. But to actually carry out this action was very difficult and dangerous. The situation was not only unstable and disorienting but highly intimidating. The flare was rolling around wildly. Levitow was badly wounded and stunned by the explosion of the shell that hit the plane. Because of the plane's instability, the only way he could control the burning flare was to hug it to his body.

All these factors suggest both the difficulty and hazards of the required actions as well as the unstable and confusing nature of the situation. To carry out this task required an unusual determination of will, presence of mind, and undeterred practical equilibrium.

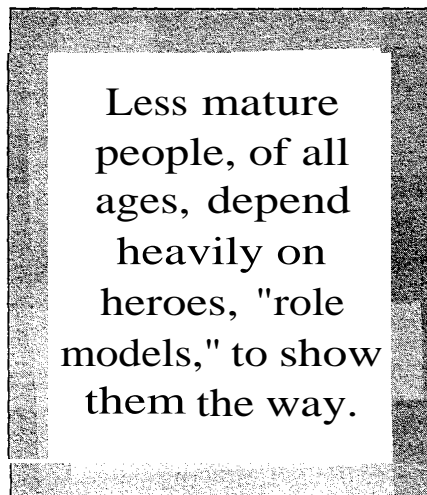
Although there may have been professional skills or training that helped Levitow perform this exceptional sequence of actions, qualities of determination and presence of mind may not be due to any trained expertise in particular. And many cases of courageous actions that occur in a military context reflect not so much military training or professional skills as the simple and plain personal qualities of someone who steps forward and does what needs to be done, despite the danger and difficulty of the situation. So courage is not inherently a military virtue. It can arise in any situation where there is sudden danger, catastrophe, or potential loss of life.

³. Congressional Medal, 100.

The kind of judgment involved in any act of courage is the ability to size up a situation and take the necessary steps to carry out a valuable goal despite the obstacles posed by a dangerous or unstable situation.

MORAL RULES AND VIRTUES

One reason for the systematic neglect of the virtues in modern ethics stems from the presumption that ethics is a purely abstract, analytical study of rules, like truth-telling and doing no harm, that compromises a systematic set of principles. However, as is often acknowledged, without fully realizing the significance of the admis-



sion, some of the most important moral problems arise when conflicts occur. Notoriously, for example, telling the truth in a particular situation may result in harming someone. David Ross's way of trying to cope with the problem was to make a distinction between *prima facie* (general) duties and duties concerning what to do in a specific situation.⁴ In fact, the important ethical decisions almost always are problems about what to do in a particular situation where many gener-

al principles could be applicable, but they tend to conflict with each other in relation to the situation. Such decisions are almost always made with highly imperfect knowledge of the possible future consequences and side effects of either one's actions or omissions.



irtues are the different kinds of practical wisdom that enable a person to carry out ethical goals, convictions, principles, and values in an imperfect world in which the right thing to do is too often obscure and hard to carry out with judgment and wisdom.⁵ Such decisions of means and ends require experience and maturity. They demand insight and shrewdness. Because the most momentous choices may allow little time for reflection, habit is often important. Less mature people, of all ages, depend heavily on heroes "role models," or other forms of guidance from their peers or opinion leaders, to show them the way. But they do so at great risk, for even clever and sophisticated people are often badly misguided and seriously wrong in their ethical thinking. In fact, everyday decisions on matters having ethical import are so heavily premised on all kinds of popular preconceptions and biases that even to sort out the real ethical reasoning behind an action or decision in retrospect can be excruciatingly difficult, full of uncertainties and problems.

Ethical maturity may be heightened by the realization that there are usual

ly two sides to an issue, with the result that ethical convictions are inherently fallible and open to revision and enrichment. The problem is to balance this respect for opposing points of view with the strength of conviction required to take a stand. Not every point of view is equally mature or defensible, and one cannot avoid commitment to some point of view if one is to be a mature and responsible human being. The very difficulty of knowing when one is right is itself the best argument for allowing individual autonomy and freedom of individual moral and religious persuasion in a democratic society as a basis for ethical decision making.

But where does all this leave us? It leaves us with the Socratic wisdom that knowing and doing the virtuous thing is a lot more difficult than applying some indisputable set of ethical principles and then simply picking out the single action that fits these principles.

Instead, we need to recognize that trying to do the right thing or the best one can hope for in a particular situation may demand not only an ordering of priority in one's goals but also a shrewd and perceptive grasp of what the situation really is, and where it may go from here.

Understanding an action as courageous involves a teleological framework of narrative discourse—a kind of story that exhibits a sequence of actions carried out in a particular situation to aim at a goal beyond that situation. Our understanding of such an extended sequence of steps of action represents our comprehension of the courageous person's commitments in relation to his own understanding of the situation as he saw it. Thus we, as external evaluators of the action, base our understanding of the action on a reconstruction of the courageous per-

4. Sir David Rose, *The Right and the Good* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1946).

5. See Alasdair McIntyre, *After Virtue* (London: Duckworth, 1981).

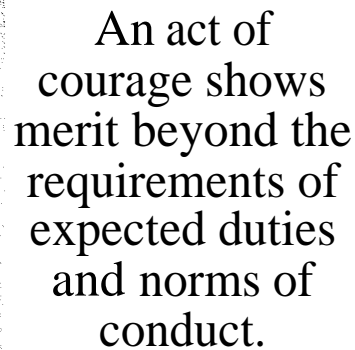
son's understanding of the situation. This kind of second-person reconstruction is possible because of a shared narrative context.

For example, suppose we are relating a story about someone who dived into a dangerous current and, nearly exhausted, managed to pull out another person who was unconscious. The presumption we reasonably make is that the first person dived into the water and swam towards the other person in order to save him from drowning. These presumptions could turn out to be wrong in a particular case. But in the absence of evidence to the contrary, they may be reasonable presumptions on the basis of what is known. By making such presumptions and stitching them together with the known facts in the narrative of a particular case, we reconstruct an understanding of the action, including the goals and commitments of the agent as they are revealed through the discourse and descriptions given.

Moral rules that define duties have the characteristic of being *universalizable*, meaning that they provide guidelines for what is required, allowed, or fairly expected of any person in a particular situation. But the ethics of ideals by which we judge actions to be courageous is marked by its very lack of universalizability. An act of courage expresses a personal depth of commitment to dearly held, and sometimes dearly paid for, personal ideals and goals. The supererogatory quality of such acts of personal commitment means that they are beyond duty, more like a gift than a required sacrifice or duty.

When a coworker fell to the bottom of a reactor filled with nitrogen gas on January 31, 1981, Stephen Pomeroy entered the reactor and unsuccessfully tried to drag his friend to safety.⁶ Efforts to revive both men were in

vain. What Pomeroy did in venturing into danger to help his coworker was an act that went beyond duty. It was not an act that he could reasonably be required to undertake, given the clear danger. The virtue of it, despite the tragic outcome, is reflected in this man's personal commitment to try to help, even in this desperate situation. Personal ideals have to be based on one's own life-plan and moral reasoning, one's own estimate of what is possible and worthwhile. Because of the severe risk involved in an act of courage, undertaking this type of act cannot generally be regarded as a duty or obligation that it's universalizable. It



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Acts of courage may involve moral rules of conduct, but because they are so often risky or difficult beyond reasonable requirements of duty and are based on personal commitment, moral rules applying to them are not decisive, controlling, or mechanistically applied. Rather, judgment, skill, and experience are required, because of the instrumen-

⁶ Canada, Governor General's Office. *Investiture Bravery Decorations*, (Ottawa) 8 September 1983, 1.

tal nature of acting virtuously in a particular situation. An act of courage shows merit beyond the requirements of expected duties and norms of conduct, because of the strong personal commitment to highly valued goals shown by the act.⁷ But merit is also shown in the judgment required to act in a situation of risk and danger that involves balancing competing goals in a particular situation. Obviously one important goal, personal safety, is often at sharp risk of compromise in the carrying out of many a courageous act. Lack of judgment could mean that the act was reckless or even foolish rather than truly courageous.



ince acts of courage are based on personal commitments, intentions, and judgments rather than on strictly applied moral rules, critics may be inclined to say that such actions are subjective and are not therefore truly ethical or moral matters. It might be alleged then that courage is based on irrational fanaticism or on an elitism that implies that some of us are better than others (not strictly equal to all other moral agents).

This criticism has some basis, because acts of courage are based on personal commitment; they do show personal merit. However; the conclusion that acts of courage are purely subjective and are therefore of no moral value is erroneous.

COMMITMENT BEYOND DUTY

An action is properly judged courageous for essentially two reasons:

7. See David Heyd, *Supererogation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

First, the act must be directed toward a good end, and second, the act must be in the face of great difficulty or danger. These two aspects of any courageous act have to do with the end and means respectively.

The second requirement implies that for an act to be courageous, the means of carrying out the act must be involved with peril, hardship, or risk. It is because of this element of danger or risk that an act of courage reveals the agent's strength of commitment to goals that he highly values. The test of commitment lies in the action taken despite the risk.

Deborah MacLean was taken hostage in a department store holdup in Summerside, Prince Edward Island, on January 25, 1978. Her assailant held a loaded shotgun to her head as she sat in a chair. When three policemen charged, Maclean grabbed the barrel of the shotgun, deflecting the weapon away from one of the policemen so that the assailant was overpowered without being able to fire.⁸ We clearly recognize this as an act of courage because of the risk of grabbing the barrel of a loaded shotgun from the hands of the assailant and because of the intent to prevent the death of the police officer by taking this action.

But why is an action better if carried out in a situation of danger or risk? If two actions, A and B, are equally good or worthwhile to bring about, then why should A be judged as more worthy or excellent simply because it was more difficult or dangerous to bring about than B? For the utilitarian or the Kantian, such a judgment would seem to have no rational basis. For the utilitarian, it is only the good consequences or outcome that matters. If A and B have equally good outcomes, then the fact that A was more danger-

8. Carnegie Hero Fund Commission, *Report* (Pittsburgh, 1979), 19.

ous or difficult to bring about is ethically immaterial. Or if anything, it is a negative factor in the balance. For the Kantian, all that matters is conformity to duty. If A and B are equally required as moral duties, then the ease or difficulty of their having been brought about reflects no additional credit on the moral agent.

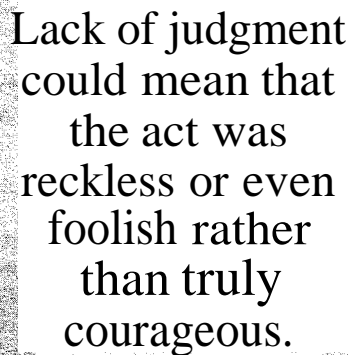
But courage is a supererogatory quality of actions, meaning that a courageous act is one that is freely undertaken beyond the requirements of duty. Such an act is correctly judged courageous if it required a perseverance or risk beyond what would be reasonably expected or required in normal conditions. It is this willingness to incur additional risk or danger that reveals the special, supererogatory commitment of the inner person through the courageous act. It is an extra commitment, revealing a person who has something more to give than the rest of us should reasonably expect on a "fair share" basis.

Acts of courage are taken in the face of danger and therefore can turn out in a way contrary to utilitarian calculation of goods and benefits. When this occurs, however, the act is no less courageous.

Kevin Walsh was among the first police officers to answer a call that a woman had jumped off a bridge into the Anacostia River. He and another officer jumped in. The strong current overwhelmed them and Walsh drowned. Friends afterward commented bitterly that he had given his life to attempt to save a former mental patient intent on suicide who died anyway.⁹ Walsh's wife Judith, mother of his three children, said he would have disagreed: "He had the passion of a missionary and he really wanted to be able to help people whether it was

something minor or more important."¹⁰ In this case the consequences turned out badly for everyone, but that did not detract from the courageousness of the act, which was revealed in the virtuous intentions and strength of commitment of this police officer.

It is important to recognize that difficult and dangerous actions can be more meritorious because we live in a world where disasters, uncertainties, and obstacles can frustrate the best intentions. Therefore, it may take effort, ingenuity, even risk or sacrifice to carry out good intentions. Any human action starts from a premise of uncertain knowledge. Nature can be highly



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capricious, sometimes unexpectedly uncooperative, and even vicious. The overcoming of real difficulties, therefore, is often necessary to bring about something good. Consequently, action required to achieve a good end is itself instrumentally good (virtuous).

However, there has been a strong bias in recent ethical thinking towards the presumption that it is only the end or goal that can be good in itself and

9. "A Celebration of Heroes," *Newsweek*, 6 July 1987, 62f.

10. "A Celebration," 63.

that merely instrumental goals are of no serious importance in morality. But this is a kind of fallacy or shallow thinking.

For example, an argument that seems to be presumed in much recent thinking begins with the proposition that peace is good; therefore if everyone agrees that peace is good, then that is the end of any moral discussion of peace and war.



What this presumption of the issue overlooks is that the means of maintaining peace in an unstable and dangerous world may itself not only involve effort and risk but also difficult negotiation and shrewd judgment. Carrying out an end that all agree is good may itself be replete with side effects, judgments that conflict with other goals or about alternative means and judgments of what is possible in an uncertain situation. These "secondary" judgments are very often not at all morally neutral or insignificant. They are replete with assumptions that require the weighing of strengths of potentially conflicting commitments. Even in an uncertain and dangerous world, however, the committed and moral person must take up some line of action or omission. That such actions are based on convictions that may, in hindsight, be subject to error, should not force the moral person into a stance of quietism or "Do nothing at all—never take risks."

Hence, the real moral problem is how to have peace in an unstable and dangerous world alongside other important goals like freedom and dignity. This is a problem of means as well as

ends; it should not therefore be dismissed as morally trivial.

JUDGMENT AND PRACTICAL WISDOM

Even though courage is manifested in outward action, it is essentially an inner virtue, meaning that a courageous action can only be understood as courageous through an understanding of the agent's intentions and of the agent's personal knowledge of the situation. To understand an act as courageous, we have to make reasoned presumptions about the goals of the person who carried out the act and about how the person perceived the line of action as a means to the realization of these goals. Thus courage is strongly tied to the inner biography of a person's intentions, ideals, and personal perception of a situation.

This means that there is a special kind of thinking, or reasoning, involved both in carrying out a courageous action and in evaluating the action, after the fact, as courageous. This kind of thinking is goal oriented and knowledge based. To say that an action was *goal oriented* is to say that there was a line of action from an initial, known situation toward some final state, the projected outcome of the action. To say that an action was *knowledge based* is to say that the agent began with some set of facts and principles that comprised the particular situation of the action, as he saw the situation at the time. The action is the sequence of steps that the agent took to link up the initial situation, as he saw it, to the goal. A courageous action is one where the action was appropriate to the agent's carrying out his highly commendable and worthwhile goal, despite his realization of the dangerous, painful, or difficult nature of the action.¹¹

After his boat had capsized, Lloyd Patterson was thrown into cold water

near Fort Bragg, California, on March 11, 1978, and erratic currents began moving him out to rough waters. James Ponts, a teacher aged thirty-seven, launched a dinghy and started rowing some nine hundred feet to Patterson, passing through several breaker lines. According to the account given by the Carnegie Hero Fund Commission, "After a number of tries, during each of which the dinghy was blown off course by strong winds.¹³ Ponts succeeded in throwing a rope to Patterson. With difficulty Ponts then rowed back to shore, towing Patterson by means of a rope."¹² The description of the sequence of actions reveals the ingenuity, presence of mind, and persistence of Ponts in a very dangerous and unstable situation.

We are told that Ponts made "a number of tries," and encountered difficulties. The dinghy was blown off course by the strong winds.¹³ This information enables us to understand Ponts' goal in this situation, and because we can understand what he was trying to do, we can appreciate both the danger of the situation and the worth of his goal. By tying this understanding together with the sequence of actions in a narrative discourse, a coherent reconstruction of a courageous action can be filled in. We see the goal, we see the dangerous situation, and we see the outline of the sequence of steps Ponts carried out in his determined attempts to realize that goal. We can also appreciate his strong commitment to helping someone in trouble, and we are moved by a description of the acts that revealed his commitment. Here then are all the ingredients of a courageous act, tied together in a narrative discourse

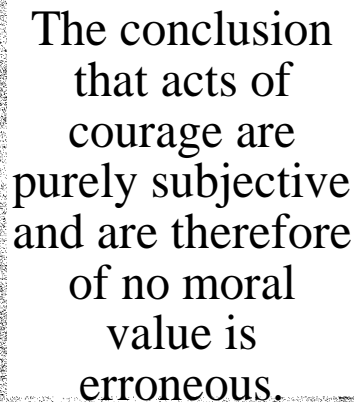
11. Douglas N. Walton, *Courage: A Philosophical Investigation*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986).

12. Carnegie Hero Fund Commission, *Report* (Pittsburgh, 1979), 210.

13. *Report*, 1979, 210.

that characterizes this type of act.

The kind of judgment involved in practical wisdom is not necessarily professional skill or trained expertise, although these may be involved. It is the kind of judgment that calls for a reasoned assessment of risk and doing the best one can in a dangerous situation, even an unfamiliar one. But each particular situation is unique, and danger is notoriously hard to judge. Luck and happenstance may be involved. However things turn out, a courageous act is one where the person who acted took a severe risk where there was a reasonable chance of successfully carrying out the highly worthwhile outcome.



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Many lives are lost every year in highway accidents where the victim is pinned inside a vehicle and dies in the fire when the vehicle burns. Despite the clear and terrible danger posed by the possibility of an exploding fuel tank, some truly inspiring rescue attempts have been made by individuals who happened to be at the scene of an accident.

The following incident is recorded by the Carnegie Hero Fund Commission. In this situation, Moses G. Adams was



AMERICAN ETCHINGS OF THE 19TH CENTURY, EDITED BY FRANCINE TYLER, NEW YORK, 1984

The Life Line, by Winslow Homer

left unconscious in his pickup truck following a collision with a train. At the scene also was Lewis Herbert Chase.

Adams, 36, was unconscious in his pickup truck, pinned to his seat amidst flames. Chase, 50, railroad conductor, ran to the truck and three times entered it in unsuccessful attempts to free Adams. Despite increasing flames and intense heat, Chase entered the truck again, freed Adams, and pulled him from it. Adams was hospitalized for his burns; Chase sustained minor burns. Both men recovered.¹⁴

In this case, fortunately, both men recovered. In other cases, one or both-- the victim or would-be rescuer --died.

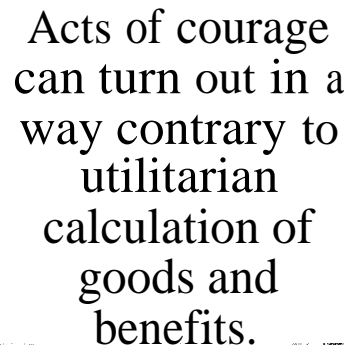
In any dangerous situation, it may be hard for anyone to try to calculate or quantify the degree of risk. Because personal abilities in different situations also vary widely, it may not be so easy to judge whether a risk was reasonable or foolish for someone else to take in a particular case. In the instance above, the fact that Chase entered the burning truck three times in unsuccessful attempts to rescue Adams suggests that Chase was fully aware of the danger. He was trying very hard to do the best he could in a situation that was extremely dangerous. It was highly problematic whether either of the men would survive.

Sometimes an act is all the more courageous because the situation was a tricky or unfamiliar one for the rescuer. Such conditions not only make the job more dangerous but they demand presence of mind in an intimidating situation that is not familiar and therefore all the more problematic.

Socrates in the *Laches* (192c) asked

14. Carnegie Hero Fund Commission *Annual Report* (Pittsburgh, 1982), no. 8592.

the question: Who is the more courageous, the skillful diver who performs a rescue or the person who performs the same act but has no skill in diving? Like most Socratic questions, the answer is by no means straightforward. In many cases, the one who has no skill seems the more courageous, for the lack of skill adds to the danger and difficulty of the rescue. But each situation is unique. In some cases, the unskilled diver could succeed due to blind luck when he took a foolish risk, or was not aware of the real danger. Or in other cases, because of risks beyond anyone's control, the skilled diver could be taking as much of a risk to effect a



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rescue as anyone who would have attempted to do so.

John Patrick Sullivan, a 53-year-old fire fighter, was on his way home from visiting friends in Westchester County on April 21, 1986, when he spotted an overturned truck.¹⁵ The truck had collided with a car. Sullivan saw flames spreading from the engine to the cab of the truck. As flames spurted around the truck, he leaped onto its side and

15. Sheldon Kelly, "Highway Inferno!" *Reader's Digest* (April, 1987), 76-80.

pulled two young boys, then a woman, and a man out of the truck. Seconds after he managed to get the last person out, the truck was engulfed in flames. Sullivan then went to the crushed car and managed to force the jammed door open, pulling out the badly injured crash victim just before the truck exploded, showering the whole area with burning debris.



Later, receiving a commendation for his action, Sullivan modestly insisted that his instincts led him to the fire and that his years of training governed his actions.

But a woman who had witnessed the incident had eloquently testified to his courage when she said to him at the scene of the accident with tears in her eyes: "You're the bravest man I've ever seen. God bless you."¹⁶ It was more than professional skill that was being honored in these words. It was a tribute to the commitment of a man who was not only able but also willing to take measured but very real and significant personal risk for a goal he felt was worth it. His actions expressed not only his skill and practical judgment but also the strength of his personal commitment to aiding the victims of the accident.

FACING A DIFFICULT SITUATION

Acts of moral courage are based on convictions, on a person's assessment and knowledge of a particular situation that may be controversial and subject to differing interpretations. This is typ-

ical of personal goal-directed reasoning based on knowledge of a particular situation, often containing many presumptions concerning patterns of action that are typical, expected, and conventional at any particular juncture of tradition and narrative discourse.

As the movement to impeach President Andrew Johnson progressed through 1847, it became increasingly apparent to Sen. Edmund G. Ross that the case was unfairly prejudiced against the president and that evidence in favor of the president had been arbitrarily excluded.¹⁷ In the end, however, a groundswell of popular pressure rose against Johnson, and the Republicans needed one more vote that only Ross could provide to unseat the president. Ross was a staunch Republican who personally disliked Johnson; moreover, he recognized that he had a lot to lose by not giving in to this tremendous popular pressure to vote with his party. Nevertheless, he felt that the case for impeachment was based on insufficient evidence and that to bow to partisan pressures would risk malting Congress into an instrument of narrowly partisan autocracy. When he voted against impeachment, however, public opinion rejected him as a "traitor." According to the account given by J.F. Kennedy, "When he returned to Kansas in 1871, he and his family suffered social ostracism, physical attack, and near poverty."¹⁸ It was only much later that Ross came to be praised as a courageous man who took a lonely stand against mob rule knowing that it would mean his political death.

Moral courage involves the determination to stick to valued convictions even in the face of tremendous moral and psychological pressures, even if the situation might not be immediately

16. Key, 79.

17. John F. Kennedy, *Profiles in Courage* (New York: Harper & Row, 1956).

18. Kennedy, 121.

dangerous in a physical way. In other cases, where injury or risk of personal destruction is directly evident, we often speak of courage in more physical terms like "guts" or "grit." Yet the two kinds of courage are often inseparably combined.

We often think of courage in wartime as the kind of physical courage required to cope with imminent danger. But there is also a strong element of moral conviction involved. Take the case of an SS soldier on the eastern front in the Second World War who held a position by staying to his gun to the end despite overwhelming odds. Though this soldier and his comrades may have truly thought his action courageous, we are inclined to withhold the term "courageous" because his action supported a regime and philosophy that we condemn as evil.

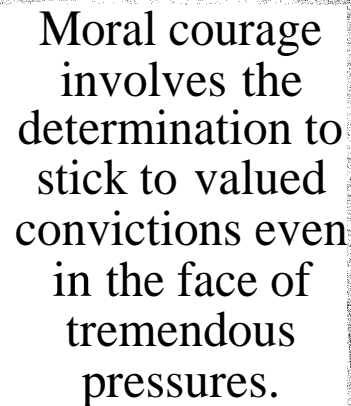
In acting in a way one thinks to be courageous, therefore, there can be moral as well as physical risks. For all actions in risky and unstable situations are based on goals and convictions that may turn out to be mistaken, wrong, or misevaluated in a particular situation. Following the popular opinion of the time in setting one's goals and convictions can sometimes be as dangerous as dissent. Judgment can be problematic.

Courage is not a very pleasant or enviable virtue in some respects, because it requires being in a difficult or dangerous situation to be exercised. In the following case, a U.S. Air Force fighter pilot found himself alone, facing a large formation of enemy fighters, in a situation where his duty would have been to attack the enemy if possible.

Lt. Col. James H. Howard was the leader of a group of P-51 Mustang fighters supporting a bombing run over Oschersleben, Germany, in January, 1944, when his force was attacked by German fighters, causing him to lose contact with his group." Returning to

the bomber formation, he found that the bombers were being attacked by more than thirty German aircraft and that he was the only plane in sight on his own side. Howard chose to attack the German formation alone. He continued to attack the enemy fighters for over thirty minutes, destroying three of them, and probably destroying and damaging others during the engagement.²⁰

In this case, it would seem correct enough to describe the situation by saying that Howard did fulfill the requirements of duty in a difficult and extremely dangerous and intimidating situation. However, the skillful



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and determined manner in which he carried out his hazardous task demonstrated a performance beyond even what might normally be expected in the situation. At any rate, whether the action is best judged as meeting the requirements of duty in a bad situation or as an act beyond duty, it was courageous and must have been very moving to any of the bomber pilots who witnessed it. Howard was

19. Congressional Medal, 346.

20. Congressional Medal, 346.

awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for his actions on this day.



Because courage is an outcome of danger and risk, the wish to be courageous or the uncritical emulation of heroic "role models" can be foolish. It is better that one be able to work for and realize worthwhile goals without the dangers of floods, fires, wars, and other catastrophes and disasters. Courage is a kind of good that arises out of something bad, and it would be preferable not to have these bad things to deal with at all. That is not the human situation, however. Unfortunately, the advent of modern technology has not made courage obsolete, but has made courage and judgment more necessary than ever.

COURAGE AND ALTRUISM

Courageous acts are often for the purpose of saving life, and altruism is typically part of any courageous act. Altruistic intent is not, however, essential to courageous action. For example, a scientist may make a great sacrifice and effort to contribute to knowledge even though he has physical disabilities; yet his goal does not necessarily have to include helping others *per se* for his actions to qualify as courageous.

On the other hand, the SS soldier mentioned in the previous section may have had the intention of helping others, yet we withhold the term "courageous" to describe his determined fight against his opponents in combat.

Courage is different from self-

sacrifice for various reasons. One reason is that self-sacrifice can be foolish, but a truly courageous action can never be foolish, even though there is a fine line, in some cases, between the courageous action and the foolish risk. Courage involves practical wisdom, an estimate of what is possible and worth risking in order to carry out a worthwhile goal in a difficult, dangerous, or risky situation.

Curiously enough, a courageous action can be based on an error or incorrect knowledge, provided that there was a justifiable reason for the error at the time.

When Lt. Col. Leon R. Vance was leading a bomb attack over Wimereaux, France, in June, 1944, his plane was hit by fire that killed the pilot.²¹ Vance's right foot was hit and almost severed. Applying a tourniquet to his leg, he led the formation over the bombing run, even though only one of the four engines of the plane still functioned. On the return to England, realizing the plane would not make it, he ordered the crew to bail out. Believing that one of them could not jump, Vance decided to ditch the plane in the water in order to give this man a chance to survive. Because Vance's foot had become lodged behind the copilot's seat, even though it was still attached by only a few tendons, he had to land while operating the controls lying on the floor and looking out the side window. After landing, the sinking plane exploded and blew Vance clear. He was rescued and survived. It turned out that he was the only crew member left in the plane. All the others had been able to bail out.

Vance was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for his decision to "ditch the aircraft in order to give

21. Congressional Medal, 467.

the crew member he believed to be on board a chance for life."²² Not only this gallant decision but Vance's entire conduct in skillfully carrying it out despite excruciating pain and dangerous conditions was an inspiring act of courage.

Curiously, although we rightly think this sequence of actions is an example of the highest courage, it was based on a premise that turned out to be false: Vance's belief that a crew member was still aboard was false. But it was a belief that was based on reasonable, even if inconclusive, evidence at the time when Vance had to make his decision. Therefore, it was not a foolish or incorrect presumption in light of Vance's knowledge of the situation, incomplete though it was. In dangerous situations, often part of the danger is incomplete knowledge. The reasonable person is not required to be omniscient, but only to act on a sensible estimate of the situation in light of the knowledge available at the time.

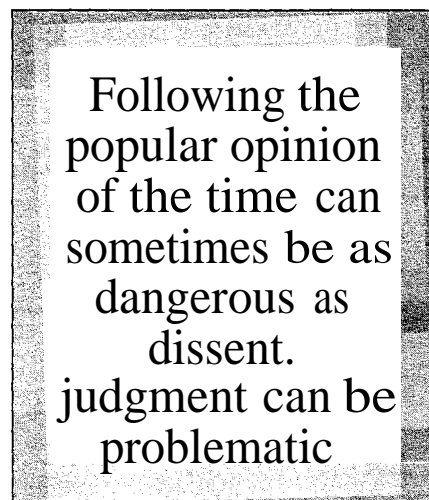
Evaluating an action as courageous involves judgment and reasoning because it requires a reconstruction of the agent's intentions and commitments as he saw the situation at the time. Evaluation and commemoration of acts of courage by an individual or group also reflect their values and judgment.

In most instances a courageous act does involve altruism, a risk or loss to oneself in order to help someone else. In a secular and commercialistic society, currently obsessed with individual rights and personal comfort, it is widely questioned whether nonindividualistic actions of this sort still have any meaning, value, or satisfaction for most people.

What is overlooked here is that with maturity comes the realization

that a personal sense of fulfillment is synonymous with a feeling of having contributed something worthwhile that will count or carry on after one dies. Though for many it may no longer mean a favorable accounting in a personal ledger on judgment day, an act of courage still clearly marks a measure of one's contribution in life, an important one. A courageous act is a gift, given at great risk or cost to the donor; it therefore demonstrates the giver's commitment to something other than himself, to something larger than himself.

An important career or fame may be the current way to seek this kind of



Following the
popular opinion
of the time can
sometimes be as
dangerous as
dissent.
Judgment can be
problematic

satisfaction, but ultimately unless it can be justified as a real and genuinely worth-while contribution to others such a quest is illusory and unsatisfying. On the other hand, a real act of courage is always deeply worthwhile; it enhances the human dignity of the courageous person and those who stand with him; it confirms an inner willingness and resolve to make a contribution despite risk, sacrifice, and effort. In the end, these are all that count for much.

22. Congressional Medal, 468.