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Teaching Excellence: The Use of Heroes in Moral Education

Shaun Douglas Respass
Old Dominion University

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TEACHING EXCELLENCE:
THE USE OF HEROES IN MORAL EDUCATION

by

Shaun Douglas Respass
B.A. May 2015, Old Dominion University

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Approved by:

Dale E. Miller (Director)

Lawrence J. Hatab (Member)

Frederick A. Lubich (Member)

ABSTRACT

TEACHING EXCELLENCE: THE USE OF HEROES IN MORAL EDUCATION

Shaun Douglas Respass
Old Dominion University, 2017
Director: Dr. Dale Miller

Heroism allows us to explore morality on a much deeper level, supplying us with people, events, actions, and circumstances that make our beliefs more complex, more meaningful, and more practical. My research evaluates heroism as an instructional tool and subject for the use in moral education and personal development. In this thesis, I argue that heroes are and should be used in moral education to stimulate the retention or reevaluation of cultural values and moral conventions. My objective will be to explain how heroes are currently used to support and guide moral development, while raising important questions regarding the benefits and disadvantages of utilizing heroes in particular ways. In other words, I want to demonstrate how heroes influence our moral understanding. My thesis starts by establishing a new definition and set of necessary criteria for heroism. Using this new definition, I then discuss the advantages and limitations of using heroes to communicate, reinforce, or reevaluate moral values. Heroes have always been pedagogically significant, but have received little academic attention as instructional figures. I blend philosophy with sociological and psychological research in order to explore the educational possibilities of heroic phenomena. I support my position by examining cultural and historical icons, fictional heroes, and heroic archetypes.

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This thesis is dedicated to my many heroes: to my parents and grandparents
who taught me the true meaning of struggle, sacrifice, and conviction;
and to the many idols who continue to inspire me, though we may have never met.

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INTRODUCTION

Heroism is compelling, inspiring, provocative, and admirable. Heroes are individuals who we consider to be truly remarkable, whose actions exceed what we could reasonably expect or demand from them. They are exceptional in many ways: physically, socially, psychologically, and morally. Their excellence is well-respected and celebrated, so much so that they have become an influential part of almost every community. Heroes are the characters in our favorite stories, the symbols of our diverse beliefs, the models of commendable behavior, and the recipients of our praise or worship. Heroism is a deeply ingrained concept within communities, making it nearly impossible to deny or ignore. We place tremendous value in our heroes by retelling and reliving their narratives, by erecting monuments and statues, and by preserving them for future generations or other communities. I will not criticize our love of heroes or their popularity, and will be taking our infatuation with them for granted. Instead, I will ask what heroism can teach us collectively and individually.

My research evaluates heroism as an instructional tool and subject for the use in moral education and personal development. One of the most important and underappreciated benefits of heroism is its pedagogical potential. In this thesis, I argue that heroes are and should be used in moral education to stimulate the retention or reevaluation of cultural values and moral conventions. My objective will be to explain how heroes are currently used to guide moral development, while raising important questions regarding the benefits and disadvantages of utilizing heroes in particular ways. In other words, I want to demonstrate how heroes influence our moral understanding. This thesis will blend philosophy with sociological and psychological studies in order to explore the educational possibilities of heroic phenomena. Heroes have always

been pedagogically significant, but have received little academic attention as instructional figures. I will support my position by examining cultural and historical icons, fictional heroes, and heroic archetypes.

Purpose

My research has several implications. First, my work will improve our understanding of heroism by providing a more flexible and appropriate definition of the term. The criteria for this definition should prove to be more reliable, inclusive, and informative than prior interpretations. This definition will also synthesize and expand on the current descriptive research, which has proven to be useful but incomplete. So far, scholars have primarily concentrated on selectively discussing various components of heroism, and have yet to provide a comprehensive definition. In other words, their work has assessed how ideas such as ‘courage,’ ‘compassion,’ or ‘idealism’ fit within our perceptions of heroism, but fail to demonstrate how these concepts coexist within a working description. I believe that a more accurate cross-cultural definition of heroism will provide us with a better understanding of the people, actions, and stories that we celebrate, as well as give us a more suitable set of requirements.

Second, I ask and answer a different question that the social sciences and philosophy have largely taken for granted. Sociologists and psychologists are often so preoccupied with the hero or heroic event that they rarely seem interested in how the hero is used in and by societies. For those who are interested, they emphasize how culture creates or enables heroes, rather than discuss how heroes could potentially create, affirm, or alter culture. Philosophy often takes the hero’s place in society for granted, citing heroes as examples in moral theory but rarely critiquing or evaluating the social impressions of their actions. I instead ask: how do we *learn* from heroes, and what do we gain from their example? Specifically, I shed more light on how

heroes can be intentionally or inferentially used in educational ways. I am asking not only what heroism is, but why it is important to us and how we can learn from it.

A third implication of my research is the successful implementation of heroism as a pedagogical tool. Based on heroism's prevalent availability in written texts, digital media, public discourse, artistic creations, and so forth, the concept deserves critical consideration as a subject and tool of study. Much like we would consider the limitations or potential of studying certain historical events or of using different forms of media within a classroom, so should we also contemplate the strategic implementation of heroes in moral education. This can include, but is not limited to, utilizing realistic or fictional heroes to contemplate complex moral issues, assessing and applying appropriate types of heroic behavior to guide moral aspiration, and harnessing heroism's motivational capabilities. Assuming my claims are correct, a more well-rounded understanding of heroism's pedagogical potential could support new methods of examining cultural values and personal development.

Paradigmatic Examples

Before I begin, I will introduce some paradigmatic examples of heroes. These are individuals who generally are or would be seen as heroes, and who very few people, if any, would question or take issue with. I introduce them here so that we may consider why they are heroic, and I will return to some of them later. I shall start with the classic example of Achilles. The Ancient Greek hero from Homer's *Iliad* is very popular in classrooms and common folklore. The majority of people are familiar with his larger than life actions in battle and his poetic downfall during the Trojan War. He is known as a superb example of exceptional speed, strength, wit, and bravery that far exceeds the capabilities of any average person. Centuries later, we still recognize Achilles as a hero and share his story, even though he models a way of life

greatly different from our own. As Jordison (2016) writes, “Achilles does not fit modern sensibilities. He is a killer, arguably a rapist, certainly a pillager. He is sulky, high-strung and oh boy, is he temperamental. He can be pitiless – actively enjoying the iron in his heart – and he can be murderously cruel.” His cruelty and selfishness would not be considered admirable by the majority of modern societies. Why, then, should we still consider him a hero? Although we may not value or understand the same ideals today that the Ancient Greeks had, we can at least respect their estimation of him. This example suggests that we do not need to accept someone as personally inspirational in order to consider them a hero for someone else.

An illustration of ‘ordinary’ heroism, by which I mean so-called ordinary people doing extraordinary things, would be Dr. Stella Ameyo Adadevoh. She acted heroically in the medical interests of the greater population by quarantining a contagious Ebola patient in Nigeria, despite immense legal pressure and risk to her personal health. In the face of accusations that she was “kidnapping” her patient along with the hazard of Ebola exposure, she did what she considered necessary to protect others (Ross, 2014). Dr. Adadevoh’s actions are indeed heroic, based on the physical and social risks she overcame while doing what she considered to be right. She acted against her fear of litigation and self-preservation in order to meet a moral and professional responsibility to help others in dire need, losing her life in the process. She may not have the same amount of fame as Achilles, but this does not make her any less heroic. Her bravery, character, and commitment should be recognized appropriately, especially since she acted under circumstances in which we could not fault another doctor had they decided to fold to the legal demands or had they chosen to prioritize their own health.

A third hero would also be considered an example of ordinary heroism. In 2007, as bullets flew across a section of Virginia Tech’s campus, a professor named Liviu Librescu was

honored for heroic actions that ultimately cost him his life. As the shooter charged towards his classroom door, Dr. Librescu moved swiftly towards it, barricading the door while his students escaped through the window. He was fatally shot in the process of what was considered to be a courageous and heroic act (Moynihan, 2007). Dr. Librescu gave his life to protect his students and demonstrated immense courage. Reports from students inside that classroom claimed that he acted without hesitation and never attempted to leave the door in order to preserve himself (Moynihan). His actions further raise questions concerning an educator's duty and responsibility to their students, even though the majority of us would rightfully see self-sacrifice as non-obligatory. Those who mourned his death and felt inspired by his actions were forced to question whether they could do the same, or what would be possible if events had unfolded differently.

Finally, soldiers are frequently identified as heroes. This may at times be controversial, but very few could deny the actions of some brave individuals. Imagine a soldier who dives on top of a live grenade in order to save his or her fellow comrades. The soldier certainly is unselfish and courageous, as well as pays the ultimate sacrifice to save others. The majority of people would consider him or her a hero. How about another soldier who acts as a decoy, and therefore an open target, so that others may escape or avoid danger? Such an individual would be prioritizing the safety of others and assuming a tremendous risk, so we would normally consider him or her a hero. These two examples, as well as many more associated with the military, are familiar representations of soldiers who we would normally identify as heroes. I will present many more examples in this thesis that may not have quite the same degree of agreement, but who demonstrate heroism in their own respect and/or provide insight into conflicts and opportunities in moral education. My goal will be to accurately portray these individuals and characters while highlighting their significance to the discussion at hand.

Approach and Outline

I will unite philosophy and the social sciences together to pose as well as possibly resolve many questions stemming from gaps in the research regarding heroes. I will use critical social theory to (1) create a more applicable and accurate depiction of heroism, (2) explain how heroism relates to ordinary morality and conventional standards of behavior, (3) show how their relationship produces pedagogical opportunities, and (4) offer practical suggestions for using heroism in educational methodologies. My approach will include various types of examples, such as popular historical and fictional heroes, heroic archetypes, and hypothetical scenarios. Overall, I will be analyzing multiple representations of heroism in order to account for various applications. Although examining a single type of heroism may be a more focused approach, I believe that a pluralistic approach best indicates how the phenomenon as a whole is useful.

I first need to clarify my use of several terms. I will be consistently referring to ‘heroism,’ ‘heroes,’ ‘heroic narratives,’ ‘heroic actions,’ and so forth. I will use many of these terms interchangeably throughout the work, and recognize the need to distinguish them. I understand that the mistaken substitution of these ideas may raise concerns. For instance, there is a general question of whether one heroic action is sufficient enough to call someone a hero, or if heroes are individuals who demonstrate a repeated pattern of heroic actions. This is not a question that I will specifically address in this thesis, but one that I do recognize as troubling. Calling someone a hero solely because of one particular action may leave this interpretation open to criticism. ‘Heroic narratives’ may also unintentionally suggest that heroes solely or primarily receive their value from our perception or explanations of them. My goal will be to use ‘heroism’ as a blanket term that covers the phenomenon as a whole, ‘heroes’ to refer to individuals who have been publicly regarded as such and who meet the requirements, ‘heroic action(s)’ to refer to a

particular moment or set of events, and ‘heroic narratives’ to mean the stories of heroes as they are told or reported.

My thesis will begin with an analysis of the necessary conditions for heroism. The main questions of this chapter are: What is a hero? What does it mean when we refer to heroism, heroes, and the heroic? In this chapter, I argue for a set of necessary criteria that together sufficiently accounts for heroism. I will also address many other factors that influence our perceptions of heroes, even though they may not be directly required. These components will also include an important distinction: what is required for someone to *be* a hero vs. what is required for us to *call* someone a hero. Topics covered in the chapter include the *supererogatory*, used to discuss heroes as morally exceptional, as well as *bravery*, *integrity*, and *public approval*. I additionally will discuss the various obligations, expectations, and motivations of heroes that could influence our opinions of them.

My second chapter will begin exploring the role of heroism in moral education. Here, I claim that heroism is and should be used to support the communication or retention of culturally dominant values. Heroism is a valuable way of communicating what values matter, why they matter, and who best exemplifies them. Heroes are a way for us to examine the “moral thought” of a community and explore the conventional morality of our own culture. In this chapter, I emphasize the use of heroes as a way of maintaining a ‘status quo’ and normative expectations of behavior. My goal is to determine how to appropriately use heroes to reaffirm moral behavior and access cultural values. I cover topics such as cultural needs and desires, idealized images, modes of communication, admiration, and emulation. Key questions that will be addressed in this chapter include: How are heroes currently used in moral education? How can heroes be

repurposed to fit moral interests? How do individuals learn or perceive the lessons of heroism differently? Can anyone be heroic and is it good for us morally to have heroes to emulate?

My third chapter will build off of the previous work and instead suggest that heroes are individuals who can challenge the status quo. I argue that heroes have been and should be used to foster change, challenge the standard, and reevaluate moral truisms. Rather than limiting heroes to the reinforcement of popular ideals, I suggest that heroes are also an effective way of critically challenging or resisting ordinary morality, leading to adjustments in moral thought. My objective will be to acknowledge the role that heroes play in inspiring change, and to encourage others to use heroes as a way of thinking more critically about moral conventions. I will discuss topics such as common virtue, moral conflicts, conflicting duties, and accuracy. I will explain how heroism alters our perceptions of common sense principles and how they inspire us to act or believe differently. I will ask why we should not automatically support the status quo, how we could explore problems in a heroic space, and why it matters to be “right” about our heroes. Overall, my thesis will address both the benefits and disadvantages of using heroism in moral education, to which I conclude that the benefits far exceed the concerns.

WHAT IS HEROISM?

What do we mean when we refer to heroism, heroes, and the heroic? These expressions are quite common and familiar, and may be easy to take for granted. Many disagree about what these terms should include or emphasize, meaning that our understanding of heroism may not be entirely definitive. Heroism can be exhilarating and inspiring, yet the characteristics that make an action or person “heroic” are often difficult to delineate. The phenomenon covers a wide range of motivations, values, risks, and factors that must all be taken into consideration. In order to accommodate these components, I offer an analysis of heroism that acknowledges and critically evaluates prominent philosophical, psychological, and sociological descriptions. My objective in this chapter will be to provide a definition of the ‘hero’ that establishes necessary conditions as well as empowers the term with enough flexibility to be cross-culturally applicable. I argue that heroes must satisfy certain requirements, but that the criteria themselves may be rather fluid and, at times, ambiguous.

In this chapter, I will evaluate the necessary fit of various concepts by exploring the different ways in which heroes are better or different than ordinary individuals or other exemplars. Since heroes are conventionally known as exceptional or abnormal *moral* persons, my approach will begin with an examination of moral differences between heroes and other individuals, including other exemplars. The discussion in this section will primarily focus on the concept of *supererogation*. Next, I will elaborate on some of the more familiar concepts associated with heroism: bravery, conviction, and integrity. Here, I also present the requirement of *action*, where I contend that heroes must be actively doing something with their values, as well as question whether specific motivations are necessary or sufficient for heroism. I will then

explore the obligations, expectations, demands, and choices of heroes. This section will specifically address how heroes meet various demands under difficult circumstances and how they may perceive their actions differently than their audience. Finally, I will address why we must endorse the moral and psychological characteristics of heroes. In this section, I will claim that heroes necessarily require approval, and that visibility of the hero is therefore required for us to call them a hero. I also suggest that our approval is based on the information available and the hero's cultural fit. In order to support my analysis, I include examples and illustrations in each section, and may occasionally refer back to those in my introduction. I will conclude by offering my comprehensive definition of heroism that reasonably accounts for the considerations presented in this chapter.

I will preface this chapter with what I call a *presumption of excellence*. Based on the traditional and conventional use of heroism, we can reasonably assume that the term 'hero' is generally meant to be positive and laudable, unless used sarcastically. The term 'excellence' suggests that heroes are or achieve something *better* than what could be considered normal. However, there are many different forms of excellence (i.e. excellent musicians, excellent friends, excellent tastes, etc.), and excellence alone is not enough to be considered a hero. Viewing heroes as "excellent" suggests that regardless of how we are evaluating them, we are doing so with the understanding that they are better in some way. Therefore, excellence is a necessary condition of heroism, but alone is not sufficient. I introduce this presumption to note that when I distinguish heroes from ordinary individuals in some way (morally, physically, psychologically, or otherwise), I am assuming that they are different in ways that we generally recognize to be positive and "better than" what is normative. The presumption of excellence does not suggest that there is a precise degree of merit necessary for someone to be a hero, but rather

claims that these measurements vary according to a spectrum that is always greater than typical behavior. These evaluations are most commonly determined by public approval, which I will discuss in my final section. Part of what this chapter grapples with is the idea that heroes are not just different from us, but better than us in some way.

Exceptionally Moral

How do we distinguish heroism from other forms of excellence? Heroes are typically recognized for being *morally* superior to the average person. They are individuals who appear to possess an exceptional character while meeting or exceeding their obligations and/or pursuing their desires. Yet, what counts as “exceeding” expectations or an “exceptional” character depends on a roughly coherent understanding of what the normative expectations are. Cultural norms and beliefs dictate or influence what the standard of behavior ultimately is. Regardless of what that standard includes or requires, heroes are evaluated according to those expectations. This section will examine the position of the hero relative to the conventional standard, or ordinary morality as it is known. Philosophers call the moral views that are widely shared in a given culture its ‘ordinary’ or ‘conventional’ morality; when they use these terms without qualification, they refer to our own culture’s widely-shared moral views. Heroic actions are troublesome for traditional moral classifications because they can fit into several different categories. Therefore, I will discuss how heroes exceed or fit within ordinary morality, while also distinguishing them from other exemplars and common individuals.

The most popular classification of heroes is to describe their actions as *supererogatory*, or above and beyond what is morally required. Supererogation first arises in J.O. Urmson’s (1958) *Saints and Heroes*. Urmson asserts that the traditional moral classification of actions – (1) those that are obligatory, (2) those that are permissible but not required, and (3) those that are

morally wrong – are incomplete (198). He introduces a fourth category, the supererogatory, which describes actions that are above and beyond a person's obligations, and are therefore praiseworthy. The two groups who Urmson argues best exemplify this category are saints and heroes, though the category does not sufficiently account for all saints or all heroes. Heroes and saints can both surpass expectations and are praised in similar ways, so what separates them? Urmson claims that the two exemplars overcome different obstacles. A person can be called a saint if they (1) meet their duty through self-control in situations where others would act according to *inclination* or *self-interest*, (2) meet their duty effortlessly where others would act in their own interest, or (3) far exceed their duty through self-control or lack of effort (200-201). A person may be called a hero if they (1) meet their duty through self-control in situations where others would act according to *fear* or *self-preservation*, (2) meet their duty effortlessly when others would be consumed by fear, or (3) far exceed their duty through control of fear or lack of effort (200-201). Individuals can be considered both heroic and saintly, but would be required to sufficiently overcome both obstacles of fear and self-interest.

Urmson's example of a hero is a soldier who throws himself onto a live grenade in order to protect his comrades (202). The soldier's action is certainly admirable, but not required, and the rest of the soldiers should not be blamed or faulted for not acting as he did. Heroes, as well as saints, are examples of people who should be praised because they do a little more, going that "second mile" when they are only required to go as far as the first (205). In other words, ordinary morality sets a normative standard of obligatory and admirable behavior, which is then surpassed by a hero who overcomes fear and thoughts of self-preservation. Some few people may exceed expectations in a way that makes them both heroes and saints. One example of both would be the "heroes" of civil disobedience, such as Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Their

tactics and execution of disobedience demonstrate remarkable restraint and bravery while prioritizing the interests of a larger population over a single individual, despite fear and tremendous risks. Many of those who participated in such demonstrations are viewed as heroes and could rightfully be seen as “saintly” as well.

Susan Wolf (1982) provides another useful distinction, claiming that saints are necessarily committed to “improving the welfare of others or of society as a whole” while resisting their own desires and temptations (420). Heroes, on the other hand, are certainly praised for their prosocial efforts, but are not required to promote larger social benefits or to sacrifice their own desires in all cases. In fact, a hero may be doing exactly what they desire. Heroes and saints essentially overcome different obstacles, but may or may not have similar goals in mind. For instance, a vigilante may be considered a hero (particularly within the superhero genre) while acting out their view of justice, service, protection, or some other ideal. Their actions take place outside of the law, which some could argue actually undermines social order, and could be well within the vigilante’s desire to distribute punishment. The challenge that vigilantes face is their personal well-being and safety, not necessarily their inclinations or interests. Rarely would we ever call these individuals saints because they act according to their own agenda, which may indeed be prosocial or may not reflect the ‘common good’ at all. In contrast, a saint may be the kind of person who quits their job and leaves their home to aid refugees in an impoverished area. They may not face any immediate danger, depending on the area they travel to, but are certainly making sacrifices. The saint is sacrificing their own aspirations for the sake of helping refugees in need, and are thus considered saintly. It would be difficult, but not impossible, to think of them as heroic without the threat of injury or the element of fear. Heroism is a form of moral excellence that requires risk and bravery.

Bravery and Integrity

Heroism requires an individual to overcome fear or self-preservation in order to meet or exceed the demands, duties, and expectations presented to them in troubling circumstances. The conventional perception and use of heroes suggests that they are brave, robust, fearless, and so forth. I shall thus discuss the necessary characteristic most commonly associated with heroism: bravery. I am defining bravery as the resiliency or perseverance through challenges, risks, and/or obstacles such as fear, danger, ridicule, and loss. This definition is derived largely from Jayawickreme and Di Stefano's (2012) interpretation: "not shrinking from threat or challenge even when significant opposition exists and acting on conviction when such activity is unpopular" (169). This definition has two important premises: (1) threats or challenges must be present for a hero to engage with or respond to, and (2) the hero must possess the necessary conviction to act. The "popularity" of the action will be addressed in my final section. For now, I want to address these two premises in turn.

The presumption of risk should be familiar. Stories of heroism are filled with threats of natural disasters, violent attacks, dangerous climates, social ridicule, financial losses, and much more. It requires little to no effort to imagine heroes in difficult conflicts. Heroism and risks are necessarily associated, as argued by scholars such as Becker and Eagly (2004) as well as Franco, Blau, and Zimbardo (2011). They contend that society is unable to process someone as heroic unless they face an apparent element of danger. This coincides with the research of Stenstrom and Curtis (2012), who identified that perceptions of prosocial actions are more likely to be expressed as 'heroic' as the degree of risk increases. While Stenstrom and Curtis were not able to decisively identify a threshold moment where the prosocial becomes heroic, they were able to isolate risk as a necessary variable. The research and popular perceptions of heroism suggest that

individuals are considered virtuous or admirable because of their actions or ideals, but must also display bravery and face some potential sacrifices in order to be considered heroic. The risks themselves are not a direct reflection of the hero's psychology, but influence the type and degree of bravery needed as an appropriate response.

The conviction of heroes should not be understated. I claim that integrity, a collection of a person's moral principles accompanied by profound devotion, is also a necessary part of the heroic equation. Here, I am evaluating a person's integrity according to the depth of their conviction and commitment. Not only do we as an audience judge our heroes on their bravery in harsh circumstances, but also judge the strength of their character. However, just because an individual possesses the necessary conviction or commitment does not mean that they will do anything significant or heroic with their integrity. As Aristotle suggests, we can possess virtue while sleeping, but happiness requires virtuous *actions* (Nicomachean Ethics I). I agree with this claim, as we generally do not believe that someone is heroic if they are lazy, withdrawn, or similarly inactive. A person with integrity is someone who not only has a set of relatively consistent moral principles, but who actively uses them so that those ideas may be understood or addressed as "right" or virtuous.

T.V. Smith (1954) agrees. He states that, "to be a hero is better than to be a mere idealist; for that means that you know what to do with ideals and what not to do with them. You can either make yourself sick on them, or make the world better through them" (83). For Smith, heroism means successfully acting on our moral convictions while also tempering our eagerness or ambitious desires. The hero does all that they can without collapsing under the fear of what they cannot do (85). They are also reserved enough to control their ambition and to avoid being reckless (86). Heroism thus means having firm convictions, being brave enough to act on those

beliefs, and understanding the reach or limitations of what can or cannot be done. Although it appears rather intuitive to suggest that heroism requires action along with integrity, I find it necessary to distinguish between heroes and the potentially heroic. Those individuals who have firm moral principles and bravery are potentially heroic, while those who decide to act according to those qualities should be considered heroes.

Smith's work presumes that the hero is aware of their capabilities within given situations. For instance, a hero is typically able or willing to run into a burning building to save someone who is trapped inside because the hero has a general understanding of what they can or cannot potentially accomplish. He or she first believes that the other person's life matters, and then believes that they are able to enter the building and help. They are not typically, however, ambitious enough to believe that they can keep the building from collapsing or that they can put out the fire without the proper equipment. The hero's inability to do so does not hinder their actions. Instead, they focus on doing everything that *is* in their power. Similarly, an activist should not quit because they may not change the minds of everyone in the world, but rather should accept this possibility and do everything in their power to bring awareness to those who might change. Even fictional superheroes, who possess extraordinary capabilities that defy human potential, must embrace their limitations. Superman, considered to be an archetype of superheroes with fantastic abilities, still has to adapt to his weaknesses, including his rigid moral code, magic, and abnormal cosmic threats (Nyalapogula, 2015).

The association of bravery and heroism should be seen as necessary. Bravery and conviction define part of the mentality needed to perform heroic actions. However, they do not explain *why* a hero would act. Heroes must be willing and able to act, but scholars have found their motivations for doing so to be mysterious and inconsistent. The social sciences have been

unable to provide a definitive answer for the motivations of all heroes, but do recognize that social values and environments are highly influential (Franco & Zimbardo, 2006). I contend that our beliefs and background do not necessarily encourage us to *desire* to take action, but rather urge us to believe that we *can*. It is more than likely not in my best interest to run towards a disaster for someone else and I would probably prefer to avoid that predicament. However, if I value someone else's life and believe that I am capable of doing something to help them, then I feel more obliged to act. On the other hand, I may indeed want to help as well, which does not conflict with my duty to act. I do not claim that heroism is driven by any one particular motivation, but instead assert that there is an assortment of drives, desires, and duties that could all sufficiently motivate heroic behavior. Yet, individuals motivated by fame or greed may likely be excluded from our interpretations of the heroic. Therefore, we must still take the hero's motivations into consideration in order to reasonably evaluate their integrity.

The public should take an individual's motivations into account when deciding whether or not that person is a hero. Their intentions and motivations can suggest a lot about their character as well as the obstacles hindering their determination. Being a hero does not require a particular disposition or set of motivations. Rather, a hero has firm convictions and the bravery to act on their reasons. The hero's motivations are contributing factors for understanding the depth or meaning of their values and commitment. The psychology of the hero is defined by their reasons for acting, their degree of bravery, and the magnitude of their convictions or devotion. These three elements reasonably explain why heroes are mentally considered superior to the average person. A hero is a person with an exceptional moral character whose traits include bravery, resolve, and integrity, used to overcome abnormal circumstances in which we could expect fear or self-preservation to prevent the hero from acting. The limitation that this definition

has is the fluidity of its terms. What counts as bravery, integrity, or an unusual situation largely depends on the cultural environment that sets a normative standard. I will provide more detail concerning that environment in my final section of this chapter. Before I expand on that subject, I will explain how bravery and integrity empower the hero to meet a wide variety of demands.

Obligations and Expectations

Heroes are individuals who must overcome fear or thoughts of self-preservation while meeting or exceeding the demands and expectations of a given situation. Urmson's category of supererogation is suitable for classifying certain acts of heroism, but only describes actions that *exceed* duty. It would be incorrect and incomplete to believe that this concept accounts for all heroic actions. Benjamin Studebaker (2014) is overzealous in this regard and mistakenly claims that heroism and the supererogatory are entirely synonymous. He fails to account for heroic actions that take place outside of this category. These include actions where an individual meets their duties or expectations, but does so under such extreme or precarious circumstances that no one could fault the individual had they been unable to meet said demands. We recognize these people as heroes because they accomplish feats that we could not anticipate them achieving under conditions that most would shrink under. Dr. Adadevoh would be an exemplar of this type of behavior. Essentially, the fear or drive for self-preservation becomes so overwhelming that we could not blame that person for acting differently or being unable to act at all.

Another excellent example of this type of action would be the famed plane landing of Captain Chesley Sullenberger III, also known as Captain Sully, who successfully landed a commercial airliner onto the Hudson River, saving all 155 people onboard including the passengers and crew, then walked through a sinking plane twice to search for survivors (Cooke, 2016). As a commercial pilot with extensive training, Captain Sully would certainly be expected

to safely deliver his passengers, but his circumstances were different. After losing both engines upon striking a flock of birds, he performed a risky maneuver that investigations concluded was both correct and remarkable among all possible outcomes (Cooke). Even after successfully landing a plane, we could not fault a pilot for focusing on their own safety. Captain Sully instead chose to prioritize the survival of others, which is a compliment to his character. This action, however, could also be perceived as fulfilling a duty to help or promote the welfare of others (Dancy, 1991, 221). It is worth considering whether checking on passengers in that situation is a reasonable obligation of a pilot, or a duty which we would find hard to fulfill and thus difficult to require. I would argue that Captain Sully's right to self-preservation would trump duties such as these, which may be precisely why he is considered heroic since he overcame or ignored that right. The heroic actions of Captain Sully demonstrate an ability to meet particular duties and expectations under circumstances that many other people may have not been able to meet, and are therefore considered heroic and praiseworthy.

Heroes may exceed or meet their respective demands, but also must be evaluated according to the type and degree of their obligations. Heroic actions may in fact be well within what is morally required of someone. For instance, ordinary morality would require someone to save a drowning baby from a shallow pond, since the costs are so miniscule that the person would be obligated to preserve the baby's life. Individuals such as these are still sometimes considered heroic, even if the "fear" that they overcome is no more than a fear of failure or of getting wet. Elizabeth Pybus (1982) believes that supererogatory actions should still be deemed obligatory, claiming that individuals are fulfilling their moral demands rather than their social ones (198). Although a bystander may not be professionally required to help firefighters rescue or assist someone, they may feel morally obliged if they are able to help and have an overriding

reason to. This also coincides with what Archer and Ridge (2015) identify as the *paradox of supererogation*. The hero, according to the paradox, does not aspire to work beyond their obligations (i.e. run the second mile), but rather believes that second mile to be part of their duties. In other words, the hero feels morally responsible to act in accordance with their own perceptions of moral duty, rather than obligated by any professional, familial, or other social duties.

Archer and Ridge attempt to settle this paradox as simply a distinction of moral wisdom: The person who does not believe that their action is supererogatory and mistakenly judges it as obligatory is no less virtuous than the person who performs the same act and correctly believes it to be supererogatory; they would just possess more moral wisdom if they correctly assessed the action (1576). Essentially, the hero's perception of the action as obligatory or supererogatory reflects the person's moral awareness of the event. We may reflect on their actions and suggest that they are supererogatory, but the claim can be made that we are either not as morally wise as the hero or that we prioritize the wrong duties. Although some heroes do not believe that their actions are particularly significant, they also do not believe that their standard should be universally required (1582). The hero's moral duty compelled them to act in that moment, but they would not further suggest that the same duty should always take precedence or apply to every situation. The hero's awareness of and commitment to their moral standard may even garner more praise. Moral wisdom is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for heroism, but could affect the hero's willingness to act.

I have spent the majority of this section discussing the hero's requirements and expectations, but would like to emphasize their *choice* a little more. Although ordinary morality urges us to do whatever overriding duties require from us, there is still an agent who chooses to

act according to those duties as opposed to self-interest, and who must decide appropriately between several conflicting duties. Even if the decision to save the drowning child appears obvious, we can still imagine a horrible scenario where someone would not save them. Moral virtue is and should be attributed to individuals who choose to act correctly despite conflicting demands. Furthermore, a person may go beyond the scope of their obligations, but do so out of a desire to act, rather than out of a sense of obligation. Patricia McGoldrick (1984) disagrees with Urmson and Pybus's assessment that an ideal worth aspiring to has to be a "matter of duty" (525). Her position is that heroes are admirable because they *voluntarily* accept risk for the sake of others, without the obligation to value the interests of others over their own (527). She thus sees the supererogatory as a virtue of acting beyond our duty in an unselfish manner that does not correspond with our obligation to do so, but rather with our desire to (528). I argue that heroism leaves room for both, and would not make these ideas mutually exclusive. Heroes can reasonably feel required to act and want to act simultaneously. In fact, we may even offer more praise to those heroes whose desires line up with their moral duties.

Cultural Approval and Visibility

The hero deserves recognition for their moral excellence, as they exhibit a unique character that we believe is superior to the average person. That being said, the recognition of their status as a hero drastically depends on our perception. It takes a culture, community, or group to not only experience the hero's excellence, but to identify it as *right* and *extraordinary*. Heroes essentially do something well and they do it correctly, but only according to what the public approves of as sufficient. The community decides what the normative standard should be, what is considered praiseworthy, and if the hero's actions deserve approval. Therefore, I will examine how communities evaluate heroes differently. Although heroism is based on a set of

necessary criteria, the criteria themselves are understood and associated according to similarities rather than fixed definitions. Excellence, for example, is not always measured in a particular way, but socially determined by relating the character, behavior, or effort of something to other things which have already been considered excellent. The same applies to bravery, integrity, and several other conditions.

I will first address the concept of visibility. We must know that someone exists in order for us to call them a hero, even if their actual heroism does not depend on our knowledge. An audience should experience, directly or indirectly, the heroic narrative. Calling someone a “hero” means communicating who is or should be considered brave and morally praiseworthy, but a person does not need public approval to actually be virtuous. For example, we can imagine a hero attempting to save others on a sinking ship, but remaining unknown because no one on that ship survived to tell the tale. Being a hero does not mean that the person was entirely successful, and those who do not succeed may fall within the category of “unsung” heroes. Most of the time, however, we understand unsung heroes to be underappreciated rather than completely unknown. These heroes simply do not garner as much attention as one or several believe is deserved. Yet, more publicity and approval do not mean that a person is more heroic or virtuous, just that they are more widely recognized as such. The availability of the heroic narrative just grants us access so that we may hopefully assess the character or action as we see fit. Visibility is necessary for our recognition, in so far as we must know that a hero exists in order to admire them. Societies will also reserve the right to modify their perceptions of heroes based on the amount of information available. This is often the case with historical figures who either receive more or less credibility as details emerge about their actions or beliefs.

Once a society or group is able to experience the heroic narrative, they are able to evaluate it according to their own definitions of certain criteria. My next chapter will uncover some of the ways that heroes are even used to reinforce or communicate those definitions. The most ambiguous of my criteria is integrity, a term which has evolved to fit the moral interests and dispositions of the culture. Earlier in this chapter, I defined integrity as a collection of moral principles in order to avoid claiming that it necessarily refers to any particular principle. One of the more common mistakes is assuming that *all* heroes are morally righteous because they are caring, honest, selfless, or rational, even though these are all connected to cultural interpretations of what is “good.” Although these interpretations are loosely defined, they can be categorized under a single concept, integrity, even if there may not be a fixed characteristic uniting them. Integrity means a moral unity of the self, as having a set of values that one is deeply committed to and that they or others feel positively represents an admirable moral character.

Researchers within the social sciences have attempted to provide a sufficient set of values for heroism, but fail because they only account for desirable traits within *our* own culture. For instance, Becker and Eagly claim that heroes should be evaluated based on their empathetic concern or care for the well-being of others (166). This definition, however, excludes popular figures such as my paradigmatic example of Achilles, who is regarded as an Ancient Greek hero motivated more by personal vendettas and honor rather than any prosocial goals or concern for others (Jordison). Achilles should still rightfully be seen as a traditional hero, according to the principles of vengeance, honor, and strength deeply rooted in the culture of the Ancient Greeks. We could currently claim that we should value heroes who aid and care about others, but this is not required of every hero. Integrity will be understood very differently in separate cultures, but nonetheless requires the approval of someone in order to be recognized as heroic.

Jayawickreme and Di Stefano attempt to narrowly define heroic integrity further as speaking or behaving genuinely, acknowledging the conditions and concerns of others, and/or responding to them with appropriate care (169). This interpretation is more inclusive, but still mistakenly depends on prosocial empathy, like Becker and Eagly's interpretation, and honesty. Evidence of the failed requirement of honesty can be noted by examining several heroes of the WWII German occupation who regularly lied and misled others to protect harbored fugitives from danger (Grieshaber, 2007). Honesty is another admirable virtue, but is not present in all heroes, as I have stated. Rather, honesty is *currently* important for characterizing integrity in ordinary morality, and has received *our* collective approval. Different cultures have different ideas about morality and who is heroic. Their collective opinions can shape whether someone receives and deserves approval.

As I alluded to earlier, perceptions of a hero's integrity can also change as we learn more about them. What was once admirable and heroic may later become controversial, and vice versa. For example, Winston Churchill is known as a famous military hero who led Great Britain in WWII. Yet, critics are now pointing out that he allowed over a million people in India to starve during that war while exporting food out of their country (Biswas, 2010). Historians have further proposed that Britain as a whole, led by his example, may have prioritized their military ambitions over the interests of their citizens and colonized territories. The information demands further questioning of his status as a hero. Churchill has not changed, but the public's perception of him has. Since heroism requires public approval, his "fate" rests in our hands. Surely, the perception may not be perfect either and incidentally popularize "unsavory" ideals, a point which I will later elaborate on. The definition of moral integrity is not fixed, culturally or temporally, yet is still necessary for understanding heroism. Heroes must be brave and possess an admirable

moral character, but what counts as brave or admirable depends on the recognition and approval of others.

Summary

In summation, I have disclosed five necessary requirements for heroism: excellence, bravery, integrity, action, and approval. I have also determined that visibility is required in order for us to call someone a hero. We can presume heroes to always have some degree of excellence, preferably moral but also mentally, physically, or socially. Heroes are always considered better than average in some way or fashion. More notably, heroes are necessarily attached to actions or moral positions that are considered brave. The definition of bravery is contingent on the available risks or challenges in the hero's environment, but the hero is thus defined as brave by their resiliency to overcome their fear or concerns for self-preservation. The hero must also take some kind of action, and must not fall victim to laziness or inactivity. Heroes are individuals who actually do something. They are significantly defined by their integrity, which includes their beliefs, moral wisdom, motivations, autonomy, and sense of obligation or desire to do good.

These accounts of integrity, bravery, excellence, and activity, however, rely on approval. We must know that heroes exist in some way for us to call them a hero, whether they are real or fictional, and approve of their actions and morals. Even for heroes who we do not know about, they may be heroic because we or someone else would have approved of them had we known of their actions and/or character. Furthermore, the more relatable information we have regarding the hero, the more likely we are to form a reliable opinion. That being said, the degree or range of approval does not make someone more heroic, but instead makes their heroism more popular. Our usage and understanding of heroes can be deconstructed into these characteristics. Without them, we are left with some other type or virtuous or common person.

COMMUNICATING MORALITY

Now that I have presented a clearer picture of what heroism is and requires, I will focus on how heroism can be used. I argue that heroes, and heroic narratives in a broader sense, are and should be used in moral education to stimulate and support the observation or retention of culturally dominant values, which also inspires admiration and possible emulation. If heroism represents individuals and actions regarded as morally valuable, then we should rightfully view the study of heroes as an opportunity to learn more about the morality of ourselves and others. In this chapter, I will argue for two claims: (1) heroism is highly useful for disseminating popular cultural values and for communicating the “moral thought” of a community; and (2) heroism is appropriately used to inspire and guide moral development, though we should be cautious about actually imitating our heroes. Key questions that will be addressed in this chapter include: How are heroes currently used in moral education? How can heroes be repurposed to fit moral interests? How do individuals learn or perceive the lessons of heroism differently? Can anyone be heroic and is it good for us morally to have heroes to emulate?

This chapter will highlight the collective and individual benefits of using heroism in moral education. I will start by discussing what heroes mean for us socially and how they are currently or historically used. I suggest that heroes are part of a ‘cultural instinct’ and appeal to our various needs, desires, and interests. This section will also examine popular ways of using heroes for instruction and communication. The next section extends further than the scope of “our” ordinary morality, questioning whether or not heroes can be used to access foreign cultural information and various perspectives. I claim that heroes are quite beneficial in this regard, and note how heroic narratives are repurposed to fit the interests and communication style of their

cultural audience. The ensuing section will examine the advantages of using heroes for admiration and emulation. This includes asking whether anyone can be heroic, and why they would or should want to. After acknowledging the value of admiration or emulation, my final section will present some concerns and limitations, as well as argue that heroes are not figures to be directly imitated but informative pieces which contribute to the construction of our individual moral identities and standards of behavior. Overall, my objective is to bring awareness to and promote the use of heroes in moral education, while also bringing perspective to the dangers of using them inappropriately.

Reinforcing Conventional Morality

How are heroes useful to us socially, and why do we need them? Heroes can reinforce what a community believes or “should” believe by fulfilling various desires and by perpetuating idealized concepts through the strategic use of heroic icons. Charles E. Scott (1999) claims that heroes are part of our *cultural instinct* (160), answering our desires and interests. He believes that heroes respond to our many aspirations: “Our heroes are figures of promise before our needs, figures of accomplishment and completion before our failures, figures of fulfillment before our desires. They are extraordinary figurations of something that gives meaning and value in our ordinary lives” (154). A community shares a hero because those within that community share similar aspirations and necessities. People rally around a common figure to form cohesion and to develop their identities through the emulation or celebration of collectively approved values. Scott sees heroes as crucial for community identity: “Destroy a hero and you destroy a community-making power” (157). Here, he is referring to the power of a hero’s presence within their society. The hero can model a characterization of the brave and morally excellent that promotes worship, imitation, or escapism. For many in the community, replicating the standard

is easier or more desirable than asserting one's own unique values. Heroes are proven and validated models of behavior who generate considerable excitement and praise, which are reactions that many would prefer to receive themselves.

Heroes are models of behavior who can fulfill the aspirations listed previously, and do so by symbolizing an idealized image. Even if history or current events fail to produce a figure with the correct complexity or assortment of features, fantasy representations can fulfill what is lost or desired. Consider the work of Roger Rollin (1970), for instance. He notes that the fictional character of Bruce Wayne, and his alter ego, Batman, is admired for more than his "adult Boy Scout" moral goodness. Some of his more appealing qualities are actually his strength, wealth, cleanliness, appearance, intelligence, and persistence (433). Heroes such as these satisfy the idealized image of what a society or group covets, and therefore reinforce the community's desires or opinions of what is good. We utilize Batman in a variety of different ways to preserve many ideals associated with him. This can and may include capitalizing on the entertainment value of the superhero in order to communicate the portrayal of these coveted traits, or to improve the moral, physical, and intellectual capabilities of individuals through the model of someone like Bruce Wayne. Batman is an interesting portrayal of focus, determination, physical excellence, and resiliency. These qualities are so desirable that the University of Victoria in Canada even has a course dedicated to "The Science of Batman," where students can get concentrated physical and psychological training inspired from Batman's own regiment (Sztein, 2013). This is just one way in which our preferred images can creatively influence us outside of leisurely entertainment.

Of course, groups and individuals will perceive and utilize heroes differently. Children, for example, are still developing psychologically and morally, and therefore are limited in the

way that they can understand or navigate heroism. Instead, heroes are typically selected or validated for the child. They are told who is heroic and why they are, rather than discovering it for themselves. If used properly, heroism can be used to nurture the moral creativity of children. For example, a new study has shown that young children were more motivated to “work hard” and to be more persistent when they were told to role-play as ‘exemplars’ or other hard-working figures, including Batman (White & Carlson, 2016). This research also intends to note that children are positively affected by this version of play when they maintain an emotional distance between themselves and the character that they are playing. As adults, we do not role-play as much and rather attempt to see part of ourselves in heroes, agreeing or disagreeing with them as we see fit. As Richard Chin (2015) writes, adults perceive heroes differently because they are more responsive and better equipped to handle moral complexities. Adults also tend to prioritize the “moral compass” of the hero, instead of the physical or mental excellence that is admired more by children. Yet, the increased moral capacity tends to make adults more cynical and critical of heroes, leaving them with fewer heroes to comfortably admire or emulate. Essentially, as moral complexity and development increases, so does the depth of our understanding of heroes, even if it also includes more cynicism and criticism concerning moral goodness.

Heroism is utilized well in organized religions and traditional legends to communicate particular ideals. In fact, religious institutions are some of the most influential moral educators. One of the most substantial heroes in the history of civilized society is actually Jesus Christ, the *Messiah* of Christianity. It is important to acknowledge that the majority of Christians see Jesus as much more than a hero or symbol. These terms are praiseworthy but fail to capture his significance to them. According to Scott Allison (2014), Jesus is positively accepted for several reasons, such as his natural excellence acquired at birth, his service to others, and the gruesome

nature of his sacrifice which adds glamour to his bravery. In fact, Allison further claims: “The more that heroes suffer for their cause, the higher the pedestal on which we place them.”

Christian institutions, founded on principles of courage, temperance, service, and forgiveness, refer back to the heroism of Jesus in order to communicate these concepts and further shape their followers’ moral education. Religious institutions often work extremely hard to influence the moral opinions of others, and use heroes quite well to educate their audience, using Jesus in addition to other deities, demi-gods, saints, apostles, legendary characters, and so forth to get their messages across. People desire these sorts of figures to direct them and teach them how to act. The images and ideals of heroes are useful for meeting those desires and for reinforcing dominant values.

Expanding Moral Experience

Heroism is not the only way to examine cultural values. However, it is a remarkably effective way. Heroes and their narratives can make the observation of complex or foreign values more entertaining, more palatable to a general audience, and more dynamic in application. They allow us to broaden our moral experience and perspectives through an engagement with compelling actions and exemplars. I will begin this section by admitting a presupposition of my position. I hold a belief, along with W.D. Ross and others, that moral values are empirically acquired and developed, rather than known through intuition: “For [Ross], the only way to come to know a principle is to discover its truth in moral experience” (Dancy, 223). Moral principles are not entirely self-evident or universally applicable, so understanding them is not merely about discovering the correct answer. We thus use heroes as a way of understanding and evaluating principles that we cannot be expected to intuitively know. Access to divergent perspectives increases our moral experience, and thus our moral wisdom, which then can encourage broader

generalization or application of principles and duties. I am presuming that we do not intuitively “know” that murder and lies are wrong, but instead generalize these ideas from the reliability of these principles in our moral experiences. My extension of this claim is that heroes are a valuable way of attaining broader and more meaningful experiences.

Being able to navigate heroism properly is a skill that should be developed repeatedly and creatively. Heroism in moral pedagogy is useful as an experiential learning tool that allows us to “do morality” and work through or apply moral perspectives in a constructive space. Think of it similarly to a math class: we can be taught a formula and taught how to use it when certain variables arise, but nothing compares to actually applying the formula or practicing the problems. We understand the concept better by applying it, hopefully at a safe distance. As Franco, Blau, and Zimbardo note, people are more likely to interpret something as heroic when they are not directly involved in it and when successful outcomes have already been established (102). To use their examples, the integrity of a heroic whistleblower may conflict with corporate values such as loyalty and trust while the courage of a rescuer may also be seen as foolish by fearful bystanders (102). Everyone has the potential to engage with the heroic narrative, but their physical, mental, and emotional “distance” to the event will affect their perceptions.

Practical navigation of heroic narratives is made possible by what Franco and Zimbardo refer to as the *heroic imagination*: “the capacity to imagine facing physically or socially risky situations, to struggle with the hypothetical problems these situations generate, and to consider one’s actions and the consequences.” This concept suggests that people can cultivate social values by imagining heroic events under different circumstances, imagining the events with different outcomes, or by imagining themselves in similar contexts. The nurturing of the heroic imagination should be seen as a well-respected way to encourage moral engagement. The idea

has even acquired organizational support through the *Heroic Imagination Project*, founded by Dr. Zimbardo, which seeks to teach a younger population how to make stronger moral decisions through the navigation of heroic narratives and thought experiments. Zimbardo's claim is that social psychology too often focuses on the dark side of human behavior and fails to encourage people to improve their own moral decision making. The project travels to high schools and college campuses, offering lessons on a wide range of both commendable and egregious events or scenarios in order to motivate the class to think more critically and to be the "heroes" referenced in the positive examples (Wilkins, 2012).

Typically, one of the best ways to flex this imagination is to reposition ourselves in similar environments and circumstances. This is a thought exercise that is best understood by the phrase: "What would I have done?" I will refer back to an earlier example: would any of us dive onto a live grenade to save our friends, family, peers, or strangers? Surely, performing such a selfless act would be considered heroic. Yet, this hypothetical situation would be difficult to embrace, seeing as it would certainly result in our untimely death. Our response to this question may well be determined by our affection for others, our thoughts concerning self-preservation, our feelings of responsibility, and so forth. However, this is not the only question that can be raised. Is there ample time for a solution other than sacrificing ourselves? Who and how many would have to be present for the sacrifice to be considered worthwhile? What if the others that we are saving are violent criminals, Nazis, terrorists, or some other group of individuals that we may find appalling? Would it still be heroic to save such "awful" people? Furthermore, could any of us be blamed for not acting at all in such a situation? I do not pose any particular answers to these questions, but do marvel at the possibilities of exploring them. This is the power of the heroic imagination: to be able to navigate and reflect on these factors in a constructive way.

Developing moral creativity through heroes is a chance to engage with complex concepts that can allude us. This may be because we have limited access to the relevant concepts surrounding the idea, or because we are generally unfamiliar and/or disinterested. Heroes are used to communicate intricate principles in a powerful way, and even help bring awareness to ideas that are culturally ambiguous. For instance, the requirements of integrity and courage have remained an important concept for various historical and modern societies, even though they have flexible definitions. The integrity of an Achilles or an Odysseus differs greatly from the integrity of a Nelson Mandela. The bravery of these individuals is determined differently according to standards of difficulty, hardship, and fear that are considered acceptable. Even today, these concepts can have different connotations in Eastern and Western societies. Yet, these disparities present additional opportunities, which I will discuss next.

Accessing Cultural Information

What is considered morally praiseworthy has changed significantly, and will most likely continue to change. For example, Achilles does not fit modern interpretations of a morally admirable person. He is rather selfish, brutish, murderous, and irrational (Jordison). Yet, he is often regarded as an example of a traditional hero in classrooms and popular folklore. As I stated previously, heroism requires approval, but does not require *our* approval. Simply respecting that the person's behavior is approved by another group is sufficient for accepting that the person is a hero *to that group*. Achilles is not a hero of ours, but instead is an *Ancient Greek Hero*, distinguishable in character by the culture that adopted him. He is a representation of what is valuable to the Ancient Greeks, allowing us to examine their conventional morality and characterization of integrity through the study of one of their moral exemplars. Through the image of Achilles, we can learn more about the Ancient Greeks' values of honor, pride, and

physical superiority. While Achilles does not have to be an inspiring role model for generations today, he can still be considered an important representation of a lifestyle worth studying. We need to be able to work through these conceptual and cultural distinctions, and heroes are useful for expanding our perspective on these subjects.

How we interact with heroes also matters significantly. I agree with Scott when he argues that our engagement with heroes is largely founded on their style of representation; on the “documents, stories, interpretations, works of art, and deep, culturally formed feelings: their continuing status as heroes for some people is founded on images that translate a person’s life into a figure of transcendent value” (153). Walter Ong (1982) and Lance Strate (1985) suggest that the way we experience heroism can affect our admiration or understanding. The dominant modes of communication shape the way people perceive heroes and adjoining cultural values. For instance, the oral poetry and narratives of Homeric heroes tended to draw audiences to the significance of the *action*: the swinging of Achilles’s sword or Odysseus’s triumph over insurmountable obstacles. Audiences are captivated by and remember the extraordinary *actions* or *accomplishments* (Ong, 69). Centuries later, they are still remarkable. We have also been fortunate enough to expand our understanding of these figures through the following two modes of communication.

The practice of writing freezes characters or ideas in time through an object separate from the author, which preserves heroic narratives and allows societies to transmit them to a wider audience. The quasi-permanence of the medium allows and encourages readers to engage more with the *ideals*, *values*, or *virtues* behind the hero (70). History preserves and celebrates notable actions and characters, and through writing and reading we are able to explore the depth of their ideological meaning. Brief examples of this would be the strategy of Napoleon or the daring

genius of Leonardo da Vinci, but also extends to the contextual integrity of heroic figures. Strate has expressed concern over the hero's place in the modern world's fascination with electronic media. He suggests that the world's preference for electronic media will encourage people to worship heroic *images*, which would make heroes more temporary and disposable (50). Not only would heroes fade more quickly, but there would be a much larger influx of heroes who are either more debatable or unremarkable. This could reduce the degree of influence that they have in education. The worship of the image may cause us to glamorize celebrities and pop culture icons as heroic by endowing them with heroic qualities, simply because they are popular and already have our admiration. Whether or not they are brave or have suitable integrity could prove difficult to defend. Despite these concerns, we are provided the additional opportunity of further visualizing culture through the flashing images of who matters to a society, its heroes.

Heroes may communicate different messages in various ways. Regardless, heroes are effective communication tools because of their presence as icons, each of which offers us a glimpse of their community's moral thought. As I described previously, Achilles is not seen as a great moral exemplar for many modern societies, but he is an excellent model for the Ancient Greek world. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Joan of Arc, Winston Churchill, Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, Anne Frank, and so forth are other popular historical heroes who are connected to cultural and temporal contexts. We do not have to find any of these historical icons admirable to find them useful for study. For example, Adolf Hitler was once, and is sometimes still, identified as a Germanic military hero, even if most would find his actions horrifying. There has even been a recent resurgence of Hitler instruction in elite colleges in India, praising several of his ideologies (D'Souza, 2012). Donald Trump is currently being hailed by many American populists as a revolutionary hero who will change the "broken" political landscape, but is also a

figure who receives a lot of criticism (Friedman, 2017). These icons do not speak for the collective whole, but do generate some insight into how the collective thinks, into what they value. I am not suggesting that these examples are synonymous in any way, and we can make of their ideologies or methods what we will. I do, however, want to assert that heroes are reliably used as a gateway for visualizing and interpreting ideologies and cultures, and for expanding our cultural knowledge.

Encouraging Admiration and Emulation

Heroes are particularly effective exemplars, persuasively showing us the kind of people that we may want ourselves or others to be. Through their example, we desire to be better. Yet, we can look up to other exemplars, so it is worth evaluating why we aspire to emulate heroes specifically. Role-playing as heroes or emulating their behavior can be partly attributed to fantasy, but also motivated by the beliefs that anyone can or would want to be heroic. Franco and Zimbardo refer to the first belief as the *banality of heroism*. They claim that, given the right mind-set and circumstances, anyone can be heroic. The banality of heroism is meant to reject the myth that all heroes carry rare unobtainable characteristics, and urges others to avoid the “bystander effect,” where we doubt our abilities or responsibilities during a tragic event in the hopes that someone else is able or willing to help. Franco and Zimbardo suggest that the circumstances are not reserved for a special group of people, and that we are all potential heroes waiting for a moment in life that requires our bravery. They do not claim that we all will possess the necessary abilities needed for heroism, but suggest that we all possess the *potential* to obtain or develop them. They believe that people should use heroes, along with other tools in moral education, to prepare themselves as well as possible to act if and when troubling circumstances present themselves.

Franco and Zimbardo's assessment sensibly argues for the heroic potential of everyone and encourages individuals to expect more from themselves. Their arguments for the need of preparation and moral depth also carry some merit. They are attempting to establish that anyone *can* be heroic, but claim that people often choose not to be out of fear or doubt. A large part of the reason that we admire heroes is because they act under circumstances that we may feel ill equipped to handle. Franco and Zimbardo admit that the motivations of heroes can vary, but claim that the development of the heroic imagination will provide the hero with more reasons and experience to feel prepared to act. Finally, they note that our moral, social, and physical environments heavily influence our preparation and desire to act heroically. The reasonable expectation is that the majority of people will not experience the opportunity to be heroic or maximize their potential to be. The banality of heroism does not presume that individuals *will* act appropriately, even with sufficient moral training, but simply argues that they can. Even so, the belief that we possess heroic potential may be enough to encourage us to emulate the behavior or fantasize about the possibility.

Heroes are clearly admired. The question is whether we should admire them, especially if we are to emulate their behavior. In my first chapter, I examined ways in which heroic actions exceed the requirements or expectations of ordinary morality. Part of the reason that we admire heroes is because they are so different from us, because they do more than what is expected. Many environments tend to reward working beyond the norm, including most schools and occupations. Those institutions reward hard work because they either benefit from the extra production or believe that the individual possesses or acquires some additional value through the extra effort. Communities can easily condemn someone who is different or goes beyond the norm if they fail to see a reason for the difference or if the additional labor is seen as foolish.

Is it good for us morally to have models such as heroes to admire or emulate? The primary value that heroes have is their moral worth, the value attached to their integrity. Heroes are recognized as better *people* than we are, as well as considered exceptional in their specific roles. Moral worth is, however, not always received the same: it can either be honored as the highest achievement of our desires or as a burden and distraction from our self-interest (Smilansky, 2005, 490-492). Smilansky argues that there is a particular value, a way of being, that only moral behavior can offer (494). Heroes possess or have acquired this value, and are examples of a desired way of being. They are not the only ones who possess moral worth, but are more regularly on display and demonstrate their value in dramatic ways, making them more visible. I agree with Smilansky's assessment that there is a value unique to moral behavior. Moral persons are likely more consistent and passionate in regards to their ideals and actions, and acquire more cultural familiarity with socially significant values. We should want to be moral, and heroes are regarded as morally successful. Therefore, we admire them for their moral achievements and may aspire to follow their lead. They do something *well* and they do it *right*. If we truly do want to be morally successful individuals, then having heroes as reference points of achievement and inspirational behavior is worthwhile.

The pedagogical significance of examining moral worth in heroism is that we learn why heroes should be admired: "We admire heroes in part because we think we could not have had it in us to act as they did had we been faced with the same decision" (Markovits, 2012, 297). Earlier, I introduced the heroic imagination, suggesting that it allows us to access and adjust the circumstances of a heroic situation. We base our judgment off of the success of the hero in relation to the conditions that they faced, and compare that assessment to a view of ourselves in a similar predicament. This process allows us to discover or cope with our own possible failure or

limitations. We are more likely to identify the hero as *better* than us in some way (i.e. more courageous, intelligent, idealistic, powerful, etc.) for accomplishing what we believe we are incapable of doing. Heroic behavior may not be the only source of moral inspiration, but it is rather successful at encouraging individuals to be critical of the moral worth of themselves and others. By understanding or believing that heroes are better than us, we learn to ask why they are better, and whether or not we can measure up to or exceed their example.

Individual Perfection

Heroes are amazing exemplars, but they may not always be the most ideal people for us to replicate. In this section, I will discuss the various concerns and limitations of replicating or celebrating heroic behavior, followed by a solution to these issues. Some of the concerns I will address include examining whether heroes are more valuable than other virtuous individuals and discussing what kinds of sacrifices heroism entails. My thesis so far has primarily approached heroism with optimism and has been directed at revealing the wide array of advantages that heroes can provide moral education. This section will instead pose many concerns and problems with heroism that may be overlooked in large part because of the social good that heroes offer. Instead of assuming that the heroic path is desirable, we should consider why we might hesitate to follow in our heroes' footsteps.

Should we value heroes over the ordinary virtuous person, such as those who are genuine or who extend typical acts of kindness? Heroism certainly carries more fame and excitement, but this does not mean that heroic behavior is always worth emulating. We certainly can admire prototypical heroes without the desire to replicate their example, either because we believe that we could not, or because we would not want the additional sacrifices that come along with that behavior. Everyday virtuous actions are often much more desirable and reasonable for most

people. For example, someone will more than likely receive higher amounts of praise and moral worth if they repeatedly save people from burning buildings, assuming that it is also not their job to do so. However, we would have to question whether we could reasonably expect everyone to pursue those goals or meet those demands. Higher levels of praise usually require actions with higher degrees of physical, mental, and emotional stress that many either cannot handle or would not want to embrace. The average person may not want to live according to the heroic model, but may see actions such as holding doors open, being polite, or being honest and genuine as safer or preferable ways of acquiring moral worth, even if it is not quite the same kind of value.

Another concern is that we may not want to improve ourselves in the hero's way at the expense of our own. The world may always present terrible circumstances that demand a hero. Yet, everyone is not required or expected to respond to those instances. The sacrifices required to develop our moral virtues and to be prepared for those circumstances may "crowd out" our non-moral interests (Wolf, 421). Ordinary morality also does not require us to sacrifice our integrity or desires in order to chase situations that are morally demanding (Rajczi, 2007, 17), so there is no immediate obligation or expectation to respond to tragedy. Emulating heroes or other moral exemplars could mean adopting their lifestyles and methods. Essentially, there are sacrifices and risks to being Batman or living like a monk. While we should desire to develop our moral virtues and beliefs, duplicating the heroic example requires us to accept large costs and responsibilities in the process.

A final shortcoming of heroic emulation is that celebrating heroic actions may glamorize danger and encourage people to take on more risks or responsibilities than they are prepared to handle, or that overshadow the good of the outcome. Accepting unnecessary risks could be considered more foolish than praiseworthy. Curtis (1981) addresses this problem, claiming that

risks are one of many factors that must be considered when acting and must never outweigh the potential moral good of the action. He notes that we ought to do whatever we have an overriding reason to do, whether those reasons are moral, personal, or for some other cause (312). The supererogatory are actions where no reasons are overriding, and where the risks do not significantly outweigh the moral good (315). Heroes then can make a choice because it is a *good* moral thing to do, not just because it provides the least amount of personal harm or fulfills the greatest duty (317). Heroic actions should therefore not encourage us to accept foolish risks or to perform actions because they offer us the greatest advantages. Rather, we should act simply because it is the *right* thing to do. We often model our behavior and moral decisions off of our heroes, and must be careful to note how we use their example. There are great ways to use heroic exemplars to better our lives, virtues, and decision making, without going to the extreme of duplicating their circumstances, expectations, or sacrifices.

I do not want to diminish the value that heroic exemplars bring to moral education, but these concerns do support my claim that we should be cautious about imitating them. Heroes represent and practice moral values that many should want to embrace or adopt, but come with costs that most may not be able or willing to accept. The dedication that these heroes have to their moral principles are often more intense than others are prepared to replicate. As Archer and Ridge indicate, even the hero can be blinded by their enthusiasm and moral conviction, causing them to lose sight of their sacrifices or obligations within a given moment (1590). Emulating this kind of determination is admirable in its own right, but runs the risk of accepting additional danger or of subjecting one's self to another person's moral standard rather than abiding by one's own. Therefore, individuals need to be able to identify with heroes and incorporate them into their moral education appropriately, without giving up their personal interests or placing

themselves in unnecessary or undesired conditions. Complete emulation is not the answer, but a milder approach offers a more valuable benefit to “students” in moral education.

Susan Wolf offers what I believe to be the best attitude for admiring and engaging with heroes as a source for our development. She claims that emulating morally perfect beings, such as heroes or saints, is actually not desirable and does not constitute a positive way of living because doing so would mean acting according to imperatives rather than choices, as well as would ignore our personal interests (424). Instead, we should applaud heroes for their morality, acknowledging that they are the exceptions, not the rule (435). She advises us to adopt an attitude of *individual perfection*: “we consider what kinds of lives are good lives, and what kinds of persons would be good for ourselves and others to be” (437). Heroes do not have to be the only or ideal representation of what a good life or person is, but are instead useful for helping us figure out what they might look like. Kateb (2008), who warns against the dangers of emulating or celebrating martyrdom and sacrifice, would appear to agree with her position: “Struck by the example of [his or her] greatness, they might be inspired to be more moral: not to act as moral heroes but instead as moderate human beings” (356). Heroism teaches us how to be better people by showing us the possibilities and the accomplishments of a good life or good person, rather than by creating a particular standard of behavior.

The person who extends acts of kindness by holding doors or giving to those in need acts admirably according to our culture’s conventional morality. Inspired by their example, I may feel obligated or encouraged to extend similar acts of kindness and to be a better person. I may also watch the defiance of a protester or brave efforts of a rescuer, and admire their heroic example as well. However, this does not mean that we should want to be exactly like these individuals and experience their same circumstances or decisions. Even if we wanted to, we may not ever be in

the appropriate situation to do so. Rather, we should ask *why* their actions and principles inspire us, and determine whether or not they can apply to our everyday lives. The former examples are easier for us to imagine: holding a door or giving charitably extends kindness and generosity that can be easily understood and replicated with minimal costs or risk. The heroic examples demand so much more, and the important principles that motivate the hero's actions can become lost in the spectacle. However, if we can think about why we should stand up for what we believe in or why saving a life matters, there are opportunities to develop our own moral decision making.

I should not want to actively offer myself up as a martyr, but I do believe that good people stand up for what they believe in. Great heroes are a reminder of that dedication and commitment. I should not want to throw myself in harm's way for people that I do not have an emotional connection to, but I do think that a good life involves caring about other people and making sacrifices for one another, despite how close we may or may not be to them. This is simply my own reflection; I do not expect anyone to share my sentiments. The point is this: we should not aspire to be our heroes, but instead aspire to learn from their example as a way of educating and developing our own moral code. Maybe this includes being heroic at some point in our lives, or maybe it means acquiring more of the value that only moral behavior offers us. There are many advantages for examining heroes in moral education that aid our personal development, with these being just a couple of possibilities.

Summary

In conclusion, heroism has a special place in moral education. Heroes are beneficial exemplars who help disseminate and reinforce popular cultural ideas as well as guide or inspire moral development for the majority of individuals. The way in which heroes are utilized or received can vary tremendously, but the core benefits appear to be quite similar. What this means

for us *collectively* is an increase in the moral awareness within our society, in addition to helping many access, share, and navigate the cultural values of other communities. What this means for us *individually* is an exposure to events and figures who represent an admirable way of being and who we may want to model our own lives after. Both of these takeaways presume our moral capability to effectively engage with these narratives. I have also argued that the moral development of an individual affects how thorough they can be, which society often does and should continue to accommodate. This includes being more suggestive to children who may not be able to easily recognize heroes, and challenging morally developed adults to critically assess the depth of their heroes. In my next chapter, I will heavily emphasize why it is important to be so critical, and why we should care about identifying heroes correctly. In this chapter, I have shown that the experiential learning tools that are heroes help us “do morality” in ways that are tremendously beneficial to moral education.

CHALLENGING MORAL NORMATIVITY

In my final chapter, I will explain how heroes challenge and/or alter social normativity. The previous chapter covers how heroes could be used to reaffirm or communicate normative standards of behavior. This chapter will instead emphasize how heroes can be used to challenge those standards, reevaluate moral truisms, and foster change. Heroism can encourage us to not only embrace cultural values, but also to be more critical of them. Heroism is effectively used to recycle and reinforce dominant ideas, but is not limited to these functions. We should also recognize that heroes sometimes inspire us to reject the standard, and to instead pursue change. They help a society rethink its potential moral errors or adapt to new ways of thinking. I am not suggesting that these reevaluations necessarily promote moral progress in society, only change. To claim that our communities are progressing presumes that current moral decision-making is generally “better” than it previously was, which is not always the case. I do not wish to imply that ordinary morality is typically wrong or needs improvement, but rather express that we can use heroes to be more critical of our conventional standards. In cases where we do believe that ordinary morality is wrong, this skepticism could possibly lead to social change.

I will start this chapter by highlighting the limitations of using heroes to reinforce moral conventions, specifically to explain why they should not always be used to support the status quo. These concerns include shifting cultural tastes and opinions, the flexibility of duties and demands, and the pedagogical weaknesses of repetition. Next, I will dive into the benefits of using heroes to solve moral conflicts or questions. The key takeaway from this section is the value of the heroic “space,” which allows us to explore moral concepts, issues, and debates. Finally, I will address the topic of accuracy which has not yet been discussed in this thesis. I ask:

why is it important or good that who we identify as heroes are the “correct” or “right” people? What do we gain from identifying the correct individuals? This section is meant to reveal several consequences or implications from carelessly referring to things as heroic, given the disclosive power that I have claimed these people and actions have. Overall, this chapter will demonstrate how heroes help break the mold of conventional morality. Heroes can help us better understand morality by inspiring us to be more critical and creative, as opposed to encouraging us to memorize and follow certain rules.

Avoiding Complacency

The majority of our actions are guided by normative standards of behavior within our culture. Moral opinions are primarily driven by the shared moral awareness within a community, the *common sense* of those within that society: “Common sense is spoken of as having a view of the world, as having a language, as having conceptions of various things, as having a morality, perhaps even values, as having its own point of view, its own business, and its own distinctive standpoint” (Singer, 1986, 227). This knowledge is reliable, widespread, and informative, so much so that we could expect others in our community to share it (231). Yet, as Singer describes, it is difficult to determine what the “verdict” of common sense is in moral conflicts, and this kind of knowledge is highly conservative in regards to ideological change (252-253). The recurrence of moral principles as “common knowledge” is not meant to suggest that these principles are logically sound, correct, or even morally right, but does maintain a status quo that we can reasonably expect others to follow. However, the status quo can prove to be problematic because it promotes complacency by resisting change, as Singer notes, and establishes truisms which may not always be appropriate or effective.

Normative standards are aimed at providing predictability and consistency, not validity or accuracy. Conventional morality contains biases that could motivate negative behavior. What is “common” or overriding in a society can be as exclusive or dangerous as it is helpful. Biases such as elitism, racism, sexism, nationalism, and so forth are often products of what is common sense. Just because moral principles are popular also does not mean that they are ideal or will remain popular. Relying on conventional morality places limits on moral creativity and establishes standards that may or may not have been rigorously vetted by the community as appropriate or intelligible. While it is true that heroes are considered exceptions to what is ordinary, they still play a role in reinforcing dominant ideals, as I discussed in the previous chapter. We should not be so quick to accept certain heroes as admirable without examining potential biases that may be present.

For example, Philip Cohen (2015) has reported on the public criticism of popular *Disney* movies that display subtle gender biases in the animation and plot of their heroic characters. Specifically, he comments on the company’s tendency to overemphasize the physical features of their male and female characters, such as hand, wrist, eye, and figure size, which are drastically disproportionate to the average human body. This strategy helps reinforce popular gender roles and beliefs concerning the limits of human potential, particularly ones that project female inferiority (Cohen). He does mention that the company has attempted to respond to the criticism of their female characters, empowering some of their newest heroines with traits or objectives that are not driven by affection or relationships. The physical discrepancies appear to be more difficult to break because the archetype is so deeply imbedded. Typically, we prefer mythical heroes to somewhat reflect our culture, reality, and preferences, even if the heroes’ adventures are fictional. As we see in this instance, we must also remain critical of the ways in which our

“reality” or beliefs are portrayed. As Cohen insists, ignoring these biases gives us a limited perspective of human potential and motivates us to accept ideas that we may not actually believe.

As stated in the previous chapter, heroes fulfill the moral aspirations, needs, and demands within a society. Yet, these needs and demands are different, as are the solutions recommended for meeting them. Different cultures have different ideas about morality and who is heroic. A major bias that we can have is assuming that our heroes should be heroes for everyone, in every society, for the same reasons that we find them heroic. A person’s heroism sometimes appears so obvious that it would be hard for us to imagine a place where they are not universally renowned. I believe that exploring the concept of moral relativism may help provide perspective for this conflict. As David Wong (1991) notes, “the range of human goods is simply too rich and diverse to be reconciled in just a single moral ideal” (446). Relativism denies any universal moral ideals that could reasonably account for all human goods, although it need not be so extreme as to suggest that any ideal is justified solely because it promotes relative goods. Therefore, Wong claims, “the relativist argument is best conducted by pointing to particular kinds of differences in moral belief, and then by claiming that these particular kinds of differences are best explained under a theory that denies the existence of a single true morality” (445).

Moral truisms and common sense are great guidelines, but should not be considered absolute moral truths. Rather, they are only as reliable as the human goods they produce or the conflicts that they resolve. Heroes can either reinforce our ignorance, such as the biases stated previously, or help illuminate the uncertainty of our moral truisms. Essentially, heroes can help us realize that what is *usually* right is not *always* right, or may not be right for everyone. As I mentioned in an earlier example, “always telling the truth” will not always promote the best moral outcome. As was the case with the WWII heroes who harbored fugitives from the Nazis,

deceit and lies may result in greater utility, greater fulfillment of moral responsibilities, and/or greater individual integrity. The truism “killing is wrong” is another controversial issue, which I will review in the succeeding section. In response to moral rules such as these, Wong notes that the objective of normative moral relativism is to provide a set of reasons for tolerance (449), suggesting that it is wrong to pass judgment on others with different values (442). Heroes add complexity to conflicts concerning deeply held moral beliefs. They can be used to reaffirm the position that our morality is correct, or help us reconsider hasty generalizations. Incorporating a mild position of moral relativism may encourage us to be more open, tolerant, and inviting to contrasting moral perspectives, further aiding personal and collective moral development. There is the possibility that our ordinary morality may teach us to reject tolerance, in which case maintaining this position may prove to be much more difficult.

The prevalence and conditioning of “extraordinary” virtues could also cause them to lose their significance and become more “common.” This idea is represented well by John Stuart Mill (1969): “When what once was uncommon virtue becomes common virtue, it comes to be numbered among obligations, while a degree exceeding what has grown common, remains simply meritorious” (338). An example of this transition from uncommon to common virtue would be charity. Philanthropy would typically fall under the category of supererogatory actions. However, if the majority of a specific group of people are frequently charitable, we begin to expect this type of generosity, and it is no longer extraordinary. For instance, as the frequency of philanthropy from ‘heroic’ athletes increases, the more likely we are to expect all athletes to act in a similar fashion. Studies by Babiak, Mills, Tainsky, and Juravich (2012) show that there are various motivations for athlete philanthropy, and that the phenomenon is growing rapidly as athletes continue to discover the altruistic and personal benefits as well as feel pressure from

their peers. What once made an athlete exceptional – their commitment of time, resources, and energy – is now considered common virtue. If heroism continues to encourage the expansion of common virtue, then we must embrace the reality of expanding our demands and obligations in order to meet those new expectations.

Finally, the emphasis and repetition of moral standards is vulnerable to the educational limitations of memorization. Simply memorizing heroes and their moral principles does very little for our development. Committing ideas to memory through repetition is not nearly as valuable as actually understanding the material or as useful as knowing how and why ideas relate to one another (Orlin, 2013). If we merely accept who is heroic because of brave action ‘A’ or virtue ‘X’ and fail to ask why they should be considered heroic, then our understanding of these ideas is no more developed than the child who has their heroes selected for them. Memorization ends up focusing only on learning what is necessary when it is necessary, which ends up as material soon expelled or forgotten once it is no longer useful (Orlin). The goal should not be to simply memorize heroes and rehearse their values, but instead to apply heroes so that we may learn and understand why someone or something is heroic, why it matters, and what these ideas can mean for us. Heroism should be seen neither as a sponsor nor as an antagonist for morality, but as a space to engage with moral conflicts and complexities.

Tackling Moral Conflicts

The heroic “space” is a way for us to enact change and explore or resolve moral conflicts. Heroism is an opportunity to significantly develop or modify ideas within moral education by navigating complex ideas through a familiar image. I am in no way suggesting that heroism fosters or guarantees *progress*, but do assert that it can be used to prompt and support ideological changes. Our principles and obligations adapt to changes in the cultural climate and can often be

sources of contention, which I will elaborate on shortly. Heroism is also a valuable educational space for grappling with several abstract ideals such as courage, perseverance, sacrifice, or justice, and for identifying preferable values out of many viable alternatives. While the concept of courage could be defined as an ability to take action despite the hindrance of fear, how would this compare to actually experiencing or witnessing courage? Furthermore, how is this definition already supported by examples of courage that we are familiar with? I am not suggesting that heroism is the only way to communicate these ideals successfully (i.e. it takes courage to ask for a promotion or to resist bad temptations), but it is a preferred and efficient way of doing so. Children and adults alike are taught the meaning of courage, justice, perseverance, and more through the stories of characters who fight dragons, endure trials, challenge norms, and defeat “evil” enemies.

Established heroes can receive large amounts of criticism instead of admiration, which indicates that a reevaluation of the person or their values may be needed. Figures such as Donald Trump, Winston Churchill, and Muhammad Ali are all highly contested and controversial subjects. For instance, Ali has and still receives a large amount of contempt and public ridicule for his “unthinkable” decision to avoid the draft and protest the war. Yet, his charisma and excellence as a boxer make him a very likeable character, and his idealism and political struggle prompt many to call him heroic. As Taibbi (2016) reports, Ali was not perfect and had many flaws, but he is considered a hero by a large sum of the American public, despite possible criticism from the remainder. Conflicts over heroism are apparent demonstrations that communities, and the individuals within them, do not always agree on what principles or people are heroic. Heroes are complex icons that can be seen as collections of cultural information, but can also be used as subjects for moral exploration. We can evaluate the issues and conditions

pertinent to the heroic situation in order to question which duties should be overriding, which values deserve more immediate or substantial attention, and/or which figures should be emulated. Complications and debates such as the examples I provide deserve consideration, scrutiny, and practical creativity. Heroes present ideal opportunities for debating several issues.

Heroism is a unique way of putting values into a dialectic or agonistic conversation. It is an opportunity for people to suggest that their moral positions are preferred or correct compared to other alternatives. Heroic narratives can be the prospective arenas for the struggle of competing values. This approach does not just apply to retrospection of historical figures, but also to the projection of complex moral issues in current or fictional persons. As an example, consider the debate regarding the death penalty and killing as a solution in certain situations. Many disagree heavily about what motives may count as true justice. Is killing one menace justified if it saves countless others from harm, or is killing always an inexcusable action? I will not attempt to provide an answer myself, but recognize that heroes are a safe subject of discussion for these matters. Even for fictional characters, fans and academics both find merit in evaluating the moral integrity of a hero who refuses to kill or does so in the belief that it is necessary. This is often seen in controversial superheroes who refuse to kill even the most violent of criminals (White, 2008), or someone like *Marvel's Punisher*, whose regular method of execution makes people wonder if he is truly a hero or a villain (Norkey, 2015).

Another interesting case study is Edward Snowden, a man who has been identified as a hero to some and a villain to others, with the overall perception being wildly conflicted. He is famous (or infamous) for leaking a substantial collection of N.S.A. documents outlining the agency's procedure for collecting the phone records of millions of Americans without warrants or probable cause (Cassidy, 2013). Snowden is a tricky example because he is not a household

example of heroism, but those who do consider him heroic believe him to be brave and determined to pursue change in the form of a transparent government. However, ordinary morality and the fiduciary duties he has to the U.S. government would require him to prioritize secrecy and professional trust. The “heroic whistleblower” chose not to support what he considers to be intrusive and unjust politics. Rather, his moral principles are focused on open communication, political trust, and privacy (Cassidy). Snowden may not be the perfect illustration of a hero, but his actions do inspire criticism and critical evaluation of the moral principles listed previously, and encourage many to question how a trustworthy government should act. If these questions continue to gain momentum, the United States could be looking at radical political change. Snowden is a prime example of a hero who is celebrated and condemned for challenging certain expectations and standards of behavior.

An interesting practice to examine in this discussion would be the use of antiheroes. The antihero is the protagonist and central character of a narrative, but lacks either traditional heroic qualities or a “positive” moral disposition. They are a detour from the conventional fascination with glamorous heroes, and are becoming increasingly popular and highly demanded in today’s entertainment market (Dawn, 2014). Additionally, audiences want these characters to be darker, edgier, and morally confrontational. As Dawn reports, several producers of television shows with these characters actually play on the moral conflict of their audiences. They know that viewers must grapple with the villainous things that the antiheroes do, but also admire them, to a degree, because of their strength, resiliency, or persistence. The characters are more enticing because they truly test the reach of their viewers’ empathy and moral complexity. This practice breaks the traditional entertainment mold, but may eventually convert these characters into actual heroes, in so far as their terrible actions may actually receive approval because the outcomes are “worth it.”

The pedagogical benefit of this phenomenon is the strain it puts on conflicting moral beliefs: can we empathize with or accept someone we believe to be horrible? Are there principles that we are willing to sacrifice or compromise for the sake of some other good or belief? These are a few of the important questions raised when we grapple with our morality through these characters.

The reach of heroism extends further than the affirmation of popular values. Individuals can have their moral codes and assumptions improved, altered, or questioned when they engage with the people and actions that are deemed heroic. Although there are incredible benefits to reinforcing moral conventions, being critical of normative principles can also achieve great results. There are great cultural and conceptual advantages to challenging our beliefs and common knowledge, which heroes excel at doing. Heroes can present great opportunities for projecting complex ideas and problems that may not have been deeply examined or previously explored. They are useful conceptual battlegrounds for navigating and weighing our options, including those we may find morally appalling. We should not be reluctant to lean on their popularity and influence.

The “Right” Heroes

The final topic that I will cover is accuracy. Is it important that who we identify as heroes are the “correct” or “right” individuals? I argue that it is tremendously important. Why should we acknowledge the right individuals as heroes? If we can reasonably conclude that heroes are sources of emulation and admiration, as well as essentially worth that praise and attention, then we should be diligent and mindful of the kinds of people that are receiving that treatment. If we can also conclude that heroes substantially influence the moral opinions of their audiences, then we should be mindful of the messages and principles that are being communicated. In this thesis, I have argued that heroes are and should be used as tools in moral education to communicate,

reinforce, or reevaluate conventional values. As an educational tool, it is important to use heroes correctly and with good intention. Additionally, knowing who is heroic, why they are heroic, and being more confident about those beliefs further aid our moral understanding.

If we hope to be accurate about our heroes, then we must be critically thorough. This means examining individuals who society may take for granted as heroic. For the sake of this analysis, I will be primarily emphasizing public service members, such as firefighters, police officers, and the military. For instance, Gantenbein (2003) writes that firefighters can be over-glamorized as heroic and appear to have heroism built into their job descriptions, even when there is no danger. He also points out that their position overshadows many others who accept more risk and may do more to positively affect lives. Since a firefighter's occupation routinely involves saving people and aiding others, we may rashly assume their integrity and bravery. A bystander may also run into a burning building to save someone in trouble, which would generally be considered heroic. Both would more than likely receive public approval, but the firefighter appears to receive this approval by default. Further questions worth asking include: How do we determine who is more, less, or equally heroic regarding the two? Is either heroic at all? I believe that many would judge both individuals to be brave and doing the right thing if they are taking action to prevent others from getting hurt. Yet, we should not assume that individuals are performing certain actions simply because they are in a position to. These questions may never arise if we automatically presume one group to be heroic without due diligence.

Law enforcement is a group that is currently under a large amount of scrutiny. Police officers, sworn to protect and serve the citizens of their city, county, or state, have been regarded as heroes for their courage in the face of constant danger and for their commitment to the safety of the public. The term 'hero' appears to be attached to the badge of the officer. Feige (2015)

reports that this perception is quite evident: “One need only listen to the fife and drums, witness the squadron of NYPD helicopters flying the missing man formation, or gaze at the image of tens of thousands of white-gloved officers standing at attention to understand the profound nature of their particular brand of heroism.” However, after the recent uproar over unjustified police brutality and misconduct, many are starting to question the narrative of the heroic officer. Feige details how difficult it can be to evaluate and potentially prosecute officers who are unlawful or immoral, primarily because of two problems: (1) the narrative of the “heroic cop” has become so pervasive that judges, jurors, and attorneys tend to offer them unwarranted defense, and (2) there are additional laws specifically designed to protect these “heroes” from the methods and motives that the police themselves use. I personally will not generalize about whether police officers are or are not heroes, and admit that this issue deserves as well as currently receives more precise attention beyond the scope of this inquiry. Yet, I find it important to highlight the role that the heroic narrative plays in these situations. Before we have an opportunity to evaluate an officer’s actions, we may already be blinded by heroic assumptions accompanying the badge and position.

Should we think of military or public service to others a heroic simply because those jobs *could* or usually do involve more danger? As Christine Gudorf (2009) warns us, the repeated mistaken synonymy of service and heroism can lead to confusion between ‘victims’ and ‘heroes’ (88). This is clearly represented in the national recognition of military service: severe injuries or death are often rewarded as heroic, even when the soldier did not do anything (Brooks, 2007). Rather, the individual was present during terrible circumstances. These concerns are generally raised when a soldier accidentally makes contact with a bomb or gets hit by an inadvertent weapon discharge (Brooks). Individuals such as these are quite different from the soldier who dives onto the bomb or steps in front of active fire. Should we make a distinction between a

person who dies or is injured while fighting and another who dies or is injured in a tragic accident? I argue that we should, since the latter of the two does not demonstrate, or have the chance to demonstrate, bravery, integrity, conviction, and so forth. Their situations lack action. Rather, we may presume that they could act heroically, had they been able to. Despite this, the fact remains that both individuals are regarded as such because the perception overshadows the reality of the situation. The consistent association of service with heroism can continue to hastily guide popular perceptions unless a reasonable challenge or revision is made.

The question of exaggeration is another concern related to accuracy. Some may suggest that we should not admire or attempt to emulate heroic behavior that we fear may be embellished or fabricated. The person or group who “owns” or distributes the narrative is capable of, and sometimes likely to, overstate or alter the conditions of the story. The risks may come across as much more dangerous than what actually occurred, the hero may have done something far less significant, or the motivations for acting may be completely circumstantial. The fear is that by exaggerating or creating exemplars, individuals are giving these heroes so much virtue that no one could possibly live up to or emulate their standard of behavior (Rhodes & Johnson, 2008, 119). I believe that this fear is of minimal concern. This is a valid challenge to the legitimacy of the hero’s *historical* accuracy, but is not necessarily a serious threat to our use of their integrity. Our approval of heroes can certainly be based on hyperbole, but more often concerns the hero’s degree of good rather than the good itself. History is filled with figures whose stories exceed their actual lives, and fictional heroes are romanticized from the beginning. Yet, the exaggeration of their good does not mean that we should not admire or emulate what is good about them (Rhodes & Johnson, 120). While exaggeration is less of a problem in this regard, a line should still be drawn between the hero’s virtues and their methods. There are very real and apparent

dangers to putting on a cape and attempting to fight crime. These exaggerations may prove to be more dangerous. However, emulating a hero's integrity or aspiring to have similar moral beliefs still has potential benefits. We should focus more on accurately portraying or understanding the hero's values and character, and less on accurately depicting their accomplishments.

For my final example, I want to discuss one of philosophy's own heroes, Socrates. We can presume that the stories of him are more than likely exaggerated, but questions of accuracy reside more with the appropriate use and fit of his teachings, rather than the actual depiction of his life or intellect. When using heroes, we should also ask whether their values are right for our educational needs and whether they accurately portray the messages that we would like to convey. The heroic Socrates is taught in philosophy courses to encourage critical questioning and a love of the truth. His work and approach have become known as the *Socratic Method*, which is referenced as one of the most tried and true ways of instilling the virtue of critical thinking or an "inner critical voice" (Paul & Elder, 1997). Yet, this method has received recent criticism for being used in places where it is no longer effective, such as the study of law (Dinerstein, 2015; Patrice, 2014). Although the method was once used to foster critical questioning, others now believe it is used to intentionally mislead, confuse, and subjugate students (Patrice). Our knowledge and opinion of Socrates the person may not have changed much over recent years, but our perception of how to utilize his teachings may still be up for debate.

The previous examples are not meant to communicate my opinions on who should or should not be considered heroic. They instead demonstrate that there is controversy surrounding who the "right" or "correct" heroes are, and that these questions matter tremendously. Idolizing or emulating heroes comes with the responsibility that we are admiring the right people for the right reasons. The moral worth and influential power that society can attribute to heroes must

always be evaluated and managed. Many heroes understand that, whether they desire it or not, they are role models and sources of moral inspiration for many people (Franco & Zimbardo). Presenting an undesirable representation of values or behavior can be quite damaging to those who admire or attempt to copy the hero. Franco and Zimbardo are quick to state that “dumbing down” heroism can limit moral creativity and our deeper engagement with the meaningful values that are attached to heroic actions and people. Heroism can drastically influence our individual moral development by representing those ideas that we value or desire to emulate, so it is important to get those sources right.

Summary

To conclude, heroes should be acknowledged and respected for their roles in challenging moral conventions and expanding moral perspectives. Ordinary morality presents a community with a valuable standard of behavior, but it is far from perfect. Heroes can be wonderful resources for exploring that standard’s limitations and for identifying opportunities for change or improvement. Rote memorization of rules and principles is not the most effective strategy for moral development, and heroes should be used to promote the actual understanding of moral ideas rather than their simple replication. More importantly, many heroes are rightfully praised because they challenge the standard or do what they believe is right in spite of what conventional wisdom would suggest. They solidify their status as heroic by their defiance of what is obligatory or expected. The challenges that they pose and their moral complexity are an invaluable resource. In this thesis, I have presented multiple benefits of using heroism in moral education, including the reevaluation of principles mentioned in this chapter. However, these benefits are somewhat dependent on the accurate identification and use of heroes in our daily lives. We must remain diligent about how carelessly we refer to something as ‘heroic,’ as well as should

appropriately attribute the right amount of moral worth and influence. Moral education should focus on expanding the understanding of ideas and issues through methods beyond the basic recycling or memorization of established values. Heroes, as effective tools in moral education, should follow the same approach.

CONCLUSIONS

Heroes are and should be frequently used in moral education to support the retention and reevaluation of cultural values and moral conventions. We use heroes to entertain, to signify who and what is important, and to inspire people, but must recognize that we also use them to teach. Through heroes, we teach others how to be better, what is or should be considered valuable, and what ideas are worth sacrificing for. Heroism allows us to explore morality on a much deeper level, supplying us with people, events, actions, and circumstances that make our beliefs or choices more complex, more meaningful, and more practically relevant. As I have argued in this thesis, we can use heroes for a multitude of pedagogical benefits and can achieve positive results, depending on our use of them. Communities can instill and reinforce their core beliefs or moral conventions, as well as communicate them to a larger or foreign audience. Heroism can also be used to challenge those very same normative values and standards of behavior, if a reevaluation is needed or desired. Regardless of how they are used, heroes deserve profound respect for their influence in moral education.

Human beings typically desire to be better, whether that means being a better friend, neighbor, family member, employee, citizen, or person in general. We often examine heroes to try and understand what that “better” looks like, what that “better” means. The hero should not necessarily be seen as a moral instructor, but instead as a subject of study or as a tool that we can use to pursue moral issues and ideas. As with any other subject or tool, we must be aware of the implications of using heroism and understand the full capabilities of its potential. We must also recognize that heroes are not the only source of moral material, even if they are a valuable source, and can work alongside many of our other subjects, methods, and approaches. The

lessons that we learn and the information that we gather from heroes should be appropriately understood as additional contributions to a larger collection of beliefs, values, and knowledge that we use to create collective moral standards or individual codes of conduct.

Overview

I will provide a brief overview of the chapters before concluding with the implications of my research. My first chapter established a set of necessary criteria for the discussion as well as sought to introduce a more sufficient definition of heroism. I noted that heroism is a form of moral excellence, but differs from other forms because of the requirement of bravery. Heroes are morally excellent because they overcome fear or self-preservation in order to do something monumental. Heroism requires integrity, which I defined as the collection of a person's moral principles accompanied by profound devotion, and the public approval of that person's character or choices. We also expect heroes to take action, noting that it is nearly inconceivable to think of an inactive or lazy hero. These necessary characteristics should be on display in some respect. In order for us to call someone heroic, we must know that they exist. Therefore, our perceptions of heroism largely depend on the hero's visibility and their cultural fit. From this chapter, I have contributed a new definition of heroism that should be more inclusive as well as more informative. The necessary characteristics of excellence, bravery, integrity, action, and approval should expand our understanding of heroism, as well as help us determine who or what should belong within this category.

My following chapter introduced some of the pedagogical benefits of heroism. Here, I discussed how society typically utilizes heroes as a way of reinforcing and communicating prominent moral ideals. Heroes reaffirm our cultural beliefs by appealing to our many needs and desires as well as by serving as idealized images of excellent persons. Although individuals may

learn differently, engaging with these persons and their actions is an effective way of fostering further moral development. Heroism can teach us how to be morally excellent, but only if we embrace their examples properly. I argued that we should not directly copy heroes, but instead should use heroes and their values to think of what it means to be a good person or to live a good life, and model our lives accordingly. Heroism is also an opportunity to access and attempt to understand foreign cultural values and ways of life that may not have been as readily available or that would not have originally grabbed our interest. We may not be immediately interested in learning about another culture, but the spectacle of one of their heroes can steal our attention. The study of heroism benefits our moral development by providing access to values and ideals in an exciting and meaningful way.

My final chapter introduced a significant capability of heroism that can sometimes be overlooked or dismissed. I argued that heroes can not only confirm what we believe or “should” believe, but can also challenge our assumptions. By challenging the standard, heroes help us avoid complacency and be more critical of principles that we may take for granted or that we may want to reconsider. This includes understanding hidden biases in cultural assumptions, determining what should be considered “extraordinary” and “common” virtue, and being more open to variations in moral approaches or beliefs. Heroes can also help us engage with and possibly resolve many moral conflicts. We may find that, after analyzing a particular hero or set of heroes, we should reconsider or alter our positions on many issues. Finally, I discussed the importance of being accurate both in our identification and application of heroes, so that we may appropriately achieve the greatest results and communicate the right messages. While a society has many reasons for reinforcing community values, the reevaluation of moral conventions is also important if we desire to promote change or achieve progress. Heroism provides us with

opportunities to present a formidable challenge to ideas that we believe are wrong or no longer apply. In summation, there are several ways in which heroes can be studied or applied that produce tremendous benefits for moral education. While there are legitimate concerns to be considered, primarily regarding incorrect usage, the advantages far exceed the limitations.

Implications

Consider the many ways that we come to know about heroes. As children, we are told stories and legends about characters who did brave and tremendous things while always standing up for what is right or while defeating evil. In the classroom, we are taught who the cultural and historical heroes are, including the success of their actions and their impact on the world. Of course, the opinions of these characters usually vary depending on what side of history they or we are on. We may also go to a church, synagogue, mosque, temple, or other religious institution and hear about the righteousness of many saints and heroes. We could see, read, or hear the inspiring actions of a brave individual on one of many news outlets, celebrating or grieving when appropriate. Our sports, movies, shows, and other entertainment are filled with many idols that we sometime see as heroic. They receive praise for bravely challenging the conventional way, inspiring us to be better people, and/or doing things the “right” way. The most common heroes to many people is actually their parents. Many individuals believe that their parents are heroic because they showed them how to live correctly, taught them what to value in life, and sacrificed in order to give their children a great life. These examples do not cover all heroes, but are enough to describe how we interact with heroes on a day to day basis.

If we acknowledge the profound impact that heroes have on our lives and take our interactions with them seriously, we open up many educational opportunities. We can be critical of the characters in our children’s stories and be more mindful of the figures we select for our

classrooms. Furthermore, we can actually exploit the influence of these characters for new pedagogical strategies in and outside of the classroom. These methods can include using superheroes or controversial figures to explore the moral complexity of several issues, much like the *Heroic Imagination Project* is attempting to do. We can strategically introduce heroic celebrities and sports heroes in ways that popularize admirable qualities or strong characteristics, rather than provide more attention to those that may be popular for the “wrong” reasons. We can deeply evaluate *why* our parents are heroic to us, and what they specifically taught us, so that we may further understand those principles and maybe pass them onto our children one day. We can also be more critical of our assumptions and beliefs as well as attempt to correct any “wrongs” or unsavory biases by examining the very heroes that inspire many of our beliefs. As I have stated previously, heroism is not the only way to explore these ideas. However, they are effective, and we would be doing ourselves a disservice if we take their place in moral education for granted. Understanding what is heroic, why it is heroic, and what that means to us can improve moral development and help us evaluate our own collective and individual morality.

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VITA

Shaun Douglas Respass
 Institute for the Humanities
 Old Dominion University
 Norfolk, VA 23529
 sresp002@odu.edu

Education

Master of Arts – Humanities: Concentration in Philosophy Fall 2015 – Present
 Old Dominion University, Norfolk, VA

Bachelor of Arts – Philosophy Fall 2012 – Spring 2015
 Old Dominion University, Norfolk, VA

Awards/Recognition

Susan Rowell Graduate Scholarship for the Humanities (2016)
 Dean's List – Old Dominion University
 Bachelor of Arts Degree Cum Laude – Old Dominion University

Conferences

Virginia Humanities Conference April, 2017
 "Heroism & Conventional Morality: A Pedagogical Approach"
Virginia Tech ASPECT Conference April, 2017
 No Presentation

Relevant Coursework

Myth and Philosophy, Studies in the Philosophy of Art, Theories & Methods in Humanities, Rhetoric of Seduction, Phenomenology & the Nature of Language, Politics of Social Media, Social Change & Communication Systems, Philosophy of Work, Social & Political Philosophy, Preparing Humanities Teachers & Scholars, Logic, Ethics, Religions of the World, Modern Philosophy, Ancient Philosophy, Technology: Its Nature/Significance, Contemporary Theory of Knowledge, Philosophy of Psychology, Gender and Ethics, Seminar: Nietzsche, Philosophy of Religion, Philosophy of Art, Seminar: Aristotle, Social Inequality, Society & the Individual, Sociology of Education, Religion & Society, Philosophy of Digital Culture, Postmodernism and Political Theory

Additional Experience

Constructed class lecture plans and reading materials
 Delivered two guest lectures for a 300 level philosophy course (Computer Ethics)
 Presented conference-style papers and delivered feedback for graduate writing and presentations