THESIS

WHAT TO PACK FOR THE HERO'S JOURNEY:

AN EXAMINATION OF SOME CONCEPTS RELATING TO HEROIC FIGURES

Submitted by

Robert Brown

Department of Philosophy

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the Degree of Master of Arts

Colorado State University

Fort Collins, Colorado

Summer 2019

Master's Committee:

Advisor: Bernard Rollin

John Didier
Matthew Hickey

ABSTRACT

WHAT TO PACK FOR THE HERO'S JOURNEY:

AN EXAMINATION OF SOME CONCEPTS RELATING TO HEROIC FIGURES

Heroes are a concept that has existed in almost every culture and period of human history. The contemporary era is no exception, with one example being the incredibly popular and lucrative industry of comic book superheroes. Despite this prevalence however, contemporary philosophy has had little to say about the hero. In this project I try to slightly remedy that situation by examining what the hero may look like in some popular normative ethical theories (nonspecific utilitarianism, Kantianism, and virtue ethics) with the idea that a successful ethical theory should be able to conceptualize the hero. Additionally, I borrow a concept from Ancient Roman culture, the discrimen, to aid in examining heroes ranging from the historic, the everyday, and beyond. Finally, I make some remarks on the inspirational nature of heroes, which I believe to be a significant reason for why philosophers should address the hero. Going forward, I would like to see more robust discussion of heroes in philosophy because of both the positive role they can play as exemplars to aid and facilitate ethical education and ultimately, create a more ethical society.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

"[Thomas] More is a man of an angel's wit and singular learning. I know not his fellow. For where is the man of that gentleness, lowliness and affability? And, as time requireth, a man of marvelous mirth and pastimes, and sometime of as sad gravity. A man for all seasons."[1]

The Hero's Journey Forestalled

During my early youth, I was an avid reader. My preference above all else was for fantasy novels. Quality was not a large concern of mine. Though I read many well-regarded works and staples of the genre, I read just as much pulp, devouring them and rereading them over and over again. From those works aimed at children, to young adult, and books that likely more mature than I ought to have, I ran the gamut. A question that did not matter to the younger me but is of some importance now, for reasons that will soon become clear, is why I was so captivated by these stories of great heroes and monsters, of seemingly insurmountable peril, and inevitable triumph through ingenuity, perseverance, and righteousness. As I believe part of the answer lies in what was happening outside of my books, I will continue sharing some other aspects of my childhood.

In comparison with the protagonists of the novels I read, my childhood was not nearly so unfortunate. Nonetheless, my parents were ill suited for the role, both suffering from alcoholism and the best times were if only one of them was on the wagon, so the other could moderate that negative influence. I was neither physically nor emotionally abused, but I was quite often and for prolonged periods left alone from about the age of five years old. This led to what was already a

[1] White, Beatrice (ed.), The Vulgaria of John Stonbridge and the Vulgaria of Robert Whittinton, Early English Text Society (London, 1932), p. xxviii.

pastime of mine, reading, to becoming something I would spend hours every day on. No doubt preferring the worlds inside these novels to the one outside of it.

Suffice to say, I grew up using these characters as positive role models, despite their often-fantastic origins. The protagonists were virtuous people that always stood up for what was just, and furthermore, had the power to manifest their will. These characters were larger than life, and in comparison, my parents' petty vices were quite small indeed. I cannot say exactly why I did not follow in my parents' footsteps as so many unfortunate children do, but if it was partly my natural temperament, then I believe it was also these stories that bolstered me. Another question to bring up here is how exactly they did so.

One of my earliest memories of a "traditional" hero was Sidney Lanier's *The Boy's King Arthur*. I was too young to fully appreciate the intrigue and tragedy of Camelot, but the vivid mental pictures along with N.C. Wyeth's charming illustrations brought the Arthurian legend to life in my imagination. Some of the characters, stories, and motifs have been of tremendous influence both before and since Thomas Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur*, such as the The Lady of the Lake and Excalibur, Sirs Balin and Balan, the Questing Beast and King Pellinore, the Fisher King and the Holy Grail, and of course, the nobility of King Arthur himself, and his doom awaiting him at the hands of his son Mordred at Camlann, and his spiriting away to Avalon, to recuperate before returning to England someday to rule once more.

The Arthurian legend has inspired more people than just me, and many of those go on to create their own reimaginings of the myth. Of the most notable there is Alfred Lord Tennyson's *The Idylls of the King* and T.H. White's *The Once and Future King*, a wonderful retelling of Arthur from his own boyhood (which served as the basis for Disney's *The Sword in the Stone*) to his tragic end, albeit with an appearance of Thomas Malory as a young page who vows to carry

on Arthur's chivalry in deed and by preserving the story. Though Arthur is not singularly unique in his heroic prevalence, it might seem a trifle strange that so many people find him such an inspirational figure, especially to someone like myself who lived an ocean and more than a millennium away from him.

The author of another such reimagining, Bernard Cornwell, writes this in his afterword to his trilogy,

> "Arthur was probably no king, he may not have lived at all, but despite all the efforts of historians to deny his very existence, he is still, to millions of folk around the world, what a copyist called him in the fourteenth century, *Arthur Rex Quondam, Rexque Futurus:* Arthur, our Once and Future King."[2]

This does not explain why I found such solace and positive influence in Arthur, but at least it shows that it is not a unique affliction of mine.

It was a small step from fantasy novels to comic books, equally bursting with heroes who were challenged, but at the pivotal moment would overcome those challenges, saving the day without compromising their ideals. Superheroes such as Spider-Man, who was a meek student granted with great power, as well as great responsibility. Superman, whose near godlike powers did not prevent him from facing the same troubles and tribulations that all of us do every time we are faced with difficult ethical decisions. Batman, whose traumatic witnessing of his parent's violent and senseless deaths spurred him to make a promise to eradicate the type of crime that caused his tragedy.

These sorts of heroes captured my imagination so completely that the thought of succumbing to my parents' failings was never on my mind. It was only natural to me to try and be better than not only them, which would be a small feat, but continually be better than my past self. I did and do not have a magic sword that is symbolic of my divine right to rule, or a body

[2] Cornwell, Bernard. *Excalibur*. Penguin Books, 2011.

that gains superpowers from the light of our yellow sun, but I never made much of that lack. The ability to be ethical, fortunately, is not limited to only the chosen few. It is a capacity we all have, though that is not to say it is easily realized. These characters pushed me to reach for a world beyond the one I inhabited, towards one that was better, and surely these stories have had similar effects upon others.

Eventually, I matured enough such that my wellbeing was in my own hands, a small amount of power compared to the likes of Superman or King Arthur, but an important power nonetheless. However, I never matured out of my liking of these settings and the simple feeling of heroic admiration. It was and still is an integral part of my character. Still though, even with physical maturity, I lacked the intellectual acumen required to describe what drew me to such figures, let alone explain the sort of influence they exerted upon me. Though this hobby remained a large part of life, it was one I remarked upon seldom, not considering it childish myself, but understanding that some may view it as such. It did not seem becoming to cling to these characters past adolescence.

With that said, when I discovered another passion in philosophy, I noticed a conspicuous absence: despite the sophistication in discussing the all-encompassing range of issues that philosophy does, I did not notice much discussion of heroes. In many ways, I consider philosophy to be the foundational human discipline, so it seems strange that something so formative in my life would be little remarked upon. If one studies the ethics of Immanuel Kant or John Stuart Mill, there seems to be little of the hero there, with grand figures swept aside for sterile and cold ones. At first, I rationalized this absence by thinking that heroes were the types of things left in one's mental toy box, put away when one came of age, maybe taken out

occasionally to be fondly remembered, but ultimately placed back inside to get on with the serious scholarship required of the philosopher.

Yet, I felt restless with such a conclusion. Afterall, though I rarely meet someone as passionate about heroes as I, their existence and presence are everywhere in society. Though fictitious, if figures like Arthur or Superman inspire nobility, justice, and perseverance, it seems a boon for the ethical philosopher. It is one thing to delineate right action, it is quite another to inflame the desire to do so in others. Ethics *is* practice, and theory is obviously not sufficient to engender ethical practice. Were it so, ethics as a discipline would have made itself obsolete long before now.

I believe here it is worth some time to explore what I mean when I say that heroes are everywhere. Take, for instance, on the campus of Colorado State University. Off in a corner of a quad, there is a statue by Chris Navarro entitled *20% Chance of Flurries*. The statue is of a cowboy, astride a horse, with a calf in front of him. There is some white metal meant to be snow, and when there is a dusting of true snow over the statue, the verisimilitude is augmented. The title along with the statue itself conjures up a narrative near instantaneously in one's mind. A man, perhaps a ranch owner or farmhand, had set out to recover the calf who had strayed from safety, before the blizzard would come and take its young life. The statue itself is picturesque, and thematically fitting for a school such as Colorado State University, with its prided focus on agricultural studies. A touching display of the lengths a person will go to for their animals.

There is a deeper layer to the aesthetics, I think, which is why I bring the statue up at all. This statue of a man, whether inspired by a real event or wholly imagined, is a hero. Few would rebuke someone for deciding not the to brave the elements for a calf, viewing such a creature as expendable. What is more, the calf may be destined for death eventually on a farm anyway, so

what if its fate is hastened slightly? Such reasons matter little to the type of person this man is evocative of, and no one would make a statue of the person who, no matter how correctly or safely reasoned, had abandoned the calf to the storm. So here too, is evidence that people thought heroes (or this specific instantiation of a hero) were worthy of commemoration.

Let us continue further. Statues such as this one I have described are by no means uncommon. I would expire if I tried to list all the examples, so for the moment and for no particular reason we will focus on the subset of individuals who were instrumental in the founding of the United States of America. There are countless statues of the Founding Fathers, with perhaps that first president, George Washington, being the most prolifically used as an emblem. There is the Washington Monument, which, when erected was the tallest manmade structure in the world. The capitol city is named for his sake with many other cities elsewhere named likewise and a state similarly christened. There is the dollar bill and coin featuring his image and even a mountain face carved with his visage, and countless roads, townships, universities and other places named in his honor.

Like with the statue at Colorado State, the natural question to ask about this Washington mania is why? Washington did not live in the hazy time of pre-history where heroic exploits could be stretched further and further without inducing credulity. The answer, I suspect, is in the same vein as the others I have asked. There is something about Washington that is well worth commemorating, and it is the job of the philosopher to determine precisely what that is.

In Washington's wake, a myriad of his colleagues and contemporaries follow. Alexander Hamilton (who was the inspiration for the recent hit Broadway production *Hamilton*), Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, Thomas Paine, Benjamin Franklin, and others are all glorified and lionized, their appellations and features adorning many things throughout the country and even

beyond, over two hundred years removed from their deeds. Of course, I am not supposing that all the people who would recognize these figures know what has made them so famous, but there are those who invoke the Founding Fathers as one would invoke a spell, meant to gain some portion of their power, some of their prestige and credibility. These figures of the American Revolution are legendary, and this despite the fact that they are not so far removed from modern times. Their importance from a historical perspective is well documented, but I believe there is still a place for a philosophical explanation, that explains why we put up these monuments, why their legendary exploits provide an inspiration for Americans and people across the globe, in a way very reminiscent of the mythical Arthur.

Another contemporary of Washington's, the Marquis de Lafayette, is also a figure that has garnered much attention, both in his time and after. He played a part in the Revolutionary War and went home to France to take part in yet another revolution, indeed he would even live to see the July Revolution in 1830. For his many feats in both countries, he earned the sobriquet, "Hero of Two Worlds". Such an appellation seems remarkably foreign or quaint today, something one would be more amenable to seeing in *The Lord of the Rings* than about an actual historical figure. Predictably, I am interested in evaluating if such a title could ever be deservedly earned, let alone in the contemporary world.

The Founding Fathers are just one such group of people who are widely revered. Every time and every place has had their heroes, sometimes real humans who transition from flesh and blood to the pages of stories and histories, sometimes completely invented characters who still spurred others to try and match their remarkable achievements and cases where the legendary and real are intertwined. Siegfried, Roland, Romulus and Remus, Gilgamesh, Rama, Beowulf, Three Sovereigns and Five Emperors, Odysseus, Aeneas, Momotarou, Siddhartha Gautama,

Mohammed, Jesus of Nazareth, all have been the subject of attention and inspiration and likely will continue to be such for as long as humans are around.

Surely no one would contest that heroes are inspirational, though I myself admit one may contest whether this inspiration is positive or negative. One thinks of the famous story about Julius Caesar, whose admiration of Alexander the Great undeniably fanned the flames of his grand ambitions, as recounted by Plutarch:

> "…we are told again that, in Spain, when he was at leisure and was reading from the history of Alexander, he was lost in thought for a long time, and then burst into tears. His friends were astonished, and asked the reason for his tears. "Do you not think," said he, "it is matter for sorrow that while Alexander, at my age, was already king of so many peoples, I have as yet achieved no brilliant success?"[3]

Likewise Octavius would measure himself against both his great uncle and Alexander. Around two thousand years later in the 20th century, there were still those who used the name Caesar to evoke the image of ultimate power with titles like Kaiser and Tsar. Napoleon Bonaparte also looked to his heroes Caesar and Alexander for the historical measuring stick by which he examined himself. Now, I am not here making a defense of what is sometimes called the Great Man Theory of History, only pointing out that for good or ill, heroes sometimes play a pivotal role in influencing others, both during and after their lifetimes.

Returning to the present day, heroes are in many ways more prevalent than ever. Whereas in my boyhood and for many years before that, superhero comics were the purview of the nerds and geeks, they now have an undeniably mainstream presence. These heroes are given new life by bursting onto the silver screen with such aplomb that the films routinely gross billions of dollars worldwide, and even are garnering unprecedented recognition at the Academy Awards.[4] Heroes are big business, but not so for the philosopher. I think I have made the point that heroes

[3] Plutarch. *Lives*. Translated by Bernadotte Perrin. Loeb Classics Library.
[4] Marvel's *Black Panther* is the first superhero film to be nominated for the Best Picture award, for the 91st Academy Awards.

are everywhere, taking up a not insignificant portion of our attention. They too, then, should have their day in the sun under philosophical scrutiny.

At the very least, if heroes are so prevalent in popular culture, surely they are worth some consideration in the philosophical arena. As Alasdair MacIntyre expounds upon in *After Virtue*, a crucial part of any successful moral theory is accounting for moral language in a sophisticated way.[5] Rephrasing that, a moral theory is a failure if it cannot account for moral language that is pervasive throughout everyday life (i.e. heroes and the heroic). If one wishes to dispense with heroes all together and argue that they are merely phantasmal, that is something that needs to be demonstrated.

Consequently, the project that follows is what I think of as a reclamation. Where once the hero was a critical figure for human societies, the hero has been obscured and often even erased by modernity. A proper, philosophically robust consideration would begin, in my view, to reverse the tide of alienation and abstraction a great deal of contemporary moral philosophy has promoted. Heroes are inspirational as well as aspirational, and this is a potent power that has gone for too long untapped by ethicists.

That consideration entails a few items to be addressed, which will become my task in the remainder of this project. The first issue is why popular contemporary moral theories necessarily fail to capture a hero's essence and subsequently eschew heroic language whether consciously or not. Here we will examine why two of the most predominant titans of moral theory (generic forms of both Kantianism and utilitarianism) are inadequate in expressing or even understanding what it means to be a hero. As an alternative, I will extoll the virtues of some kind of Aristotelian

[5] MacIntyre, Alasdair. *After Virtue*. 3rd ed., University of Notre Dame Press, 2007. MacIntyre is primarily referring to the emotivism of the 20th century as eroding crucial aspects of morality of times past, the titular virtue. I think heroes and related concepts similarly were part of what MacIntyre describes as a "degeneration, a grave cultural loss."

virtue ethic, though I will make it plain that I am not committed to a particular ethical theory per se, but rather believe it is a *type* of ethical theory that is more amenable to the hero. Here too, I will address the objection that ethical theories such as utilitarianism and Kantianism purposefully neglect the concept of heroes, seeing them as a relic to leave in the past, along with humanity's more primitive conceptions.

The second issue follows from the first. I believe a slight reorientation of ethics as it is traditionally thought of needs to occur. Rather than focusing on specific instantiations of ethical dilemmas (e.g. what is the correct answer to solve the trolley problem) the nature of an ethical dilemma *itself* needs to be examined. For this section, I will borrow a page from literary analysis, as the traditional structure of a story lends itself quite well to understanding this type of moment. I believe it is here that heroes are made and unmade. I will use the Latin term *discrimen*, to denote this point of crisis. Like the climax of a story, our ethical actions define us, so I believe viewing ethics as preparation for whatever discrima we happen to face is a better and more educational avenue to be walked down rather than the conception of ethics as a game is that is easily "solved" like tic-tac-toe with obvious moves to be made once one has settled upon a normative theory.

Lastly, I will take some time to discuss some loose ends to be tied due to the constraints of time and space. One end I will briefly examine is another critical aspect of the hero, the inspirational component and what that has to do with ethics. Which is to say the importance of having such a heroic figure in an ethical theory. I have alluded to some parts of this already by recounting parts of my childhood exposure to heroic figures. Heroes are everywhere, taking up quite a lot of room in the average person's mind and physically leaving quite a mark on the world around us. This is perhaps enough reason to take them somewhat seriously, but it goes

beyond that, with the types of things heroes really are. They are at the same time, exceptional paragons of humanity in a more tangible way that philosophy often treats of the subject but also ideas and symbols meant to be a beacon for others.

This is what I mean by saying heroes are inspirational and aspirational. They incite ethical action by being that moral lodestone, as well as being a concrete idea of what an ethical agent can try to become. The pull of a magnet by itself though is not automatically righteous; if one is incorrect in identifying what is heroic (or in the case of much of moral philosophy, woefully negligent) than there is an all too real danger of people being pulled in entirely the wrong direction which can lead to terrible results.

The Hero Erased

I

The last section was meant to make the case that the idea of heroes has a hold on the human mind. This hold manifests itself through the various ways that I previously mentioned, and many more that time does not permit us to examine here. One manifestation that I thought conspicuously absent was how to think of the hero in a philosophical context. This absence is all the more conspicuous if we think that ethics should account for prevalent notions that seem morally charged, as the hero certainly appears to be.

Though at this point we have not ascertained the essence of a hero, we have glimpsed it, primarily in non-philosophical contexts. Yet some things seem clear enough even at this stage. The hero is necessarily an ethical actor, presumably a particularly successful one. What constitutes "success" in an ethical context will vary, as our hero will appear in quite different guises depending on the fashion of the ethical theory we endorse. It is my thinking at this point that we will examine each guise in turn and see which becomes the hero best. We might hope at this point that there is a costume for the hero that fits our so far unexamined notions of such a figure. I would go further and say that if an ethical theory fails at this attempt, and the resulting figure is nothing like the sort of person we prima facie think a hero is, that is at least a reason to question said ethical theory.

It seems then, that a reasonable place to begin such an examination would be trying to look at the hero through the lenses of two dominant ethical theories, those being utilitarianism and Kantianism. Both ethical theories are incredibly broad, and those who would describe themselves as either may have significant disagreements about many issues. In order to avoid

getting caught in the weeds of those differences, I would like to use a path already partially founded.

In Susan Wolf's "Moral Saints", she paints a picture of two agents, "whose every action is as morally good as possible, a person, that is, who is as morally worthy as can be."[6] Wolf argues that such a person is neither desirable as an ideal to aspire to nor even someone worth knowing as an acquaintance. I think this conception of a morally perfect person is flawed, but this flaw is understandable if we consider how and why Wolf imagines the moral saints as she does. Suffice to say for now that I think Wolf's choice of the word, "saint" instead of "hero" that I use throughout this is telling. How many children aspire to be saints when compared to heroes?

Now we shall take our first look at these saints. The first Wolf calls the Loving Saint and is described thus:

> "…someone whose concern for others plays the role that is played in most of our lives by more selfish, or, at any rate, less morally worthy concerns. For the moral saint, the promotion of the welfare of others might play the role that is played for most of us by the enjoyment of material comforts, the opportunity to engage in the intellectual and physical activities of our choice, and the love, respect, and companionship of people whom we love, respect, and enjoy. The happiness of the moral saint, then, would truly lie in the happiness of others, and so he would devote himself to others gladly, and with a whole and open heart."[7]

The Loving Saint is meant to be the perfect utilitarian, and as such possesses all the positive and negative baggage the ethical theory brings with it. For those who endorse some sort of utilitarianism, this saint is praiseworthy indeed. They are sufficiently adept at stifling their own wants and desires to better produce utility in others, or ideally, they might feel the joy of others as completely as if it were their own. For detractors, this person seems to cease being an individual entirely; they are more a particularly clever causal lever who can manipulate relevant variables to increase utility as efficiently as possible. The self is subsumed by the pursuit of

[6] Wolf, Susan. "Moral Saints". The Journal of Philosophy. 1982.
[7] Ibid.

utility, and some utilitarians take even this as a plus, as Derek Parfit does when personal identity itself is almost completely eroded away. Here I am particularly referring to Parfit's "Later Selves and Moral Principles". Parfit sees identity as a matter of degree rather than any further, deeper fact. The effect this has on certain moral principles (e.g. fairness) is a near eradication. Parfit believes that as a consequence of adopting this view: "We may tend to focus less upon the person, the subject of experience, and instead focus more upon the experiences themselves. We may then decide that it is only the nature of what happens which is morally important, not to whom it happens. We may thus decide that it is always right to increase benefits and reduce burdens, whatever their distribution."[8]

All of which is to say that one's feelings about the Loving Saint are going to be largely dictated by one's feelings towards utilitarianism in general. For those in favor, the failings will be not seen as such or as necessary sacrifices. For those against, though there are some characteristics that are laudable, taken to such extremes it becomes distasteful or even repugnant. A more practical objection is how likely or possible the Loving Saint's existence is. A person whose happiness lies solely in the happiness of others seems rather unlikely, and still more difficult to cultivate.

Thus, I agree with Wolf that though this Loving Saint may seem an advantageous person to have around in some respects, they are hardly appealing as an individual. The Loving Saint seems to carry the implicit message that it is merely the regrettable circumstances of typical human biology and psychology that constrain most people from being ideal utilitarians, and were these shackles removed the self would disappear in kind. This is far from the hero I had envisioned, and I suspect all the more alien the average person. It is common enough to see a

[8] Parfit, Derek. "Later Selves and Moral Principles." *Philosophy and Personal Relations*, 1973, pp. 137-169.

hero who is willing to do whatever it takes to achieve certain ends, but perhaps more than anything it is the loss of the self that seems to erase the hero. Heroes seem like they ought to be best of humans, hence their inspirational appeal. The Loving Saint is altogether a different type of being, and though they may take pleasure in their actions, it is a kind of hollow pleasure, devoid of meaning and only meant to increase the global utility.

Wolf has another saint, who is characterized in a different way than the previous, which she calls the Rational Saint and describes as:

> "…someone for whom the basic ingredients of happiness are not unlike those of most of the rest of us. What makes him a moral saint is rather that he pays little or no attention to his own happiness in light of the overriding importance he gives to the wider concerns of morality. In other words, this person sacrifices his own interest to the interests of others, and feels the sacrifice as such."[9]

This is the Kantian version of moral saint. The "wider concerns of morality" mentioned by Wolf are no doubt the rational basis of morality that Kant so dearly prized, as well as the things that come with it, such as the extreme consideration that one owes to one's equally rational fellows.

Like the Loving Saint, there are features that stand out as commendable. Intuitively, most would assume that one sometimes has to sacrifice things one regards as important to one's self to contribute to the greater morality. The Rational Saint, acting from duty and the rational mandate of certain actions, is able to put egotistical desires aside, though they likely have these desires to a greater extent than the Loving Saint. Although, "able" may be the wrong way to describe it. The Rational Saint, acting out of respect for the categorial imperative, is perhaps better described as compulsive. The Rational Saint, in recognizing the moral law, is perhaps not in a position to ever countermand it, no matter what their private inclinations may be. In this saint too, the self is destroyed out of subservience to a moral mandate. At best, the Rational Saint may be able to preserve some of what the average person might hold dear, if such actions are acceptable to the

[9] Wolf, Susan. "Moral Saints." *The Journal of Philosophy*. 1982.

categorial imperative, but this coincidental allowance seems quite foreign to the everyday person, and to the hero as well. The duty that is often associated with Kantian ethics is extreme.

This is the "one thought too many" written about by Bernard Williams used to condemn both utilitarianism and Kantianism, stemming from a discussion of what the utilitarian or Kantian has to save about the choice between saving one's wife or a stranger from mortal peril:

> "…this construction provides the agent with one thought too many: it might have been hoped by some (for instance, by his wife) that his motivating thought, fully spelled out, would be the thought that it was his wife, not that it was his wife and in situations of this kind it is permissible to save one's wife." [10]

It does seem off-putting, in some ways obsequious, that a person would be reduced to kowtowing so to the demands of the rational universalizability of actions.

II

I believe Wolf's characterization of these actors as ideal utilitarians or Kantians is fair enough. One can still hold to them as ideals, but they come with undeniable shifts in the popular conception of what an ideally moral person would look like. Again, for those that uphold these theories that is likely neither an accident nor a drawback, but it is alienating for it. There is little question that to the laymen these people are hardly aspirational, another of Wolf's contentions proven true: "…the main thrust of the arguments of this paper has been leading to the conclusion that, when such ideals are present, they are not ideals to which it is particularly reasonable or healthy or desirable for human beings to aspire."[11]. Neither the Loving Saint, nor the Rational Saint are an adequate picture of the hero, even as nebulously defined as the hero yet is.

---

[10] Williams, Bernard (1981). "Persons, Character, and Morality." In James Rachels (ed.), *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers 1973–1980*. Cambridge University Press.
[11] Wolf, Susan. "Moral Saints." *The Journal of Philosophy*. 1982.

The question may rightfully be asked why we have spent our time examining these saints when they are so obviously not evocative of the hero. The answer is two-fold. The first I stated at the outset; these two ethical theories are immensely popular and widely taught, so they merit at least an examination of the type we have done here. The second is that though the saints were in some respects "heroic", in that they were ethical actors who excelled under the rules of the systems that begat them, their distorted appearance tells us by contrast something of the hero. A funhouse mirror certainly displays an imperfect reflection, but that is a reflection of something real nonetheless. The hero is not so easily definable that they can be spontaneously generated from looking at the implications of the standards either utilitarianism or Kantianism set, but this by itself tells us that we need to look elsewhere if we do indeed find the hero a worthy topic of philosophical inquiry.

The hero eludes us still then, but thankfully there are more ethical theories in the world than the limited versions of utilitarianism and Kantianism we have thus far looked at. Instead of a utilitarian or Kantian approach, we might feel inclined to revisit something like Aristotle's ethics; a style commonly referred to as virtue ethics in order to get a fully realized ethical picture of the hero.

Wolf for her part anticipates this move, but she does not endorse it, for a few reasons. Wolf admits that an Aristotelian or even Nietzschean approach could create moral ideals that are inclusive of more than just the whatever traits are seen as necessary or expedient for a moral agent. Yet, Wolf thinks that, "it is doubtful that any single, or even any reasonably small number of substantial personal ideals could capture the full range of possible ways of realizing human potential or achieving human good which deserve encouragement and praise."[12] This critique is

[12] Ibid.

lacking in bite, as the apparent futility of a philosophical project has rarely persuaded a writer to cease their investigation, and here should be no different. Interestingly, there is a premise implicit within Wolf's objection that ethics should be in the business of exhausting all potential idealized human paragons. This does seem unfeasible, but it is also an absurd thing to expect of a philosophical theory. It is akin to critiquing the utilitarian or Kantian for not delineating all or even a sizable portion of specific acts that are considered correct under the respective frameworks. The world being as complex as it is, ethics must be flexible enough to help an agent decide how to act on the spot, and not by consulting a massive tome of morally worthy actions.

Wolf's toothier objection is that though an Aristotelian ethic seems at first glance to have a broader conception of what counts as moral, this is not as advantageous at it appears. If we broaden the scope of morality such that it seems to have dominion over all activities, there may be no room left for anything besides ethical action; a conclusion seemingly similar to the ones reached by the moral saints. Wolf states that:

> "…no matter how flexible we make the guide to conduct which we choose to label "morality," no matter how rich we make the life in which perfect obedience to this guide would result, we will have reason to hope that a person does not wholly rule and direct his life by the abstract and impersonal consideration that such a life would be morally good."[13]

For Wolf, it seems that having a clear demarcation between an ethical and non-ethical domain is critical, and so if an Aristotelian ethic verges on destroying that dividing line, it too is objectionable. But why should ethics be "abstract and impersonal" as Wolf puts it? Certainly, ethics looks like that if we take it to be accurately represented by utilitarianism and Kantianism, and many students who are first introduced to formal ethics are greatly put off by these factors.

Wolf's concern is shared by many other professional philosophers who become disillusioned with the current state of ethics and either restrict or argue for a rejection of a

[13] Ibid.

rigorous ethical theory altogether.[14] One of the reasons I began this essay in the way that I did, by way of a semi-autobiographical account of my relationship with heroes was to show that ethics is anything but abstract and impersonal. Ethics must be personal since it has to do with real persons that inhabit the world, and it cannot be abstract because ethics, principally out of all philosophical disciplines, is practiced. Thus, I believe an ethic that can account for heroes can escape Wolf's worries, which are well-meant but ultimately misplaced. Nonetheless, there must be some framework to think of heroes, and I believe something like Aristotle's ethics can do an adequate job, so let us return to Wolf's fear about ethics encroaching over the entirety of one's life.

One has only to remember the famous first line of the *Nicomachean Ethics* to imagine Aristotle had a similar thought in mind: "Every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and pursuit, is thought to aim at some good; and for this reason the good has rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim."[15] For Wolf, this is undesirable, as again, now we are seemingly in the same position as the Loving or Rational Saint, doing all that we do in the name of morality. Is this truly that objectionable?

In short, I do not believe so. There is reason to believe Aristotle here. Obviously, ethics aims at some good, or indeed, the Good, which is to say that there in an undeniably evaluative component to ethics, both in theory and practice. This hardly seems unique to ethics though. Even hobbies and similarly leisurely pursuits aim at goods themselves. The person who makes craft beer in their spare time does not mean to brew bad beer, and the chess player never strives

[14] Bernard Williams is one such philosopher, whose works I quote from often because of their poignant critique of mainstream ethical theories. Williams in his *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* even goes so far as to argue that ethics as it is practiced currently can lead to the destruction of ethical knowledge, rather than its acquisition.

[15] Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*. Translated by W.D. Ross. Book I. 1.

to play a mediocre game. It is concerning for Wolf to have to couch everything in the language of morality, to constantly be asking whether it is obligatory to do X or is it moral to do X instead of Y. It seems less concerning, at least to me, to ask the question of could I be doing X *better*, whether X is something traditionally thought of as being under the purview of morality (e.g. promoting utility, acting under a universalizable maxim), or something not typically thought of as having that moral component.

It is difficult for me to conceive of a clear-cut distinction between realms of morality and non-morality. When a doctor feels she should do her best in treating a patient, would we describe that as moral? What about a mechanic who feels similarly about repairing cars? Both are ostensibly engaging in similar pursuits, despite being in different professions.

Aristotle himself makes a distinction between moral and non-moral virtues, and this seems clear enough:

> "Virtue, then, being of two kinds, intellectual and moral, intellectual virtue in the main owes both its birth and its growth to teaching (for which reason it requires experience and time), while moral virtue comes about as a result of habit, whence also its name (ethike) is one that is formed by a slight variation from the word ethos (habit)."[16]

With that said, it is evident that even with these two kinds of virtues, overlap is to be expected. The nonmoral virtues complement the moral ones. Justice is impotent without courage to enforce it, for instance.

Where I diverge still further from Wolf's arguments requires us to revisit her definition of these saints. Namely, that a saint is a person whose every action is as morally good as possible. I believe this is a key piece of what makes the moral saints so undesirable, and further, that this is not actually a suitable definition of a morally perfect person. Once demonstrating this, we can pivot towards a more suitable understanding of peak moral agents, amenable to the hero.

[16] Ibid. Book II. 1.

Let us take another look at the Loving Saint. Assuming something like act-utilitarianism, that is that the action that produces the most utility for a given circumstance is prescribed as the action that should be taken. For someone to qualify as a Loving Saint, their every action must be maximally utility producing when compared to all their other possible actions. Beyond the obvious ridiculousness that Wolf's definition precludes a saint who exactly one time made a miscalculation, it is just not feasible in any sense to presume a person could keep this up for more than perhaps a day. At best, the would-be perfect Loving Saint will face epistemic limits that will restrict them from producing the most utility with any given action. Now, I am not arguing that having an ideal that is manifestly impossible is by itself problematic for an ethical theory, though the question is an interesting one, as it relates to having heroes that are completely fictional. Rather, the problem I believe arises from having this backwards construction of a moral actor, who is pieced together from correct actions as if it were an ethical chimera. Utilitarianism lends itself to a sliding scale of effectiveness, which becomes problematic if we think it is only the person who sits atop this scale as worthy of highest moral lionization. As there is only this one metric, agents are likewise only defined in terms of this utilitarian potency, and so become one dimensional and abstract from the complexities of everyday moral existence.

The Rational Saint, on the other hand, suffers from an equally damning flaw. Rather than a matter of degree, it seems one is either a Rational Saint, and at all times acts under the categorical imperative, or they do not, and thus are a lesser moral agent. An ethical system that lends itself to these two classifications is intuitively unsatisfying, as a scoundrel and someone who often tries to live up to the demands of the moral law but sporadically fails are under the same heading. There is seemingly little room for supererogatory actions under this kind of Kantian framework, which may indicate there is no room for the hero, who intuitively seems to

not only be a moral agent who excels but excels in a way that is not always demanded of by the average agent.

Which is why, ultimately, I think this definition of a morally perfect person illustrates both why the Loving Saint and Rational Saint are undesirable as ideal humans, as well as why Wolf writes off the Aristotelian approach. What has happened is that the state of contemporary moral philosophy that focuses on discrete, morally praiseworthy actions tends to lead one astray when we return to considering the moral agent. We should not think of the morally perfect person as one whose every action is morally perfect, as this is neither feasible nor desirable if it were. Instead, we must begin with the agent and ask ourselves as ethicists what can be done to ready the agent for decisive ethical action and what are the types of agents we find most worthy of praise (i.e. heroes). In other words, ethics is as much about preparation or moral education and training as it is about differentiating incorrect from correct action. This shift in perspective will require a different language than what is typically used in contemporary ethics to account for these types of concerns, which will both evade Wolf's concerns of an all-consuming morality, but equally important, preserve some ethically thick concepts like the hero which has so far proven to be beyond the explanatory power of contemporary ethical theories that hold significant sway.

III

If we take moral education to be a main concern of ethics, our ethical theory must be amenable to it. Ethics is inseparable from agents, which is why focusing merely on the actions themselves is so alienating and abstracting. Many ethicists throughout philosophy's history have

done significant work and written compelling arguments for this or that normative theory, and much ink has been spilt justifying or attacking metaethical foundations for those, and once that work is done the ethicists set down their work, and in a Humean fashion, knock off for a few drinks.

Such work is valuable, but not nearly the end of one's work as an ethicist. This is an element of the discipline of ethics that Aristotle understood to differentiate it from other inquiries: "the present inquiry does not aim at theoretical knowledge like the others (for we are inquiring not in order to know what virtue is, but in order to become good, since otherwise our inquiry would have been of no use)…".[17] One key component then, is this preparatory or educational component. This has received some attention in the course of philosophy's history, with Plato's *Republic* being most notably being a tract on justice, but also dealing heavily with education and moral preparation. Plato thought that one needed decades of both non-moral and moral education to be a peak moral actor, and though we might disagree with the particulars of his curriculum, there is merit in his motivation for designing one.

Aristotle was similar in this respect to his teacher, and it is to his style of ethics that we finally turn. I say style and not his exact ethical theory for a reason, as will be illuminated forthwith. I do not believe one has to be committed to a strictly Aristotelian ethical theory to make sense of the hero, and more broadly ethics as a whole, but his theory has features that I believe are indispensable for any ethical theory, even that of the utilitarian or Kantian. This distinction can be described in the following way. Utilitarianism and Kantian are examples of what I will call, "action-centered ethical theories". An action-centered ethical theory takes as its principle charge the task of delineating correct and incorrect action. For the utilitarian, agents are

[17] Ibid. Book II. 2.

expected to choose and undertake actions that promote the greatest utility. For the Kantian, agents must act only on maxims that they could at the same time will to be universal law (or something similar to the other formulations of the categorical imperative).

Though agents typically must undertake these correct actions, that is not strictly necessary. With something so action focused as utilitarianism, there is seemingly no requirement for a person to be involved at all, a disquieting feature for an ethical theory. Along these lines, Bernard Williams critiques, "…for utilitarianism, agency comes in only secondarily: our basic ethical relation to the world, as agents, is that of being the cause of desirable or undesirable states of affairs…It is a question of what causal levers are at that moment within reach."[18] Aristotle's ethical theory is instead an, "agent-centered" ethical theory and does not suffer from this objection. Aristotle's focus as the earlier quote from the *Ethics* implies, is not only to know what goodness is, but to prepare an agent to perform it. Though we will spend our time looking at some aspects of Aristotle's ethics in particular, I believe one could still profit from studying other philosophers with similar ethical paradigms. For instance, Confucius and his focus on the *junzi*.

One usually talks about Aristotle's ethical theory in terms of the virtues one needs to cultivate in order to become a successful moral agent. I think that, broadly speaking, there are two principle kinds of success one can have when trying to be a moral agent. The first is what is predominantly argued about in contemporary moral philosophy: understanding what constitutes "right' action, and when to perform said right action. This is a crucial role for ethics and has always been so, virtually since the dawn of philosophy. In its most basic form, this task is concerned with separating correct from incorrect action, and perhaps equally important, giving a

[18] Williams, Bernard. *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. 1985.

sort of rational justification for why an action is one category or the other. For instance, in Plato's *Euthyphro* we see a dialogue between Socrates and the titular Euthyphro concerning Euthyphro's bringing charges against his own father for the negligent death of a slave. I believe most would intuitively agree that Euthyphro acted correctly but his rationale for his action was found lacking by Socrates, as their discussion progresses further in trying to formulate a definition of piety. This lack of explanation is rightfully called into question by Socrates, but the act itself is not.

The second type of moral success is, I believe, neglected by most contemporary ethical theories and ethicists: readying one's self to perform the action that one thinks (or knows) is right. This is a less well trodden road but has significant implications for how ethics and the real world meet and is thus worth pursuing, though a full examination of the idea of a modern moral education is beyond the scope of this project.

With that said, as I alluded to in the previous section, the hero can serve a function in both types of moral success. The hero's role in the first type of moral success, that of distinguishing correct from incorrect action, is an interesting avenue of inquiry, though not I will extensively investigate it here.[19] The hero's role in that second type of moral success is of more interest here, and in ways both implicit and explicit I will spend the rest of this project looking at that intersection. For the rest of this section however, I will spend some time examining the philosophical conception of a hero, using Aristotle's virtue ethics as a foundation.

[19] This approach is typically known as "paradigmatic virtue ethics" and has a certain amount of appeal. Again, for the sake of limiting the discussion, I will not be entering into it here. Suffice to say that a very natural way of thinking about actions is to imagine an exemplary figure (hero) and further to think of how they would handle a given situation. E.g. what would Superman or Confucius or Jesus do in this scenario?

IV

Now the time has finally come to paint a philosophical picture of the hero. As we are in the realm of virtue ethics, we will wish to spend some time identifying virtues associated with the hero, either exclusively or embodied most by figures many would describe as heroic. Painting is indeed the favored metaphor here; just as paintings can vary greatly in style despite depicting the same object, our picture of the hero will not be the only one possible of a morally perfect agent. It would be a failure otherwise. Humans being as varied as they are, two perfect moral agents will certainly not be the same. The difficulty utilitarianism and Kantianism had in accommodating such differences was a notable strike against them.

Let us start with what Aristotle called the *μεγᾰλόψῡχος,* "greatness of soul", which I will render at various times as megalopsychos to refer to the virtue, or a person who has the virtue, or magnanimity and magnanimous person, and the virtue is also sometimes translated simply as "pride". Of this type of person Aristotle says: "Now the man is thought to be proud who thinks himself worthy of great things, being worthy of them;" and, "…the proud man, since he deserves most, must be good in the highest degree; for the better man always deserves more, and the best man most. Therefore the truly proud man must be good. And greatness in every virtue would seem to be characteristic of a proud man. "[20] For these reasons, Aristotle describes magnanimity as, "a sort of crown of the virtues; for it makes them greater, and it is not found without them. Therefore it is hard to be truly proud; for it is impossible without nobility and goodness of character."[21] This already seems a much more coherent conception of a peak moral agent. The name itself (great-souled person) evokes a paragon of humanity, who certainly has many of the traits that are popularly held to be good (courageous, intelligent, just, temperate, etc.) and

[20] Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*. Translated by W.D. Ross. Book IV. 3.
[21] Ibid.

Aristotle's further elaboration that this person is not merely the sum of the virtues they possess; the megalopsychos is a gestalt, whereas the Loving and Rational Saints we examined before were agents that were simply a collection of actions.

I believe the best use of Aristotle's megalopsychos is as a template, to be filled in and expanded upon, rather than being taken as the last word on what a hero could look like, philosophically speaking. Robert Faulkner has done work in this vein, in his paean to greatness, *The Case for Greatness: Honorable Ambition and Its Critics*. Faulkner describes the magnanimous George Washington in this way: "Greatness, resolve, a wish for the public's esteem, but governed by duty, by public duty in particular, and by a height of soul that would not stoop." and of the magnanimous person in general: "Such a man is great because he claims great honors and offices and he deserves them. He is good, for his is a lofty ambition to benefit others on a grand scale."[22] This mixture of greatness and goodness is an interesting facet of Aristotle's study of exceptional persons. Following his distinction of the two types of virtues, we also see that within a person who can be described as magnanimous there arises a tension between the desire to be great and the desire to be good. For an ethic to be reflective of the real world, it must have room for these complexities.

Alongside this tension, Aristotle's megalopsychos has often been accused of being vain, such is the overriding concern with ambition, and accruing honors. This criticism is often paired with a more Christian inspired list of virtues, as David Horner points out: "To those whose ethical perspectives are shaped by the Christian values of human equality, humility, and gratitude

[22] Faulkner, Robert. *The Case for Greatness: Honorable Ambition and Its Critics.* Yale University Press, 2008.

Aristotle's paradigmatic character often seems closer to the nadir than the pinnacle of virtue."[23] This accusation is interesting, as Aristotle himself explicitly identifies vanity as a vice: "On the other hand, he who thinks himself worthy of great things, being unworthy of them, is vain;" and, "Vain people, on the other hand, are fools and ignorant of themselves,"[24]. Aristotle also labels humbleness as a vice, as this is the opposite problem of vanity, not knowing one's true worthiness. Thus, magnanimity is the golden mean, both understanding one is worthy of honors, and actually being worthy of them. Horner resolves this criticism deftly, and since I am only borrowing Aristotle's megalopsychos as a base on which to build off of, I will look at another feature of the great-souled person that is often found distasteful: an implicit denial of equality.

Returning to Faulkner's treatment, he is particularly concerned with Aristotle's distinctively political component of the megalopsychos. The great-souled person is indeed convinced they are deserving of more than other citizens, but Faulkner argues that individuals like Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and Winston Churchill were superior in several respects to the common citizen, including their ability to ascertain what is just, and from this:

> "If one grants their superiority in justice, one respects superior human beings as well as universal human being. But if a person were superior in this way, he would be dishonest and false not to claim what he deserves. It would be hypocritical no to claim his due. It would be worse, if Aristotle is right. To be self-effacing is bad for human excellence, *especially if one has superior powers*."[25]

Faulkner further defends that the magnanimous person is in no way anathema to contemporary democracies, despite the apparent denial of equality by acknowledging such a person as superior:

---

[23] Horner, David A. "What it Takes to be Great: Aristotle and Aquinas on Magnanimity". *Faith and* Philosophy. Vol. 15, No. 4, October 1998. Horner's is a thorough and excellent examination on this topic in particular, so I will not address the criticism in nearly so detailed a fashion.
[24] Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*. Translated by W.D. Ross. Book IV. 3.
[25] Faulkner, Robert. *The Case for Greatness: Honorable Ambition and Its Critics.* Yale University Press, 2008.

"For the great-souled man claims as tasks what no one else can do or do as well, and this service is at least as necessary in democracies as in other political orders. The doctrine of equal dignity may be easily professed in settled democracies. It is impossible to live by. It is never lived by. It should not be lived by."[26]

There is much more that could be said about the magnanimous person, but I wish to continue and look at some additional virtues that heroes often seem to have.

From Aristotle let us turn to Thomas Carlyle. Carlyle is famous for his historical writings (particularly on the French Revolution) but he also had a series of lectures entitled *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*. Carlyle's style is much more literary than what is palatable to contemporary philosophy, but nonetheless I believe Carlyle to have been a shrewd judge of just the sort of person we are interested in examining. So, I will end this section by picking out a few themes Carlyle identified that are often associated with the hero.

By way of introduction, Carlyle's main thesis appears to be that history is nothing more than the amalgamated story of each successive hero:

> "For, as I take it, Universal History, the history of what man has accomplished in this world, is at bottom the History of the Great Men who have worked here…Thoughts that dwelt in the Great Men sent into the world: the soul of the whole world's history, it may justly be considered, were the history of these."[27].

I am not here interested in whether or not Carlyle is correct in his consideration, as that is a question best left to the historian. However, his ardor towards heroes (describing the study of them as "hero-worship") yet again shows that the idea captures the mind easily, and is reluctant to let it go.

One observation on his part that I think is apt is what seems to be a particular strength of the hero: a sort of generalizability or adaptability. This can be seen easily from the way Carlyle categorizes his lectures on the subject. Carlyle describes heroes as literal gods, prophets, poets, priests, scholars, and kings. This is diverse range of occupations for the hero throughout history,

[26] Ibid.
[27] Carlyle, Thomas. *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*.

and though Carlyle thinks that some of these are relics of the past (such as the hero as divinity: for example, Odin, whom Carlyle believes to have originally been a mere man who first devised a system of writing and whose subsequent legend propelled Odin into the Norse pantheon), Carlyle believes that anyone who can qualify as heroic could be any profession they wished depending on their circumstances:

> "…the Hero can be Poet, Prophet, King, Priest or what you will, according to the kind of world he finds himself born into. I confess, I have no notion of a truly great man that could not be *all* sorts of men…I fancy there is in him the Politician, the Thinker, Legislator, Philosopher; -in one or the other degree, he could have been, he is all these."[28]

I think that this is an important trait of the hero as well, a person who can adapt to circumstances more easily than most, something *Homo sapiens* as a species is already remarkable for. We shall see in the next section why this is critical, along with Carlyle's wide taxonomy of heroic professions. Heroes can and do come from any time and place, so reconciling that with an ethical theory is a worthwhile endeavor. This trait is also why I began this section with the quotation about Thomas More being a man for all seasons which calls to mind a person who is versatile and adaptable, fitting an important criterion of the hero.

One last virtue that Carlyle often ascribes to the hero is worth noting. Carlyle spends some time describing the prophet Mohammed, and he begins by rebuking those who accuse Mohammed of being purposely false with both his followers and others outside of the faith. Carlyle explains further:

> "But of a Great Man especially, of him I will venture to assert that it is incredible he should have been other than true. It seems to me the primary foundation of him, and of all that can lie in him, this. No Mirabeau, Napoleon, Burns, Cromwell, no man adequate to do anything but is first of all in right earnest about it; what I call a sincere man. I should say *sincerity*, a deep, great, genuine sincerity, is the first characteristic of all men in any way heroic."[29]

[28] Ibid.
[29] Ibid.

What I believe Carlyle means by sincerity is what also might be termed *authenticity* which often comes up in phenomenological and existential writings, particularly Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time*. The sincerity is an understanding both of one's self (harkening back to Aristotle's megalopsychos understanding their own worthiness), the world (both the "natural" world and human society), and the relation between the two.

This sincerity has a great amount of appeal. If we think of one of the great heroes of the philosophical tradition: Socrates, we see that a large part of his character is the sincerity with which he interacts with his fellow Athenians. Socrates understands the world in a way that is different than others (causing strife when he confronts his various interlocutors), and how his views conflict with the larger Athenian society as whole. Socrates, too, (if we take the *Apology* to be in anyway representative of actual historical events) is sincere until the very end of his days, showing an unwillingness to compromise between what he believes is right and what would be expedient for his longevity. It is little wonder then, that such sincerity would inspire many people long after his martyrdom, from various philosophical traditions like the Stoics, all the way to Jacques-Louis David's famous painting *The Death of Socrates*, immortalizing the philosopher's decisive moment where he chooses self-destruction over prolonging his existence.

That decisive moment is one of countless many such that they inspire those who come after, lingering in the mind and catalyzing moments which could be called heroic. Earlier, I said that there is a type of moral success that assists one in carrying out an action that one's theory has deemed correct and so preparing for that action is key for an ethical theory. Now I would like to turn to another component in analyzing that success. Moral education or preparation is crucial, but the question then is *what* exactly it is critical for? Lives like Socrates, Mohammed, the other heroes of Carlyle, the lives of people like Washington, Lincoln, and Churchill all have been the

source of inspiration. What is more, even for those relatively acquainted with people such as these, I would not be surprised if they were able to identify moments similar to those of Socrates during his final hours, moments where there are both significant personal and ethical stakes at hazard.

The next section aims to examine the nature of these moments, moments where I believe heroes are created. These moments appear to me to be the point of the moral preparation I have argued for, the purpose of cultivating the virtues we have seen. This is the type of ethical moment that deserves our attention now, and so it is to them that we shall now examine, the type of moment that I call the *discrimen*.

Discrimen

The last section spent some time examining what a philosophical conception of a hero could be like under a selection of mainstream ethical theories, such as utilitarianism and Kantianism. Heroes, intuitively, seem to be peak moral agents, and I argued that to better understand those types of people, a virtue ethical framework is needed, and looked at a few virtues that the hero may have in abundance. What is, in my view, more critical to the hero, what is a better way still of viewing this type of person, is the topic of this section. A typical method understanding something is to trace it all the way back to its genesis and see where it is born. Ethics is inherently a practical discipline, and so I believe that to understand a particular type of ethical agent, such as the hero, we must see the moment they are made. Various philosophers have discussed the nature of a virtue at length, but at least in the case of the hero, it seems important that the virtues are put to the test. Cultivating a virtue may be valuable in own right, but it hardly seems possible for a hero to exist without coming into contact with the type of situation we shall examine in this section. I would like to introduce both the concept and an instantiation of said concept at the same time. I now quote from Tom Holland's *Rubicon*, who sets the stage by describing the thoughts and feelings of the 13th legion of Rome, pertaining to their captain:

> "Few could see their general in the darkness, but to his staff officers, gathered around him, he appeared in a torment of irresolution. Rather than gesture his men onward, Gaius Julius Caesar instead gazed into the turbid waters of the Rubicon, and said nothing. And his mind moved upon silence.
>
> The Romans had a word for such a moment. "*Discrimen,*" they called it—an instant of perilous and excruciating tension, when the achievements of an entire lifetime might hang in the balance. The career of Caesar, like that of any Roman who aspired to greatness, had been a succession of such crisis points. Time and again he had hazarded

> his future—and time and again he had emerged triumphant. This, to the Romans, was the very mark of a man."[30]

What Caesar eventually decided to do is well known to us, if not to his men at that moment. This critical point in Caesar's life will showcase the type of moment I think casts the hero in starkest relief: the discrimen. A discrimen is a crisis or turning point in one's life, where fortunes are made or lost. I shall be looking at the hero through the discrimen which I think exhibits their virtues most obviously, but another way of looking it is the following: what makes a hero is their ability (or virtue) to navigate situations that could be described as discrima. Those who can handle such situation are heroes, those who fail to do so, fail to be heroes. For now, a feature of the discrimen I wish to highlight is one it shares in common with the hero: the propensity to capture the imaginations of people.

This is something true of Caesar's discrimen certainly, so well in fact do we remember this moment that two thousand years from it we still use it as an idiom. "Crossing the Rubicon" refers to a moment of critical importance where one makes a decision that cannot be unmade, and thus the only way left is forward. Caesar himself when he crossed the literal Rubicon said, "The die is cast!", evoking the image of the gambler, for whom, when the bet has been placed and one's fortunes are at the whims of fate, the only thing to do is wait for the die to land. The discrimen is mostly beyond one's control. Being able to deal with that knowledge, and yet persist in making the bet the discrimen demands, is, in my view, the essence of heroism. This feature synergizes well with viewing ethics through virtues, as cultivating virtues in the lead up to whatever discrima one might face allows one to handle them with skill. Of course, this might also be useful in such cases where discrima go awry, as one might need to be equanimous in order to deal with less than favorable outcomes. Returning to the Rubicon, this moment is so

[30] Holland, Tom. *Rubicon: The Last Years of the Roman Republic*. Anchor Books, 2005.

powerful that beyond the idiom, its greatness trickles down and its name is even bestowed upon a car. I think the hold this moment has over people is no coincidence, and the Romans were right to prize this ability to decisively act when stakes are at their highest.

I choose Caesar as a figure to examine, and this moment in particular, for many reasons. The first is simply that it is one that personally fascinates me, so I am acutely familiar with it, making it easier to showcase the phenomenon. The second I have already outlined, which is that this moment has evidently captured the imagination of many more people than just myself. I will describe it in more detail further on, but this moment serves as an enduring testament to just the sort of situation I think the discrimen is. Lastly, it dovetails nicely with what Holland points out was a facet of Roman culture. By no means is the concept of the discrimen something the ancient Romans hold exclusive dominion over, but I believe Holland is correct in pointing out that the Romans of Caesar's time valued the ability to navigate these types of situations more highly than many other cultures and societies.

I could have chosen a few other words to encapsulate the concept here, but discrimen I prefer for mostly personal reasons. Another I considered using was the Greek ἀγών, *agon*, meaning a contest or struggle. This is the word that gets used in protagonist, antagonist, agony, and so on, which I think also fits nicely with the hero and would work suitably in other contexts. Regardless, the next subject I wish to discuss is what I think the term discrimen can bring to philosophical discourse as a way of conceptualizing both the hero, and ethical situations in general.

Let us further flesh out what a discrimen is. Like Caesar's crossing of the Rubicon, a discrimen is a pivotal moment upon which much hangs in the balance, some of which we might describe as material, like one's possessions, societal status, and well-being, and some being

immaterial, things of a nature of what I would call ethical considerations. Exactly what the scale has to be in order to count as a discrimen is I think best left up to interpretation. Crossing the Rubicon obviously must count but having to decide whether to have pancakes or an omelette for breakfast probably does not, without some incredibly extenuating circumstances. Still, I think the term encompasses a wide range of ethical situations. For the moment I would like to spend some time focusing on the benefits that viewing ethics through the lens of the discrimen brings.

Chiefly, examining ethics through the discrimen allows us to see the truly granular nature of ethics as practice. Just as a stone may look smooth to the naked eye but rough under the microscope, ethics is often described in too simplistic of terms. To show what I mean by this we can think of how ethics is often taught in introductory philosophy and ethics courses. Students are often presented with an overview of mainstream ethical theories (such as those we have examined, utilitarianism, Kantianism, virtue ethics, among others) and then presented with a simple moral dilemma, like the now famous trolley problem, or a few other old reliable situations meant to get one's ethical intuitions pumping.

In some respects, these thought experiments of ethics seem like kin to the discrimen. Both are meant to evoke a sense of the ethical as tangible and more easily understood than the esoteric and abstract language that philosophers often thrive in, and I would admit the true difference between them is a matter of degree and not kind. A discrimen, by its nature, is a situation that is incredibly fleshed out in terms of ethical minutia and context, either owing to the fact that they are real moments plucked straight from the pages of history and our lives, or possibly coming from purely fictitious sources. This complexity is necessary, as the real world itself is never so simple as to rigidly allow only two or three options as we are often limited to in our ethical case studies. A reason for this limitation would perhaps be an attempt to make ethics

easier for nascent philosophy students. They can come to grips with the problems in a graduated environment rather than the inevitable messiness that real world ethics brings, but I argue that this well-intentioned concession removes us from real ethics more than it helps us achieve it.

Rather than expanding our ethical lexicon and understanding, this focus on contrived and simplistic examples narrows it, causing many philosophers throughout the years, increasingly so in the 20th century, to have tunnel vision about what ethics is about, not to mention the reaction it sometimes provokes in philosophy students, often they begin to mistrust ethics due to what is perceived as its stale and unhelpful nature, and even see it as a game about what various words like right and wrong mean, without actually being of much practical use, if any. By practical use I mean actually working to create a more ethical world, which by itself is ambiguous but I hope the reader takes my point. Let me illustrate this by contrasting a moment like Caesar's with Phillipa Foot's classic trolley problem.

First introduced in a 1967 article titled "The Problem of Abortion and the Doctrine of Double Effect", the trolley problem was a means of contrasting the idea behind what Foot called direct and oblique intentions.[31] Hardly the first of its kind, the trolley problem was invented simply to "pump" intuitions about the dilemma presented by the scenario: is it morally acceptable to kill one person rather than allowing the trolley to stay its course and kill five? Since its inception, the trolley problem has taken on a life of its own, with countless tweaks and formulations mean to get at this or that intuition and make some larger point about ethics. The issue I have is not so much with the problem itself but rather the way problems of this type shepherd us into thinking about morality, whether intentionally or not.

[31] Foot, Philippa. "The Problem of Abortion and the Doctrine of Double Effect." *Oxford Review*, 1967.

The first matter is the contrived nature of these moral problems. Which is not to say they do not actually occur in the world, but merely the way the problem is set up occludes what I consider to be a crucial part of ethical thinking. No person is, *ex nihilo,* created such that they are spontaneously faced with an ethical dilemma with heavily restricted options. Furthermore, no ethical situation is agent agnostic; the types of situations we find ourselves in have everything to do with the things that we have done before. Throughout one's life we may indeed have moral dilemmas like the trolley problem forced upon us, especially if one has a habit of lingering around railroads, but they are often as not products of our pasts previous currents and eddies of previous moral choice guiding us towards the next. Rarely too are we faced with a couple or even a few options. In such cases where one's options are limited, it is obvious that many minor tweaks about how exactly one goes about one's choice or what type of motivation one has is of ethical importance whether towards the outcome of the choice or potentially in one's thoughts and feelings towards it. The desire to truncate this continuous nature of moral activity is understandable, with the very real time and space constraints professional philosophers face either in journals or in the classroom, but this should not be carried over as being an actual facet of ethics.

The second issue I have with these types of thought experiments is their raison d'être. Namely, that they are used by philosophers to evoke certain reactions or thoughts on the part of the reader to reach some conclusion on the nature of morality. Again, this is fine in principle, a particular strength of human beings is the ability to imagine scenarios that are fiction but bear enough semblance to reality so that they can be useful in assisting with preparing for possible events.

As a parallel, I have no problem with a family discussing an imagined event where a fire breaks out in their home, and how each member of the family may have a role to play in such an event, as contrived and artificial as it may be. This type of roleplay is used in a variety of other situations, often with the goal to prepare for an emergency, such as the aforementioned fire drill, drills for extreme weather, active shooter drills, and so on. This type of preparation is beneficial, but I do not think it is the same thing as what is happening with thought experiments like the trolley problem.

As I mentioned when I introduced the problem, Foot is trying to examine the difference between intentionally bringing about an event and allowing an event to happen. This serves Foot's purpose by elucidating a further difference between looking at ethical dilemmas through the doctrine of double effect and without it. Other famous examples of philosophical thought experiments follow this pattern. Judith Jarvis Thomson's piece, "A Defense of Abortion", uses a few imagined scenarios, perhaps the most famous one is where one wakes up to find one's self tied to a renowned violinist whose medical needs require one to be connected to the violinist for nine months before each can once again be separated, the violinist then being able to live independently.[32] This is meant to be analogous to carrying a pregnancy to term, and in Thomson's view to show that that a woman's right to choose what happens with her body trumps another's right to life. Bernard Williams uses the case of an out of work chemistry PhD and an unfortunately waylaid botanist to illustrate what Williams finds to be an odd byproduct of utilitarianism, namely that adopting it leads one to also endorse a doctrine of negative responsibility.[33]

[32] Thomson, Judith Jarvis. "A Defense of Abortion." *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 1971.
[33] Williams, Bernard. "A Critique of Utilitarianism".

All of these thought experiments are “ethics”, in the sense that we are dealing with an event where the stakes are ethical, in the broadest sense where we want to say some choices are correct and some choices are incorrect, for whatever reasoning. Yet it is not “ethics” in the necessarily messy and convoluted way that most of us deal with the discipline in our lives.

Contrast that genesis with that of the family and their fire safety drills. What is the purpose of this exercise? The answer seems clear: the family wishes to prepare for an event of that type, so that they may navigate it as safely as possible. There are many courses of action in which one can mishandle a situation involving a fire, such as inhaling so much smoke so that one grows too weak to escape the fire, or not being cautious enough when opening doors, and so on. It is because of these many ways of improperly navigating a fire that one finds benefit from preparing this way, by imagining and even acting out a scenario where a fire has broken out. The benefits can range from gaining information about how to properly handle the situation to psychologically preparing oneself so that one is better able to handle the situation when it occurs.

This too has the hint of the ethical, in the broad way that I have outlined it above. Jumping out a third story window instead of using the fire escape is a decidedly incorrect way of handling a fire. Checking the heat of a door with the back of one’s hand rather than the more sensitive front is a correct method. This is not so, or at least, not as obviously so with these classic thought experiments in ethics. People have argued for either horn of the trolley problem dilemma, and one could likely even do so within a single normative ethical theory. What is more is that imagining these scenarios offers little in the way of preparing one to face similar situations, especially as the thought experiments becomes increasingly more abstract and divorced from ethical dilemmas one is likely to face. Even if everyone universally agreed that one should pull the lever so that the trolley kills fewer people, that does not mean that everyone

in acknowledging that fact would have the wherewithal to follow through on the action if they happened to actually face the problem in their lives.

Again, I want to be explicit here that I have no problem with using imagined scenarios like the trolley problem to try and get at some intuition concerning ethics. It is certainly a tool in the philosopher's toolbox, but most tools have limited use and these thought experiments are no exception. When discussing what ethics is in totality (i.e. inseparable from our lives as I argued it was in the previous section), and what types of events it is concerned with, I believe the discrimen proves more useful. Let me try and illustrate what I mean by returning to Caesar's famous crossing.

Ever since that incident, many have written about it in interest of what place it should take in the wider theater of history, its importance as a turning point in both the history of Rome and the western world in general, as well as either condemning the act or praising it, along with the man behind it. I will try to briefly sketch out this moment, without getting lost in the annals of history and the cultural aspects of Rome that are inextricably tied up with Caesar's actions, so that we might try and place ourselves in Caesar's position. The fact that I am no historian should be understood as well, though I would mention the caveat that these types of moments often influence people despite their less than historically accurate understanding of events which makes them still suitable for analysis.

The first thing to acknowledge here is the high stakes, which I think are characteristic of any discrimen. Though no one can ever truly know how wide the ramifications of most of our choices will be, Caesar's decision had obvious weight. Were Caesar too cavalier in his decision making, this would be an obvious mark against him, as we would criticize him for having too much levity with dealing with serious matters like the lives of his men, the sanctity of Roman

laws and customs, and so on. When seated at the gambling table, to take no notice of what the stakes are is an inexcusable blunder.

The second thing to note, as this was an actual historical event, is that the choices Caesar could have made are infinite, not arbitrarily limited to a handful or fewer. Even though I will limit the discussion to a small number of options because of practical constraints, we should acknowledge that various tweaks in the implementation or mindset of the choice would be ethically important. If Caesar had made the same choice by literally rolling a die, for instance, that would be quite different than if he had an expressly defined and lengthy rationale.

Nonetheless, when analyzing this discrimen, we can think of two major decisions Caesar could have made. One, the choice he did make, was to cross the river. Now, the physical Rubicon's importance was mostly artificial, in that it marked the boundary between Caesar's governorship in Cisalpine Gaul, and Italia proper, where Caesar's authority to command an army, or imperium, ceased. To undertake this crossing, Caesar would be going against the Roman Senate's wishes, as well as breaking both law and tradition. Though very little is certain when we make ethical choices, it was clear that Caesar's crossing would also provoke a violent response, as his adversaries would react with force at his crossing, which indeed happened and was a bloody civil war between Romans. Many have argued that Caesar's act itself was the first punch thrown, as it were, such was the importance placed on observing these boundaries.

Caesar could have instead not crossed the Rubicon and disbanded his army in accordance to the Senate's demand. If he did so and returned to Rome, he likely would have faced severe consequences from his political rivals, perhaps banishment at best, and execution at worst. This may have averted a civil war of Caesar's own making, but the Republic had been in peril since before Caesar, so it is not certain this would have saved the Republic from its slide into the

Empire. Afterall, not forty years prior to Caesar's crossing the Republic had seen copious bloodshed from the bitter feud between Gaius Marius and Sulla. The ills that plagued the Republic were not solely of Caesar's creation, but that is not to say any of the events that followed his crossing were inevitable either.

I do not bring up Caesar's Rubicon to either praise his choice or condemn it, only to show what a thorny and bramble filled path he found himself in, and I find it hard to imagine most normative ethical theories could have something definitive and uncontroversial to say about his choices. How can someone possibly calculate the utility of a far-ranging decision such as the one Caesar faced? If he were to act from duty, which of the many duties should he hold most sacred? His duty as a governor, as a general, as Roman citizen, his duty to himself? It is not surprising then, that according to Plutarch, Caesar himself was appropriately sober and thoughtful about his choice:

> "Then, halting in his course, he communed with himself a long time in silence as his resolution wavered back and forth, and his purpose then suffered change after change. For a long time, too, he discussed his perplexities with his friends who were present… estimating the great evils for all mankind which would follow their passage of the river, and the wide fame of it which they would leave to posterity. But finally, with a sort of passion, as if abandoning calculation and casting himself upon the future, and uttering the phrase with which men usually prelude their plunge into desperate and daring fortunes, "Let the die be cast," he hastened to cross the river;"[34]

What I find more interesting here (and this applies to the discrimen broadly construed as well) is that Caesar's choice was not made in isolation. I pointed out the artificial constraints of most ethical dilemmas to contrast it with the discrimen's wide open nature. Though one can (and I did for this example) try and truncate a moment in a person's life in order to examine its ethical stakes, this too, is terribly artificial. As Holland pointed out in the text above, this was not the first discrimen Caesar faced. Some are nearly as famous as his Rubicon, such as his flippancy in

[34] Plutarch. *Lives*. Translated by Bernadotte Perrin. Loeb Classics Library.

the face of his pirate-captors on the Mediterranean Sea, standing up to the dictator Sulla as a youth, not to mention his many military exploits in Gaul and Britain. No doubt some of these episodes were made larger in retrospect, to further enlarge a man whose legacy would last millennia after his death. But let us not make too much of such embellishment, the discrima Caesar faced, if not wholly real, are authentic enough that they both captured the imagination of many people not only in his own time but up through ours as well.

What we can learn from Caesar's discrimen is what some philosophers have described as a certain type of moral sensitivity.[35] By examining situations of this type, we invariably get caught up in thinking about ethics. Was what Caesar did right or wrong? What type of person does one have to be to make the choice that he did? What parts of Caesar do we wish to emulate and what parts of Caesar do we wish to prevent from taking hold in ourselves? Very rarely do we see heroes who are perfect and morally pristine, but that does not mean such moral perfection is unattainable, unlike that of the saints we saw last chapter. What it does entail, however, is a critical inspection of the types of people we look to as heroes. I have made no attempt to create an exhaustive definition of the hero, one that would easily separate pretenders from the authentic.

Even with that being the case, I do wish to at least provide (by way of ideas that I do not claim to be of my own invention) some tools to begin to discuss the hero in more sophisticated language. Hence last section's discussion of some virtues I find the hero often seems to possess, and this section's focus on moments that seem to showcase the hero. One can and should have vigorous debate about whether a person has handled a discrimen with appropriate skill or

[35] Margaret Little discusses a similar issue in her "Seeing and Caring: The Role of Affect in Feminist Moral Epistemology" where she argues a certain sensitivity for emotions and desires is necessary if one is to become "morally wise". I agree, and think this capacity is often what differentiates a hero from a non-hero. One would find it impossible to navigate a discrimen were one blind to the minutiae that such a situation entails, and like Little argues for, I think this requires more than just cold reason.

mindset, but that itself is a valuable ethical educational experience. It is not free from subjective opinion, but opinion is still bound by reasoning and should be defended as such.

Julius Caesar's crossing of the Rubicon is one historically potent example of the discrimen, but hopefully now that I have elaborated on what features are found in the discrimen, the reader could call many more instances to mind. Something like Socrates's Apology fits the description and as I have mentioned previously, and also has had a similar effect on the minds of future generations. Napoleon Bonaparte's life was similarly full of them, but to name a few he had moments like the Coup of 18 Brumaire, the Battle of Austerlitz, and, with less favorable results for Bonaparte, the Battle of Waterloo. As I mentioned earlier, the outcome of the discrimen is never entirely in one's control, so a loss to finish out one's career is not necessarily a mark against a heroic figure. There is still value in hazarding all and winning none, if one has made a sufficient effort. In life, we are sometimes greeted with a hand of cards that is not capable of winning like we may have imaged when they were being dealt.

That aspect of the discrimen is again is why a robust understanding of virtues is important, as it provides another metric by which we can judge a hero's (or our own) efforts. These discrima are just a few that come to my mind and are thus personal but are not meant to be an exhaustive list. Coming up with a few examples of what one takes to be important discrima whether from history, fictional examples, or from personal experience is again what I think of as a part of continued ethical development.

Obviously, moments like Caesar's are rare, in his day and all the more so in our own. Rarely does one find themselves in the position of precipitating a civil war. Nonetheless, the discrimen works just as well for situations with comparatively lower stakes. The key features we are interested in examining in a discrimen, such as high moral stakes, the moment being a pivotal

one in a person's life, and so on, are all present throughout most people's lives in varying degrees and quantity. In a certain sense, the discrimen is also created in retrospect. Had Caesar died from slipping on a rock shortly after his fateful crossing, the moment itself would be drained of much of its importance. Which is not to say the discrimen is all retrospective. Part of what I find endearing about both virtue ethics and discrima is how they lend themselves to viewing ethics through a lens that emphasizes how the discipline of ethics needs to focus on preparing for ethical action, and the discussions that requires.

Earlier, I remarked that although historical examples of discrimen are particularly apt, this method of analysis is truly nothing more than a slightly altered staple of literary analysis: examining a pivotal moment in a story, typically referred to as the climax, the highest point in the very familiar structure of Gustav Freytag's dramatic pyramid to describe a common narrative structure.

Starting with exposition, then to rising action up until the climax, and the subsequent falling action and, finally, the denouement. Freytag describes the dramatic climax in the following way: "This outburst of deed from the soul of the hero or the influx of portentous impressions into the soul; the first great result of a sublime struggle, or the beginning of a mortal inward conflict,--must appear inseparably connected with what goes before as well as with what follows;"[36] I think this very much sounds like the type of event that the discrimen is, despite Freytag talking about dramatic structure rather than an ethical life. Of course, I have said that separating the real hero from the fictional is nearly impossible. Afterall, Freytag spends a great deal of time analyzing the works of William Shakespeare, who himself found inspiration for his masterworks both from invention and real-life figures, among them our very own Julius Caesar.

[36] Freytag, Gustav. *Technique of the Drama*. Translated by Elias J. MacEwan.

Artificial narrative structure is not how philosophers typically view the lives of real and very unconstrained people, but the structure itself is simple enough to accommodate deviations from it. Freytag's pyramid is not meant to explain every narrative humans will ever produce, but it does show that there is a type of storytelling rhythm that is prevalent throughout many of our most beloved and influential classics. This rhythm then, I think is perfectly apt for talking about real life heroes as well as those from the imagination. A turning point in someone's life does not always involve slaying a dragon, but in retrospect we can often see the steps leading up to our own discrimen, as well as the resolution that comes after we make our choice and cast our die.

What is more, if we think of Freytag's pyramid as somewhat modeling the life of a hero, the rising action clearly corresponds to what I discussed in the previous section: cultivating appropriate virtue. Just as no climax in a story happens in isolation, so too does the discrimen require a great deal of exposition and rising action beforehand, which takes the form of the sort of moral "prep work" that a virtue ethic necessarily entails. With all of that said, I chose the word discrimen rather than climax for a number of reasons, as I remarked upon towards the beginning of the section, but I see little functional difference. Each of the terms and framework it inhabits have something meaningful to say about ethics and ethical practice.

While there is more that could be said about the discrimen, what I hope to have gotten across is a method of analysis concerning heroes that looks at their most embodying actions. Due to the pivotal nature of the discrimen, we can analyze the hero's motives, methods, and virtue with the discrimen at the center. Doing so I believe is a fruitful ethical exercise, allowing us to better catch a glimpse of not only the hero, but the ideal ethical practice that seemed to elude us in the last section concerning traditional philosophical conceptions of ethical agents. Though the

discrimen is by no means new, indeed it is older by far than theories such as utilitarianism and Kantianism, I believe it has been under used for so long that it now feels fresh.

"While I was away from Smallvillle…and the world began to hear about this "Superman" – it didn't matter where I was, what country, what city—I would hear talk from people question WHY there was such a man. People wondered why anyone with those kinds of powers and abilities – if it were true—would use them to help others and not for their own benefit. And I found myself smiling. No one would give it a second thought how Chief Parker came out on such a horrible night to warn us…any more than when a fireman rushes into a burning house, not so much to rescue someone—but to find out if there is anyone who needs rescuing. Every time a nurse bandages a wound. Every time a pastor offers comfort. Every time a parent hugs their child. These are choices each of us makes not only to do good, but to inspire good in others."[37]

Denouement

As with tales of heroism, this project, too, must end. I will again borrow from Freytag's structure to wrap things up, with this section serving as both the falling action and denouement. I would also like to come full circle and return to start of this investigation. Essentially since I have been aware of my surroundings, I was and continue to be enamored with heroic figures. It also seems that I by no means am unique in that, due to the prevalence of heroes throughout many cultures and periods of history. Though the shape, size, and characters of heroes have varied throughout human history (and likely will continue to do so for the rest of it), there is a consistent vein of heroics in the human collective consciousness which I believe nominates the subject for philosophical inquiry and attention. This project has modestly aimed at those tasks, with the hope of refreshing a few ideas or ways of thinking about the hero that could lead to further discussion.

I wish to have shown that though contemporary ethics and heroes often find themselves at odds, this relationship should not be seen as necessarily antagonistic. One of the main reasons I wanted to do this project was the prevalence of heroes in everyday life and, correspondingly,

[37] Loeb, Jeph, et al. Superman for All Seasons. DC Comics, 2018.

what Carlyle called “hero worship”, that is the looking up to and presumably the emulation of heroic figures. There was little of the hero left when we looked at the extremes of utilitarianism and Kantianism, and what was there was unlikely to captivate the mind as even the most simplistic heroes outside of a philosophical context. Critics of conceptualizing the hero in philosophy may argue that this could be due to a defect in our thinking, rather than one in our theory. If it is so hard to formulate a hero in mainstream ethical theories, it is the hero that must go and not the theory.

Though I have not gone this route, one could fruitfully investigate the hero through something like evolutionary psychology. Being the social animals that we are, it seems not too much of a stretch for the human mind to exaggerate and admire others that we find commendable until they reach a heroic status. If we have such a built-in drive for hero worship, it would help spread ideas that promote the survival and reproduction of our species but does not mean that heroes are an extant category worthy of serious philosophical attention. Rather than contest the existence of heroes as a class of human beings, I believe their prevalence at the very least means that philosophy has to say something about them, and if that something is to be a complete denial, the philosopher has an uphill battle due to the popularity of both fictional and real heroes.

Indeed, I think hero worship comes very naturally to many people, but one other aspect I have not touched upon here is the double-edged sword heroes can be. Just as I was influenced positively by the heroes of my childhood, others can be led down a worse track by heroes of more dubious morality and character. If people are predisposed to hero-worship, then I think it is a responsibility of philosophy to have some way of discussing heroes, in order to sort the good from the bad, the true from the false. I think heroes have often been a source of inner strength for many (myself included), but strength by itself is not always ethical.

Take the figure I used to extensively exhibit the discrimen in the last section, Julius Caesar, a man with plenty of moral baggage. Though he was not a unusually cruel or callous person out of step with the moral zeitgeist of Ancient Rome, many might be appalled by my usage of a general whose exploits include the subjugation and genocide of a few different peoples native to Europe in the name of Roman conquest, and who many, in his time and ours, found to be an authoritarian so repugnant that this was cited as a reason for his rightful assassination.

Nonetheless, I do not deny that he is an alluring figure to me, and I think I am hardly alone in that. Philip Freeman, who wrote a biography of Caesar, describes this seemingly paradoxical existence:

> "Julius Caesar was one of the greatest heroes of human history—or one of its most pernicious villains, depending on whom you believe…Modern scholars have been equally divided concerning Caesar's legacy. Some have seen him as a paradigm of the just ruler, but in the wake of twentieth-century dictators and devastating wars, other historians have turned a cold eye to a man who caused the death of so many and established the rule of emperors over elected magistrates."[38]

This, I think, opens another avenue of philosophical investigation. A perennial place to begin an argument in ethics is the fact that people often have conflicting views on morality. Precisely what this indicates is in dispute. Philosophers have either made as much of this ethical relativism to conclude that ethics is purely subjective, to making so little of it that one can merely say that one person may see things correctly whereas those who disagree are wrong. Likewise, the potential here is to view heroes as a parallel to ethics. History is full of figures both heroic and villainous, often depending on whether one is part of the same culture, race, or intellectual creed. Does this mean that heroes are merely subjective, or even non-existent? As the reader may suspect, I do not think it is either of these.

[38] Freeman, Philip. *Julius Caesar*. Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2009.

Many, perhaps most, heroes are indeed of a conflicted nature. If one is predisposed to throw out the entirety of a person's admirable qualities along with the regrettable, then heroes may not be a very fertile field of discussion in ethics. Though with that said, just because some heroes have regrettable aspects to them I do not think implies by any means that this is a necessary part of them. To discriminate between the figures we hold to be ethical exemplars or false idols that should not be emulated, is another place more philosophical work can be done. Virtues are sometimes held by those with significant vices as well, but one must examine whether they are inexorably linked, or that someone may surpass a hero they worshipped.

A key feature of heroes is their ability to inspire and influence others, which often goes unchecked. The solution is something philosophy regularly does: critical reflection and inspection of both these figures and related concepts (e.g. virtues, discrimen) so a healthy discourse can be had about what each figure has to offer, and what traits we wish to aspire to have. Caesar's time has passed, but the lessons he learned from his heroes and the lessons he has passed down to us, are immemorial. Though another feature of heroes that I have not had a chance to fully explore here is why it seems that we have neglected such lessons in the contemporary age.

When I was studying psychology as an undergraduate, I was formally introduced to the work of Abraham Maslow, he of the hierarchy of needs and self-actualizing individuals; the latter of which is of interest to us here. Maslow, within contemporary psychology, is often criticized for his lack of empirical rigor in his theories and at the time I found myself dissuaded from taking him seriously because of the associated stigma. Maslow's psychological theories were not palatable in an age of American psychology dominated by the incredibly empirically focused behaviorism. Yet as I have shifted to philosophical study, I found his work much more

savory. Whilst I certainly do not wish to wade into the mire of psychological methodology, I will say that if we take heroes to be examples of self-actualizing individuals, it should be of no surprise that such specimens are not easy to come by, and certainly not in the quantity one would need for the standards of psychological research today. Thankfully, there is no such requirement foisted upon the philosopher, and so what qualities Maslow identified in his self-actualizing individuals we have in this project referred to with the philosophically traditional term of virtue.

Maslow and contemporary psychologists who are like him (especially those often known as "humanistic" psychologists) are colleagues in the enterprise I have been engaging in this entire time. Other schools of psychology may obscure and even erase the hero (by focusing on psychological dysfunction, rather than focusing on psychological exceptionalism) in a way quite similar to those normative ethical theories we have previous seen to be ill-equipped to analyzing the hero.

With this digression I merely wish to point out a different approach to what is still the study of heroes, and how the dogma of a discipline can lead us astray in thinking about these types of figure. Humanistic psychologists may pursue a similar line of research as Maslow did by looking at these self-actualizing individuals and the types of qualities they possess, while some of us in philosophy instead prefer to investigate the virtues of the hero.

Of course, the entirety of my early exposure to heroes was and still continues to be in mostly non-philosophical contexts. Namely from history, literature, film, comic books, and other cultural artifacts. This could also be the subject of philosophical inquiry, and I believe it would be prudent to do so, considering the reach and impact of heroes that are spawned from popular culture, in comparison to the dissemination of even the most widely read works of philosophy.

One such hero I want to spend our remaining time discussing is surely more well-known to the public than many of the historical figures I have mentioned: Superman.

Originally created in 1938 by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, Superman has become not only an American cultural icon but a world-wide phenomenon. Superman is practically synonymous with superheroes. His trademark red and blue suit, a wide array of superpowers from super strength, speed, X-Ray vision, freeze breath, among others, combined with his rigid sense of justice form a hero that is almost beyond reproach, unlike many we could pull from history. Most will know that classic refrain that Superman stands for truth, justice, and the American way, and all this despite being an illegal alien from the planet Krypton.

Using the philosophical concepts that I have elucidated in this project, Superman certainly seems to qualify as hero. The virtues I have sketched (among many others) are all embodied in Superman, whilst in most every issue he is also faced with a discrimen that typically tests not only his super abilities but those regular capacities that we all can possess. Indeed, this is part of why I (and I would wager many others) appreciate the Man of Steel and other comic book superheroes.

What I mean is that while many children since 1938 have most likely tried to wear a cape and zoom about pretending to fly, the appeal of Superman does not stop there at his suite of superpowers. Certainly, a part of his appeal are his extraordinary abilities. Though Superman's strength differs based on the whims of the writer and the particular incarnation, he almost invariably resembles nothing more than what Thomas Hobbes described as the antithesis to the natural condition of a human being:

> "[Nature] hath made men so equal in the faculties of body and mind as that, though there be found one man sometimes manifestly stronger in body or of quicker mind than another, yet when all is reckoned together the difference between man and man is not so considerable as that one man can thereupon claim to himself any benefit to which another

> may not pretend as well as he. For as to the strength of body, the weakest has strength enough to kill the strongest, either by secret machination or by confederacy with others that are in the same danger with himself."[39]

In other words, Superman *is* the Leviathan in one person that Hobbes thought had to be created from the association of many human beings. Superman, though not invulnerable, is perhaps most alien in his immunity to things that would destroy any native-born Earthling. Bullets pose no threat, nor fire, not even radiation, which is in fact where he draws forth his godly might. The only thing Superman must fear is his famous weakness to Kryptonite (a rare substance unless the writer needs it not to be) and, lest we forget we are dealing with comic books here, magic.

Superman's power is thus immense and rivals or surpasses the often divine or semi-divine heroes of older cultures. One may think this hurts his heroic credentials, as very little can pose a serious challenge to him. Superman is sometimes criticized as being bland and boring within the comic book community for just that reason. His opponents have to be near his level in strength to rival him, but the average person cannot hope to contest Superman, and rather than a superhero like Batman, who has to rely on his wits and not just strength, and with a simple mistake can be taken down by a common thug, the "struggles" of Superman may seem quite tame in comparison.

I, too, originally felt similarly towards Superman, especially in comparison with other comic book heroes like Batman or Spider-Man, whose interesting psychologies and physical limitations presented interesting discrima for them to face, with many stories of them saving the day, but not without sacrifice and scars. This is a common theme throughout many of Batman's most famous storylines, such as the comic *Knightfall,* where Batman's exhaustion from dealing with supervillain after supervillain is exploited by the villain Bane in order to end the Dark Knight once and for all. Batman's indefatigable spirit is one thing, but though he is stronger and

[39] Hobbes, Thomas. *Leviathan*.

smarter than any person of our world, he grows tired just like us. Bane's plot culminates in the very iconic image of him breaking Batman's back after their protracted battle, obviously a tremendous defeat for Batman, and more importantly what he fought for. Batman's almost compulsive need to enact his justice makes him a compelling figure *because* of his physical limitations.

In an equally famous comic, *The Dark Knight Returns*, we see a retired Bruce Wayne once again don his Batman costume to fight crime which once more showcases the fragile balance between Batman's incredibly rigid sense of justice and his all too human physicality. As is the case with many of the ideas that come up in ethical philosophy, such as justice, that sometimes seem so abstract and unobtainable that philosophers like Plato see them as partaking in an entirely different realm of existence rather than the mundane one we inhabit, heroes find themselves at this intersection between physicality and idea, superheroes all the more so because of their exaggerated characters, foils, and situations. As I wrote previously, one of the reasons that I believe virtues are an important lens by which to view ethics is that they require consistent work to hone, as heroism rarely comes from those unprepared, even if that preparation often takes many different forms, such as reading a comic book.

To return to our star attraction of Superman, though it is the case that this contrast of holding fast to an ideal like Batman does and the limits he has a human being make for interesting stories that are relatable because of it, it should be noted that Superman still suffers from challenge despite his enormous power. In fact, he faces challenge brought upon *because* of his strength.

To take one example, in *All Star Superman*, written by Grant Morrison, we see Superman poisoned by taking in too much power from our sun, and so his days are numbered. Morrison

takes a contemplative and retrospective look at the Man of Steel, and we see a glimpse of one of Superman's rare "failures". Returning to his childhood home of Smallville in Kansas after establishing himself as Superman, Clark Kent hears his father go into cardiac arrest from a mile away, demonstrating his supernatural senses. Yet, with all his strength and his many awesome superpowers, he is unable to prevent his father from dying. Superman is like every other person on the planet when it comes to dealing with loss, and the feeling of inadequacy from thinking that there was more that one could do. Superman may be an alien from Krypton, but he partakes in distinctly human struggles all the same, which is, I have argued, what makes a hero. To reiterate, Superman is a hero not merely because of his great strength, but the fact that his powers are always utilized to help other people, from discrima where the fate of the entire world hangs in the balance, to the smallest crisis where a child's balloon is stuck in a tree. The reason people are inspired even by a fictional character like Superman is because he represents a real possibility of heroism that dwells within almost everyone; we may not be able to harness our yellow sun's radiation for power, but we can and do try and do the best we can to help others and deal with life changing situations.

This essence of heroism is what began my path to work on something like this project, and like the discrimen I consider it to be a critical piece of what it means to be a hero, which is blind to whether the hero is a remarkable yet non-supernatural person like Julius Caesar, or someone like Superman. This feature is the inspirational component, and it is why I bookend this project with the epigraphs that I have. I began with the famous quote describing Thomas More, a man for all seasons, who was of enough versatility that he could adapt to what the circumstances demanded, though importantly, without sacrificing his ideals. I began this last section with a quote from *Superman for All Seasons*, a four-issue run written by Jeph Loeb and illustrated by

Tim Sale, concerning Superman's earliest exploits as a superhero, with each issue being told from the perspective of someone close to Superman in successive seasons.

This quote occurs at the climax of the book, when Superman is at his psychological nadir, unsure of whether to continue being a superhero due to setbacks he has faced both personally and in his budding vigilante career. The quote comes from Superman's, or rather Clark Kent's, childhood friend Lana Lang. Lang's quote illustrates this inspirational quality of heroes. This quality, or virtue perhaps, of heroes to inspire others to be better in various ways is a part of their heroic essence. A hero is only such because they are inspiring others or striving to live up the inspiration of their predecessors. This virtue is also reflected on the part of those who are inspired as well, which I have not spent time examining, if only because this entire project would not have come about without it. The ability to be inspired is of equal importance, not only for heroes but of ethics more broadly. It is equally important that people are capable of *being* inspired as there being people to inspire them. It is a reciprocal relationship that has worked to further progress in human society throughout our history.

Like the sun that shines light on what we perceive, heroes often show us what we think is most valuable or worth fighting and struggling for. Perhaps this is a similar enterprise as when Socrates examined the justice of the state before turning to the individual in the *Republic.* Heroes are often described as being larger than life, in part because of their character and deeds and in part because of the exaggerations and embellishments that follow them to enlarge their stories still further. Superheroes are more exaggerated still, but this does not mean that they are completely farcical and without meaning. Heroes of all kinds have been beacons of inspiration and will likely continue to be such for many years to come.

It is in light of this fact that I think philosophy should take appropriate notice of these figures, a duty I think has been unfortunately shirked for a significant portion of the discipline's recent history. If the sun were to disappear, the darkness that would follow would be catastrophic, though its absence would only be known when it was too late. If we were to completely lose a place for heroes as collateral damage from scientific or philosophical "advancement", I think the results would be equally as dim.

References

Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*. Translated by W.D. Ross.

Carlyle, Thomas. *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*.

Cornwell, Bernard. *Excalibur*. Penguin Books, 2011.

Faulkner, Robert. *The Case for Greatness: Honorable Ambition and Its Critics.* Yale University Press, 2008.

Foot, Philippa. "The Problem of Abortion and the Doctrine of Double Effect." *Oxford Review*, 1967.

Freeman, Philip. *Julius Caesar*. Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2009.

Freytag, Gustav. *Technique of the Drama*. Translated by Elias J. MacEwan.

Hobbes, Thomas. *Leviathan*.

Holland, Tom. *Rubicon: The Last Years of the Roman Republic*. Anchor Books, 2005.

Horner, David A. "What it Takes to be Great: Aristotle and Aquinas on Magnanimity". *Faith and* Philosophy. Vol. 15, No. 4, October 1998

Loeb, Jeph, et al. Superman for All Seasons. DC Comics, 2018.

MacIntyre, Alasdair. *After Virtue*. 3rd ed., University of Notre Dame Press, 2007.

Parfit, Derek. "Later Selves and Moral Principles." *Philosophy and Personal Relations*, 1973, pp. 137-169.

Plutarch. *Lives*. Translated by Bernadotte Perrin. Loeb Classics Library.

Thomson, Judith Jarvis. "A Defense of Abortion." *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 1971.

White, Beatrice (ed.), The Vulgaria of John Stonbridge and the Vulgaria of Robert Whittinton, Early English Text Society (London, 1932), p. xxviii.

Williams, Bernard. "A Critique of Utilitarianism".

---. *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. 1985.

---. (1981). "Persons, Character, and Morality." In James Rachels (ed.), *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers 1973–1980*. Cambridge University Press.

Wolf, Susan. "Moral Saints." *The Journal of Philosophy*. 1982.