The Ethics of Courage


Courage, in ethics, is taken to be a virtue. Whether a person is virtuous is taken to be a matter of that person’s character. In this article the actions of a soldier during World War II for which he received the Congressional Medal of Honor are taken as a case in point to answer two questions. First, what kinds of reasoning are used to get from the actions described to the conclusion that they were courageous? Second, what kind of reasoning needs to be used to get to the conclusion that the person who carried them out has the virtue of courage?

1. Defining Courage

In this chapter we will define courage as a virtue associated with actions taken to carry out a goal where the agent is persistent in the pursuit of that goal despite facing extreme fear and danger. As a virtue, the motivating principles that guide such a persistent pursuit are based on a deep commitment to personal and ethical values. Courage can be defined in a narrower way as the capability to overcome fear, but it can also be defined in an ethical way, following the approach of Aristotle, who defined it in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1113b3) as a virtue (*arete*, excellence) pertaining to the actions and character of a rational human being, an agent that uses its practical reasoning power in accord with trying to achieve worthy goals.

On the way it will be defined in this chapter, the virtue of courage has four components: emotional, ethical, altruistic, and cognitive. It has an emotional component because it is about overcoming fear. But that is not all there is to it. It also has an ethical aspect in that it must be carried out in order to try to achieve an ethically worthy goal. Thirdly, such a goal has an altruistic aspect. It is about sacrificing one’s personal interests to help others. Fourth, it has a cognitive component because it is based on goal-directed reasoning. For these reasons, to adequately define courage as a virtue it is necessary to include all four of these components. This article will use some tools from artificial intelligence to provide a structure into which all four components are embedded into an operational definition of courage in order to solve a problem. The problem is how to properly judge actions to be courageous based on factual evidence, but also on certain ethical requirements.

Abstract philosophy of this sort is not much good without significant testing of a theory against real examples. Too often philosophers get locked into thorny controversies arising from battles between conflicting abstract ethical theories that do not stand the test of being useful when applied to real examples. A better approach is case-based reasoning, traditionally called ‘casuistry’ in philosophy and long disparaged since the time of the so-called Enlightenment period (Jonsen and Toulmin, 1988). Law has tools that can also help with this problem. Case-based reasoning has proved to be useful in legal analytics (Ashley, 2017). Law is typically more about blame than praise, but even so, some of its methods, because they are evidence-based, can be applied to cases of virtuous conduct that should be praised. The aim of this chapter will be to see how well the ethical theory about courage put forward stands the test of being able to explain how and why a sequence of actions documented in a particular case can reasonably be judged to be courageous, based on the evidence.
2. An Example

The real-life example presented below is one that will already be familiar to many readers. There was a documentary film about it entitled *The Conscientious Objector*, and later a movie called *Hacksaw Ridge*, as well as a book called *Redemption at Hacksaw Ridge* (Herndon, 2016).

Desmond Doss was raised as a devout Seventh-day Adventist, a religious group that follows the Ten Commandments, and the Sixth Commandment “Thou shalt not kill” was especially important to him. He entered military service in 1942, and underwent infantry training even though he made it clear that he refused to kill an enemy soldier or carry a weapon into combat. During his basic training, the other soldiers in his unit bullied him mercilessly because of his religious convictions, his quiet manner, and his respectful refusal to take weapons training. He stuck to these principles even though his officers ordered him to take weapons training, and argued with him, even pleading and coaxing him to do it (Herndon, 2016, 23). He would go along on marksmanship training, but would not participate (Herndon, 2016, 31). He was continually under pressure and punishment by both the officers and men in his unit to use weapons. Eventually however, he was allowed to serve as a medic.

After serving as a medic in Guam and the Philippines, he was awarded two Bronze Star Medals for aiding wounded soldiers under fire. During the Battle of Okinawa, his company faced a 400 foot high jagged cliff known as the Maeda Escarpment or Hacksaw Ridge. To get up the escarpment and face the Japanese defenders at the top, his company had to maneuver through a network of mines as they faced enemy mortar, machine gun, and artillery fire. The Americans had to climb up the cliff using cargo nets and wooden ladders and then try to move forward while facing the determined Japanese fire. Many American soldiers lay dead or dying on the ridge after the first assault. Many times over several days Doss climbed the cliff and entered the fire zone, treated and retrieved many wounded soldiers, and fastening them with ropes and ladders, hoisted them down the cliff where they could be taken for medical treatment. He was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for these actions on October 12, 1945.

This award always has a citation describing the events explaining the reasons why it was offered to this person for specific actions that can be described and verified by witnesses. There is a Congressional Medal of Honor website where these citations can be found, including the one for Desmond Doss. The central part of this citation is quoted below.

Pfc. Doss refused to seek cover and remained in the fire-swept area with the many stricken, carrying them one by one to the edge of the escarpment and there lowering them on a rope-supported litter down the face of a cliff to friendly hands. On 2 May, he exposed himself to heavy rifle and mortar fire in rescuing a wounded man 200 yards forward of the lines on the same escarpment; and two days later he treated four men who had been cut down while assaulting a strongly defended cave, advancing through a shower of grenades to within eight yards of enemy forces in a cave’s mouth, where he dressed his comrades’ wounds before making four separate trips under fire to evacuate them to safety. On 5 May, he unhesitatingly braved enemy shelling and small arms fire to assist an artillery officer. He applied bandages, moved his patient to a spot that offered protection from small arms fire and, while artillery and mortar shells fell close by, painstakingly administered plasma. Later that day, when an American was severely wounded by fire from a cave, Pfc. Doss crawled to him where he had fallen 25 feet from the enemy position, rendered aid, and carried him 100 yards to safety while continually exposed to enemy fire. On 21 May, in a night attack on high ground near Shuri, he remained in exposed territory while the

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1 [http://www.homeofheroes.com/moh/citations_living/ii_a_doss.html](http://www.homeofheroes.com/moh/citations_living/ii_a_doss.html)
rest of his company took cover, fearlessly risking the chance that he would be mistaken for an infiltrating Japanese and giving aid to the injured until he was himself seriously wounded in the legs by the explosion of a grenade. Rather than call another aid man from cover, he cared for his own injuries and waited five hours before litter bearers reached him and started carrying him to cover. The trio was caught in an enemy tank attack and Pfc. Doss, seeing a more critically wounded man nearby, crawled off the litter; and directed the bearers to give their first attention to the other man.

Notice that the actions described in the Citation are highly specific events that are dated and that can be verified by witnesses, other people who were nearby or who were involved in the events.

3. Virtue, Courage and Character

In 1986 I wrote a book about courage, in which I give an account of the concept of courage as an ethical notion using case-based reasoning. It was case-based in the sense that all the arguments in the book turned on evidence furnished by particular cases in which the actions of some person were described as courageous. Many of such examples or cases where a person was given public recognition for having carried out an action which was deemed to be courageous, were based on evidence. The basis for judging an individual’s actions as courageous or not in a given case, as shown in the examples studied in this book, always has two components over and above the four components outlined in section 1. First, there is a story or narrative, a connected sequence of events that all of us can understand based on common sense reasoning about the way things can be normally expected to go in situations where familiar with. When any of us reads such a story we are affected emotionally, and in the case of a real act of courage, we respond to it positively with strong emotions. Second, there is the pro evidence supporting the story, or in some instances, there can be con evidence arguing that the action wasn’t really courageous at all for some reason. The theory of courage presented in this book was supported by case studies of individual stories of this sort along with the evidence related to the story.

Using these cases, the book was able to draw some philosophical conclusions about courage as a virtue, and raise some interesting questions about further philosophical research on the subject. However, there were definite limits on how far the book could go because of the expressed limitations of its method of case-based reasoning. The basic problem pointed out in the book, especially in the last two chapters, is that courage is not just a property of individual action. It is also a property of a person’s character. In the traditional philosophy since Aristotle, it is taken to be a virtue. According to the entry “Virtue Ethics” in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, a virtue is an excellent trait of character. Hence being a virtue is not exclusively a matter of the individual event of carrying out an action and the evidence pertaining to describing that action in a way or drawing conclusions about it. Whether or not or how a person is virtuous is also a matter of that person’s character. So it was the concept of character that formed the boundary of the investigation of courage in the 1986 book, making it impossible to proceed further without facing the questions of how and on what evidence we make reasonable judgments about an individual’s character.

The problem here was quite a difficult one, central to philosophy, and widely known at the time as the “problem of other minds”. This problem poses the question of how one agent can make reasonable conjectures about what is in another party’s mind, for example by trying to guess what that person’s beliefs are or his or her intentions are in a given case. Drawing a

2 https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ethics-virtue/
conclusion about what another person’s intentions are seems to be a shaky inference from a logical point of view because of our common experience with cases where people are intentionally deceptive about their intentions.

At that time, I did not do any further work on the topic of courage because of this conceptual limit on how far I could go. I took up the other subjects for research. But in 2006 I published a book called *Character Evidence: An Abductive Theory*, which offered a solution to this problem, based on how evidence is brought to evaluate allegations or judgments about a person’s character in legal trials. Character evidence is admissible in trials, even though its use is sharply circumscribed by the Federal Rules of Evidence3, for the reason that evidence can tend to prejudice the jury. Character evidence can be used for cross-examining a witness, or for example in cases of defamation where the reputation of an individual is the issue. Character evidence is actually vitally important in law, and for these reasons, methods for dealing with that have been developed. The solution to the problem of character evidence put forward in the 2006 book adapted some of these legal methods for use in ethical case-based reasoning about character evidence judgments.

4. Abductive Reasoning and Character Judgments

The solution to the problem offered in the 2006 book was that a form of reasoning well known in logic in artificial intelligence called abductive inference, or inference to the best explanation, can be used. In law, for example in criminal law, each side has a so-called story or narrative, and the problem is to figure out which of the two stories stands up better to questioning and with regard to being internally inconsistent, and consistent with the factual evidence in the case. According to a recent theory (Bex, Prakken, Reed and Walton, 2003; Anderson, Schum and Twining, 2005), evidence supporting or attacking a claim can be modeled using tools from artificial intelligence and law. A diagram is used to represent the story as a connected sequence of events that we can judge as plausible or not based on several criteria, most notably how the story hangs together as a sequence recognizable to an intelligent agent that is aware of scripts representing the common ways things can be expected to go in familiar situations (Bex, 2011). But it is not only the internal plausibility and coherence of this story that is important. Also important is how well the story stands up to criticisms that point out gaps or weaknesses in it, and how the given factual evidence in the case is consistent with the story and supports it (or not). This approach gives us a framework not only for modeling legal evidence but also for making reasoned judgments about qualities of character.

This approach offers a solution to the problem of judging character evidence by a procedure that goes through the following four steps. First there is a coherent story based on verifiable evidence. Second, inferences about the agent’s character are drawn as competing hypotheses or explanations of what took place. Third, each hypothesis is comparatively evaluated in order to find the best explanation. This kind of reasoning is called abductive reasoning or (what is taken to be equivalent here), inference to the best explanation (Josephson and Josephson, 1994). Fourth, using abductive reasoning, an inference to the best explanation is made, enabling a conclusion to be drawn that the connected actions and events chronicled in the story support a hypothesis about some aspect of the agent’s character.

In this example, that aspect is courage. This kind of abductive reasoning is evaluated on several criteria (Josephson and Josephson, 1994, Bex, 2004). The three most important ones for

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3 https://www.law.cornell.edu/rules/fre
our purposes here are (1) the internal coherence of the story as an explanation, (2) the factual evidence presented in the story, and (3) how well the factual evidence supports the story. This general approach to drawing evidence-based conclusions as hypotheses about an agent’s internal motives and intentions, as well as the virtues, or ethical qualities of the agent, such as courage, has been called the abductive theory of character judgment (Walton, 2006). It is an evidence-based approach to reasoning about character. The evidence consists basically in the reports of what the agent said and did (speech and actions) in the given case. Character judgments are seen as defeasible hypotheses can be supported by evidence but are also open to defeat by contrary evidence.

5. Practical Reasoning

According to Aristotle (Nicomachean Ethics, 1113b3), the good of man, the ultimate goal of human action, is the use of his reasoning power in accord with virtue (arete, excellence). First, a courageous action must be carried out in order to try to achieve an ethically worthy goal. Second, it must be thoughtfully carried out by the application of human reasoning to a given set of circumstances in a particular situation. This kind of reasoning is means-end reasoning by a rational agent in a particular situation called phronesis by Aristotle, a kind of reasoning nowadays standardly called practical reasoning or goal-based reasoning (Audi, 1989).

In order to apply the evidence-based abductive theory to the example, we have to bring the notion of practical reasoning up to date with recent findings of artificial intelligence. In its simplest form it can be defined as means-end reasoning from an action, or sequence of actions, to a goal by a rational agent. A rational agent is an entity that has goals, has sensors for observing its immediate environment, can at least to some extent predict the expected consequences of its actions, and has a property called plasticity, which means that it persistently tries to carry out its goals using the means at its disposal. But as so far defined, practical reasoning is purely instrumental in nature, meaning that it does not take values into account.

In the study of virtue ethics, the most important type of practical reasoning is the one that takes the agent’s values into account. The form that this kind of reasoning takes has been formulated by Atkinson and Bench-Capon (2007, 2008) in the following scheme. The first-person pronoun ‘I’ in the scheme refers to a rational agent that is assumed to have personal values as well as goals.

Premise 1: I have a goal \( G \).
Premise 2: \( G \) is supported by my set of values, \( V \).
Premise 3: Bringing about \( A \) is necessary (or sufficient) for me to bring about \( G \).
Conclusion: Therefore, I should (practically ought to) bring about \( A \).

We can apply this scheme to the example as follows. It is possible to see that Doss acted from values when we recall that he was a Seventh-day Adventist and the commandment “Thou shalt not kill” was especially important to him. The value of life, and saving life where possible were strong commitments for him which were visible through his actions of refusing respectfully but consistently and repeatedly to take weapons training or to carry a rifle.

Later, during his service as a medic on Guam and the Philippines, he was awarded the Bronze Star for aiding wounded soldiers under fire, showing how strongly committed he was to this value. This was shown by how persistently he took action to support his goal of aiding wounded
soldiers even in harsh, dangerous circumstances that required risking his life to carry out this goal. Afterward, his actions on the Maeda Escarpment in 1942 showed how he repeatedly risked being killed in order to treat his fellow soldiers and to get them to safety, under terrible circumstances that would have deterred most other people.

The problem of understanding these actions is trying to reconstruct them as a sequence of practical reasoning from the point of view of a rational agent with goals. A rational agent moves forward in deliberating and taking actions that are hoped to lead toward his or her goals, and tries to fulfill such goals based on its values in circumstances that may be complex. Such agents try to move forward to achieve their goals, despite limited foresight. In seeing that a particular action might be a means to fulfill a goal, there might at the same time be negative future consequences in carrying out this action. For example, as Doss moved forward to treat or rescue a particular soldier on the escarpment, he would have been clearly aware of the danger he was in. We know that from the given factual information in the case showing that he had been trained as a soldier and that he was a perceptive and rational individual who would be aware of risks. So here is the problem about reconstructing the rational thinking of an individual in this kind of situation.

There is always a balance between considering taking an action that might fulfill a highly valued goal, and the possibility or even likelihood of death or injury to one’s self or others. This balance of risks and values exhibits the cognitive process of the rational agent who deliberates on what to do and then moves forward with taking action.

6. Applying the Abductive Theory to the Example

Now we have the scheme for practical reasoning, we can see in a much more perspicuous way how the abductive theory applies to the example. Consider the people on the Medal of Honor committee making decisions on who this medal should be awarded to. First they have to examine the facts of the case and see that they are properly documented. Second, they have to try to figure out what kind of rational thinking can reasonably be attributed to the candidate they are considering based on the actions and events in the story they have put together to make sense of what happened. How do they do that?

The answer proposed here is that they have to do it by using their own practical reasoning to look at the facts making up the story as it has been presented to them, and try to put themselves in the mind of the candidate for the award as he carried out the meritorious actions. Just as the agent had to do, they have to weigh the goals and values against what are presumed to be the consequences of taking action to fulfill them in the particular circumstances given, insofar as these are known.

So what we have here is a double instance of practical reasoning. We have the original agent carrying out actions to fulfill his or her goals under difficult or dangerous circumstances, and we have a secondary agent, or group of them, deliberating on how to reconstruct the sequence of actions in such a way that it meets the requirements for the award, or does not. This is the so-called problem of other minds, and the solution to it proposed above is to use abductive reasoning. And each of us, as we read the citation, undergo the same process of using practical reasoning to understand the sequence of events in the story as it was presented to us, and arrive at some conclusion on how to evaluate the story by using our own capability for understanding practical reasoning about how things generally go in situations we grasp.

In such a case the facts can be interpreted in different ways when framing it in the practical reasoning scheme to try to understand the motives, values and actions of the individual involved.
But in this case, it is abundantly clear what Doss was trying to do, and why he was trying to do it. When we read this citation, and learn a little bit about what happened, we are inspired precisely because this man’s character was brought out by circumstances that tested his goals and values so seriously. There is absolutely no doubt that he was an exceptional man and had done something so extraordinary that few of us could aspire to copying it in such deadly circumstances. Although not many of us could do what he did, we can be inspired by his actions to try to be more like him in our ethical actions in our ordinary lives. The inspiration provided by such an example is especially important in teaching young people about virtue.

7. Conclusions

Courage in this paper was defined in a broadly Aristotelian manner as a virtue, a property of associated with actions of carrying out a worthy goal based on personal and ethical values, in cases in which a rational agent deliberates and moves forward in a situation of extreme danger. Defined in this way, courage was shown to be characterized by a cognitive structure of practical reasoning. How this structure is woven through the sequence of actions in such a case can be explained and summarized graphically in figure 1.

![Figure 1: The Practical Reasoning Structure of a Courageous Action](image)

Looking at the top right of figure 1, the reader can see that practical reasoning, designated as +PR in the top circle, combines a goal premise with a means premise to support a conclusion justifying an agent’s taking a particular action. The plus sign indicates that the practical reasoning positively supports its conclusion. Note also that because the example we studied showed how the agent’s goals were based on his personal values, values are shown as supporting goals in figure 1.

The bottom part of figure 1 shows that in cases of courageous actions there is a danger to the agent’s self-interests meaning that the barrier of fear must be overcome in order to successfully carry out the conclusion to action. So here we have a consideration of consequences, labeled CO with a minus sign before it, which must be balanced against the positive support of the conclusion to take action by the practical reasoning based on the agent’s goals and values. Courage, on this way of analyzing it as a virtue, always involves a balancing these two sides. In
Aristotelian ethics this is associated with deliberation using practical reasoning carried out on a balance choosing a “mean” or midpoint between two extremes.

The other aspect of courage as a virtue studied in the paper concerned the problem of how to fairly judge in a given case whether a given set of actions represented by a connected story describing what happened in a particular case are courageous. The problem here is one of how to use evidence to judge whether the actions described in that case can properly be said to be courageous, and thereby said to support the conclusion that the agent who carried out these actions has the virtue of courage. The problem here is that we have to conjecture what was going on in the agent’s mind when he or she carried out these dangerous actions. If they were merely done for fame or money, we would judge them very differently with respect to virtue than if they were carried out for a valued goal, such as saving lives. The solution to this problem supported by the analysis of the example made use of another cognitive structure called abductive reasoning, here equated with inference to the best explanation (IBE). How IBE is applicable in such cases in order to go from the factual evidence of the case by hypothesis to a conclusion about the agents inter states is indicated in figure 2. Here we have two agents A1 and A2.

Figure 2: Multiple Use of IBE in Abductive Judgments of Character and Courage

At the right side of figure 2, the practical reasoning of the agent, along with the facts of the case, are used by IBE to arrive at a reconstruction of is taken to be the agent’s thinking as he moved forward with the decision to take action. If there are alternative explanations of these actions that can be given, they are compared with the one that is being considered, enabling the best explanation to be selected. This is the second phase of the IBE sequence. The third phase is to move from this best explanation to a character judgment about the virtue aspect. The best explanation, along with the character judgment, can then be used to support the conclusion that the action was courageous or to lead to the conclusion that the action does not meet the requirements to fit the virtue of courage.

To sum up generally, the theory of courage as a virtue put forward in this article combines the application of two forms of reasoning, practical reasoning and inference to the best explanation, using the factual evidence in a case to form a reasoned basis for drawing a conclusion about the agent’s character. Courage is defined above in a broadly Aristotelian way as a virtue, a property associated with actions of carrying out a worthy goal based on personal and ethical values, in cases in which an agent overcomes fear to persist with carrying out this goal in a situation of extreme danger. Other agents can also arrive at evidence-based ethical judgments about whether
this agent is truly courageous by using practical reasoning abductively to examine the factual details (story and the evidence supporting it) in each individual case.

References


