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### Moral Courage and Facing Others

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*Moral Courage and Facing Others*

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**ABSTRACT:** Moral courage involves acting in the service of one's convictions, in spite of the risk of retaliation or punishment. I suggest that moral courage also involves a capacity to face others as moral agents, and thus in a manner that does not objectify them. A moral stand can only be taken toward another moral agent. Often, we find ourselves unable to face others in this way, because to do so is frightening, or because we are consumed by blinding anger. But without facing others as moral subjects, we risk moral cowardice on the one hand and moral fanaticism on the other.

**KEYWORDS:** courage, moral courage, anger, cowardice, virtue ethics

“That element in our natures which enables us too face foes, to laugh at danger, to defy fate, is not always courage. Far from unfrequently, it is recklessness.”  
—George Sand (1887)

I.

What does it mean to *face* another person? In one sense, facing another involves confrontation. A criminal faces the judge or a child faces the schoolyard bully. But what must one do so as to count as having faced the other? On the one hand, I might face another as I face a wall, by orienting my gaze in that person's direction, and merely seeing the other as some object in my field of vision. On the other hand, it could be said that I only face another person *as another person* if I recognize the other as a subject (or agent) like myself, and thus as something more than a mere object, an obstacle to be surmounted or destroyed.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In what follows, I will sometimes refer to “subjects” and sometimes to “agents.” For the purposes of this essay, I will not be concerned with the distinction that could be drawn between *moral subjects* and *moral agents*, and use these terms *roughly* interchangeably, referring to (moral) subjects when I wish to draw attention to subjectivity and individuality, and referring to (moral) agents when I want to emphasize the capacity for reason-governed deliberation and action. To put it another way, the particular moral subjects I will be interested in here will generally also be moral agents.

A person manifests physical courage when he or she faces some fearful object or endures some physically dangerous situation, while seeking to attain some goal regarded as worth the struggle. The soldier secures a target while under heavy fire. A climber reaches the peak of Mount Everest. By contrast, moral courage involves facing other persons while upholding some morally motivated cause and enduring resistance or retaliation that may occur in response to one's actions. Certainly, one's actions may reflect both physical and moral courage.<sup>2</sup> However, since persons can be faced as either objects or subjects, we can ask whether moral courage requires any particular orientation toward those others one faces—specifically, whether moral courage requires facing others as subjects, rather than as mere objects or obstacles. I will suggest that moral courage does require this, and that this is both what distinguishes it from (merely) physical courage and what makes moral courage a substantive virtue. Its importance consists not only in what it enables—steadfast action in the service of one's values even in the face of (social) adversity—but also in what it requires, since the truly morally courageous person will resist the objectification of others, even those one opposes in values and action.

This understanding of moral courage does not presuppose that the morally courageous person is morally wise—that his or her moral convictions are correct (or true)—and thus differs from the ancient accounts offered by Plato (in *Protagoras*) and Aristotle which take (objective) moral wisdom to be a requirement of courage. I assume that it is possible to recognize moral courage in those who we think are morally mistaken. At the same time, the account I will offer is significantly stronger than one which would construe moral courage as simply the overcoming of fear, or the performance of actions known to be dangerous, in the service of one's cause. By taking a middle position between a fully moralized account of courage and a formulaic or “thin” account (on which the virtue simply involves consistency of conviction and action in dangerous

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<sup>2</sup> On the distinction between moral and physical courage, see Olsthoorn (2007).

situations of the relevant sorts), this account of moral courage avoids the problem of blurring the distinction between being (morally) courageous and being fully virtuous—a complaint Socrates makes against defining courage in terms of moral wisdom in *Laches*—while also avoiding the counterintuitive result of implying that certain kinds of fanatics, who seem to have the “courage of conviction,” are genuinely morally courageous.<sup>3</sup>

In the next section (II), I explain the particular way in which I will use the term *moral courage* in this essay. In Section III, I briefly consider the value of moral courage for the individual, in terms of its necessity for cultivating and preserving integrity. (I allude to its social value in the conclusion, Section VII.) In Section IV, I discuss the relationship between moral courage and compromise, insofar as the seeming tension (and the resolution of that tension) between moral conviction and the possibility of compromise provides some further insight into the relationship between moral courage and integrity and also illustrates the problems that arise when one fails (or refuses) to face others as moral subjects (or agents). Sections V and VI set out the main argument of this paper—that moral courage requires facing others as moral subjects/agents—and explain the scope of this requirement (particularly Section VI). In the concluding section (VII), I briefly consider some challenging cases, and offer some final clarifications regarding the requirements of moral courage, as pictured herein.

## II.

While courage involves facing significant dangers and overcoming or controlling significant fears, we can distinguish various types of courage in terms of the specific motivations and

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<sup>3</sup> I say describing the acts of certain kinds of fanatics as morally courageous seems counterintuitive on the general grounds that while such people may not be cowards—as Susan Sontag suggested of the 9/11 attackers (2001)—their actions seem so terrible (or disproportionate, etc.) that there is an intuitive appeal to regarding such people instead as rash. Foot agrees that being “not a coward” is not necessarily to be brave (1978: 15).

dangers (or fears) involved. Typically, an act only seems courageous to us if the goal is recognizable as having sufficient value to justify the risks involved. There is, of course, room for disagreement in the evaluation of goals, and whether such goals must have objective merit or only be regarded as worthy by the acting individual, in order for one's act to count as courageous, has been a matter of considerable debate.<sup>4</sup> Some will see daredevils as manifesting physical courage, while others may see them as foolish, risking life and limb, just to see if they can pull off a trivial stunt.

Above, I suggested that moral courage involves facing the particular fears and dangers arising from the possibility that one will be punished (broadly speaking) for taking a moral stand. The morally courageous person may also exhibit great physical courage—that is, courage in the face of death or significant physical harm—though not every instance of physical courage is morally courageous. Someone might demonstrate merely physical courage in a non-moral context, say, in order to prove herself a worthy mountaineer. (As above, some may think this merely foolish.) On the other hand, since moral courage involves a risk of punishment, not every morally good act which is physically dangerous (and fearful) is a morally courageous one, in the particular sense I attach to the phrase here. The person who dives in front of an oncoming vehicle to save a child does something good—indeed, heroic—but such acts don't carry a risk of ridicule, retaliation, social rejection, and so forth. (Perhaps they would if one were saving someone generally despised in one's society, but the general point is that morally heroic acts may reflect more in the way of physical courage than the moral courage of the person who risks punishment for taking a moral stand.)

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<sup>4</sup> For discussions which treat courage as compatible with immoral action, see von Wright (1963), Wallace (1978), Bauhn (2003), Scarre (2010), and, in a different manner, Rorty (1986). For approaches which seek to show the incompatibility of courage and immoral action, see Foot (1978), Cunningham (1985), and Walton (1986 and 1990).

It might seem odd to say that the moral hero is courageous but not *morally* courageous. Here, I must ask the reader to bear with my using the term *moral courage* in a narrow (and in that respect technical) sense. Especially, if we do not presuppose that courageous actions are necessarily (objectively) moral actions, we might use the term *moral courage* and its cognates to refer to courageous acts (or persons) that are morally justified. In that sense, the moral hero is morally courageous. No doubt, in ordinary conversation, we will simply say that he is courageous and be perfectly understood. Here, however, I will restrict my use of *moral courage* to the type of courage exhibited by those who risk punishment for taking a morally motivated stand. (“Moral” is descriptive here, rather than evaluative.)

### III.

Moral courage resembles in some ways what Per Bauhn has called the “courage of conviction” (2003: 61-90). According to Bauhn, this form of courage involves acting from a sense of moral responsibility, for the sake of values that transcend one’s own merely personal values, interests, and projects. It contrasts with the “courage of creativity,” in which one overcomes the fear of failure in the pursuit of one’s own personal good (though having the courage of creativity may be essential to one’s acting successfully in standing up for one’s convictions).

Bauhn’s account of the courage of conviction (and of courage in general) is strongly anti-Aristotelian, in that he eschews the notion that courage, like all virtues for Aristotle, is a mean between two vices. This is because Bauhn holds that courage is essentially a matter of confronting and overcoming one’s fears, but takes questions about what one ought to fear (or value) to be a separate, moral (and prudential) matter. Thus, his account of courage is morally neutral. A person can be perfectly courageous while acting utterly immorally. I am willing to

allow that we can recognize courage (including moral courage) in those whose values or judgments we think are misguided. At the same time, however, I will suggest that we can contrast moral courage with two kinds of failure, which both involve a kind of fleeing from others, an inability to face them. The moral coward is afraid to face others, and so fails to take a stand. The moral fanatic, on the other hand, flees from others by failing to see them *as* others in the sense of their being distinctive individuals, subjects. I return to these points below (beginning in Section V).

Whether we speak of moral courage or the courage of conviction, this kind of courage is closely associated with the cultivation and preservation of integrity. Indeed, there are similar debates about whether integrity, like courage, is a substantive moral virtue (so that only a person with the right values can have integrity) or whether it is simply what Rawls called a “virtue of form,” which a person has in virtue of practicing what he preaches, and acting in a way that is consistent with his own values (Rawls, 1971: 519). Whichever way we resolve that question, it is clear that having integrity—understood as steadfast commitment to one’s values in deliberation and action—requires some degree of moral courage. Without such courage, I may lack the inner resources to stand up for myself and my beliefs, let alone anyone else. Even if the potential risks to self are high, remaining steadfast in our convictions may be necessary for continued self-respect. The person who lacks such courage may come to see him or herself not only as a coward, but also as a “sell-out,” as spineless and weak. Such self-perceptions may lead to a loss of self-respect and to a sense of alienation or demoralization, and perhaps to a loss of one’s sense of autonomy. A person who is unable to stand up for what she believes in may feel that she is no longer in control of her own life. Such a person is at home with neither herself nor the world.

While one might see moral courage as at odds with one's own personal interests, insofar as taking a moral stand carries social risks that might frustrate one's own personal projects and goals (and thus one's personal well-being), the link between moral courage and integrity reveals the sense in which one's own well-being cannot be fully separated from one's convictions and sense of moral responsibility. The person who fails to stand by her own convictions, and as a result loses self-respect, has incurred a loss of both integrity and well-being. However, it should be noted that the underlying motivation of the morally courageous person is not the preservation of her own integrity or well-being, as such, but rather the defense or upholding of what she believes is morally right and just. In Aristotelian terms, the morally courageous person does the morally courageous act for its own sake rather than for personal gain. As Williams suggests, overmuch concern even for one's own integrity may seem "self-indulgent," in that one's motivations are thereby inwardly directed—toward one's moral purity—rather than directed outwardly toward the situation which calls for action (1981: 47ff.). Thus, the morally courageous person acts for the sake of his or her cause because she believes that cause is right. The contribution this makes to her own integrity is thereby secondary, though not for that insignificant. It is by doing what she thinks is right that she maintains her integrity. But she acts for the right and the good, not for herself. This may explain, in part, why people who perform morally courageous acts do not describe themselves as courageous—they simply did what was (morally) necessary.

#### IV.

Because the aim of moral courage is the defense or realization of values to which one ascribes moral significance, and because standing up for one's own moral values is essential to integrity



and self-respect, it might seem natural to characterize the morally courageous person as uncompromising. Patrick Henry's well-known declaration, "Give me liberty or give me death!" captures the essence of this idea. For the person of strong moral conviction, there are fates worse than death, and for the morally courageous person the shame of moral compromise might seem worse than the prospect of social rejection and punishment (even if one still fears such prospects). Of course, we can draw a distinction between practical compromises and moral compromises—or as John F. Kennedy puts it in *Profiles in Courage*, between compromises of issues and of principles (2006: 18)—and point out that it is possible to make compromises with those with whom we disagree that don't entangle us in outright moral contradictions.<sup>5</sup> We must decide at times which of our own moral principles or values have greater weight in the given circumstances, and in many cases, acting with moral courage will be a matter of standing by one's own judgment about such matters, even when the particular compromise we have decided upon is unpopular (or worse) with others.

Indeed, where one is expected to toe a party line, the willingness to step out of line, to seek practical or political compromises, can itself take moral courage, since one risks ostracism from one's own party. Thus, the idea that compromise is always cowardly or a form of hypocrisy (or "flip-flopping") has little philosophical merit, despite the fact that news media and some politicians themselves would have us think so (especially, in the latter case, when it is their political rivals who are making the compromises).

We could also draw a distinction between compromises of principles and compromises of means, and note that in any given instance, there may be more than one way in which a person can honor his or her principles. When it is possible to honor one's principles while also selecting means which make practical compromise possible, it is not clear that we should think that the

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<sup>5</sup> See also Benjamin (1990) on the relationship between compromise and integrity.

person who refuses that route, preferring instead the path on which *no* compromise is allowable, is being morally courageous rather than hard-headed.<sup>6</sup> Some may fear compromise insofar as engaging in the dialogue essential to arriving at a practical compromise requires that one face others with whom one may have strong moral disagreements. It might be feared that engaging in such dialogue sets one upon a slippery slope, on which the eventual compromise of one's principles is inevitable. Whether such a fear has any true merit must probably be determined by examining the particular circumstances. However, the fear of compromise may also be bound up with the fear of having the contingency and contestability of our own convictions exposed and the fear of facing those we morally oppose in the full recognition of their moral agency and humanity. As I will suggest below, the morally courageous person is one who faces those fears, and faces others as described above. If this is right, then the person who is *too* uncompromising (or who refuses reasonable compromise) may be involved in both a kind of recklessness and a kind of cowardice.

## V.

William Ian Miller remarks that “moral courage is *lonely* courage”—that unlike courage in battle, in which an individual can lean upon his or her comrades for support, moral courage may involve action that isolates and alienates one from others, even those who would normally be sources of support and protection (Miller, 2000: 255). This is the loneliness of a corporate whistleblower (whose family or friends fear the repercussions and wish that she would remain silent) and of Ibsen's Dr. Stockmann, who claims that, “The strongest man is he who stands most alone,” as he is driven to the fringes of his community (in Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*).

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<sup>6</sup> One might consider here Jonathan Lear's discussion of the courage of the Crow chief Plenty Coups, who sought a path of compromise with the United States, in contrast with the adversarial approach taken by the Sioux chief Sitting Bull (Lear 2006).

The case of Dr. Stockmann is not without its dark moments, which illustrate the concerns I raised at the beginning about what it means for a morally courageous person to face others. Stockmann has discovered that the town baths—around which the town’s tourist economy is based—are contaminated. He urges that the baths be closed until the water system can be rebuilt. His brother, the mayor, turns the town against him, and Stockmann watches in horror as the baths continue to operate, certain to infect rather than cure many of their visitors. In an impassioned speech, Stockmann decries the opposition that has risen against him—and he is no doubt right to do so—but he goes so far as to say that the “compact liberal majority” should simply be “eliminated,” and he seems to mean this quite literally. While we may sympathize with Stockmann, and understand his outrage, he has lost his head at this moment. Although his words carry no real threat, they are emblematic of an attitude which reflects moral recklessness (or rashness) rather than moral courage.

I suggest that Stockmann veers toward moral recklessness (in contrast with moral courage) as he begins to see his adversaries in impersonal and objectifying categories. The “compact liberal majority” is not itself a person. It is not something that can be faced in anything like the way one faces a particular person as a person. Compare this to the idea of “facing the masses”: there are ways of doing this such that one really doesn’t face anyone at all, but simply looks out toward the horizon, or at one’s notes. In that way, one can avoid recognizing any particular face or acknowledging any particular person. One may “face the masses” without maintaining a keen awareness of their individuality, subjectivity and moral agency. This awareness is what I suggest Stockmann appears to lose in his moment of rage.

Amélie Oksenberg Rorty hints at the objectifying tendencies of what she calls “traditional courage,” which she characterizes as “a set of dispositions to overcome fear, to oppose obstacles,

to perform difficult or dangerous actions” (1986: 151). Rorty warns that, “[traditional] courage... treats its domain, its objects, as External Others, to be endured, overcome or combated. Even when courage acts *for* something or moves *to* something, it is persistence *against* what is conceived as resistance” (1986: 154). Thus, on her view the traditionally courageous person is defined first in terms of what he or she struggles against, and only secondarily in terms of what he or she struggles for, and thus (traditional) courage is essentially adversarial. This points toward the objectifying tendencies (or risks) of traditional courage because the “External Other” to be “endured, overcome, or combated” is set against the self as something foreign. (This is true, as she notes, even when that which is to be overcome is *within* the self, since one can reject those internal obstacles as not part of one’s “true” self.) The courageous person shows “heart” (*coeur*) in her ability to overcome or endure those obstacles, not in how she treats those obstacles in and of themselves. Thus, in a different sense, a traditionally courageous person could be quite “heartless” (or ruthless) in how she engages with that which she must overcome. Those who oppose the courageous person can thus be reduced to mere obstacles, which only incidentally are also persons. Indeed, it doesn’t particularly matter *what* kind of thing the obstacle is. What matters is that it is overcome, defeated.

Does it matter how the *morally* courageous person—who takes a moral stand in the face of significant risk of social rejection or social death—faces, or conceives of, those who oppose him? Must there be a particular way in which the morally courageous person faces others in order for what he or she does to *count* as morally courageous? One might argue that the essential thing is simply that this person takes a stand in spite of those social risks (and the fears he or she might have about social rejection or punishment) and that it doesn’t much matter whether the morally courageous person sees those others she faces as fellow humans (or citizens, moral

agents, etc.) or as moral monsters or members of the complacent herd. It may be *wrong* to reduce others to those abstract categories, but—so the argument goes—I have allowed that individuals can be morally courageous without being morally wise.

Against that line of thought, I suggest that it does matter how one’s adversaries are confronted and perceived. By objectifying others—by seeing them only as monsters or members of the herd, for example—we relieve ourselves of the possible fearsomeness of seeing them as individuals, with their own distinctive histories, experiences, judgments, and wills. They are not to be seen as full and proper subjects, as we are. They are vicious or stupid, but precisely because of that, they are not part of any relevant moral community. But if they are not part of a relevant moral community, then any stand we take against them is not a *moral* stand—that is, we are not struggling against them as one moral agent (or person) to another, struggling over whose values deserve to be honored, protected, and obeyed by our moral community. The objectified others have no values—at least no values in the way that reflective and self-conscious agents do. They are “animals.”<sup>7</sup> And while one can engage in a *struggle* with an animal, as one can fight a bear, this is not a moral struggle. We do not struggle against the bear’s injustice. We cannot take a moral stand against those who are not moral agents.

My basic point then is that for one to take a moral stand, one must implicitly acknowledge the moral agency of those against whom one’s stand is taken. This acknowledgement is what I mean by facing others as subjects rather than objects. One cannot count as taking a moral stand unless one is facing other moral agents, *and facing them as such*.

I suspect that this is not always easy to do. We might prefer to think of our villains as monsters, madmen, brainwashed lunatics, or otherwise unhinged. No doubt sometimes they are

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<sup>7</sup> I use scare-quotes here insofar as some may think that such an epithet is not particularly fair to other animals (whatever we think of its application to other human beings).

unhinged. But then it is not a matter of *moral* courage to halt them; it is simply a matter of physical courage. To see one's moral adversaries as moral agents—or even simply as *human*—might itself take a kind of courage precisely because seeing our adversaries in such a light compels us to regard them as acting on their own reasons, as having their own intelligible moral standards and their own sense of what is courageous. This opens up the possibility of empathy and understanding, and those possibilities may seem to interfere with our own moral mission, and threaten to undermine our own confidence in the stand we are taking or the means we are employing. All of this may be unnerving not only because it potentially interferes with our own moral conviction (in that we may come to see our own convictions as in various ways contingent and contestable), but also because we are brought face to face with the uncomfortable fact that one need not be a “monster” or a “lunatic” in order to do or support things that we find morally terrible.<sup>8</sup> Thus, even if we are able to keep hold of a reasonable confidence in our own convictions, facing others in a way that is fair, realistic, and non-dehumanizing, exposes us to what many seem to find a fearful prospect: that of judging another to be wrong (even horribly wrong), without softening *for ourselves* the blow of this judgment by dismissing the other as wrong due a lack of moral agency (or humanity). That is, we tend to make it easier on ourselves to judge other people by lying to ourselves about their own moral agency, and thus failing fully to confront the human reality manifest in those we oppose.

This kind of fear, however, is not the only potential cause of retreat from facing the other as a moral subject. *Anger* at what others have done, or are prepared to do, can also prompt us to

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<sup>8</sup> Thus, for example, Andrew Silke draws what some would find an unnerving conclusion in his study of terrorism: “terrorists simply are not crazy” (Silke, 2004: 182). Silke goes on to argue that since terrorists are not psychologically abnormal, and so no merely fearless lunatics, they possess a generally normal psychology and as such are as capable of acting courageously in their actions as anyone else. Silke’s account of courage is notably thin, as it involves the simple perception of danger and action despite knowledge of the danger. McDermott’s recent account of the 9/11 hijackers roughly concurs with Silke’s view that terrorists are, as it were, all-too-human (McDermott, 2005).

see those others in objectifying and depersonalized terms. While anger can perhaps be righteous, it can also incite recklessness.<sup>9</sup> It is anger that (perhaps understandably) pushes Stockmann to the brink. Anger emboldens us, but it also promotes a narrowing of vision, and can narrow it to the point of blind rage.<sup>10</sup> In such a condition, we may care about nothing more than making the other *pay*.<sup>11</sup> But if we are too overcome by anger, we will lack the ability to differentiate between true justice and mere retaliation. Furthermore, when anger completely obscures our ability to face those we oppose as moral agents, then whatever courage is involved in confronting those others loses its moral character. This is because, as I have suggested, we can only see ourselves as taking a moral stand against other moral agents. Thus, while the morally courageous person controls or overcomes fear on the one hand, he or she must also maintain control of his or her anger, righteous though it may be.

## VI.

The dangers confronting the morally courageous person are thus twofold: there are the external dangers of punishment (social ostracism, etc.) and the internal danger of being blinded to the moral agency of those one faces, either by an excess of fear or anger. The morally courageous person confronts other persons (and specifically, other moral agents), and not simply fearsome objects (or monsters, etc.). In many cases, however, the relations are not this simple. One way of picturing moral struggle is as taking place between the person who takes a stand for

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<sup>9</sup> I say *perhaps* because some would distinguish anger from other sources of motivational energy and claim that anger itself is always bad. See, e.g. Thurman (2005).

<sup>10</sup> See Gay (1988) on anger and the broader notion of *thumos* in ancient Greek thought about courage.

<sup>11</sup> Aristotle claims that those motivated purely by the motive of revenge are not properly courageous. For him, however, this is because they fail to have the right kind of (noble) motive. See *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book III, Chapter 9. Below, I raise questions about whether revenge could be sought by the morally courageous person; the difficulty of squaring revenge with moral courage may ultimately have to do not with the righteousness of the motive but whether it is psychologically possible to maintain the stance of a morally courageous person—facing others as moral agents—while exacting one’s revenge.

unconventional or unpopular values and the individuals or groups who oppose those values. However, in many cases, the people who stand on the sidelines are an important part of the overall picture of a moral struggle, and the morally courageous person may have to face those on the sidelines no less than those against whom he or she struggles more directly. For example, Martin Luther King, Jr., had to struggle not only against those who took a stand against racial integration, but also against those who, while not unsympathetic to the civil rights cause, objected to his means, or his timing, or his insistence. The morally courageous person often faces multiple sources of social adversity and resistance.

An important set of cases to consider here are those in which one takes a stand against one group in order to protect another and employs means which the latter group finds upsetting, even immoral. Such cases include extremist groups who employ terroristic methods which many of those for whom they are taking a stand reject as immoral. A similar case is that of the government which employs methods of torture or other dubious military strategies in the interest of national security although its people abhor the thought that their government would do such things. Thus, one could ask: could the use of terrorist or torturous methods be undertaken with moral courage?

If we think primarily of the relationship between the acting agent and those whom he or she seeks to protect by the use of means with which they disapprove, then so long as this disapproval carries with it great social risks, the use of such methods would thereby seem to be morally courageous. Of course, since I have suggested that moral courage also essentially involves the facing of others as moral subjects (or agents), the person who uses such means must *engage* with those who disapprove. This person might on the one hand attempt to justify his or her actions, through rational and sympathetic dialogue, or he or she might simply accept the



punishment that those others find fitting, while at the same time reminding those others that the seemingly terrible actions were done for their sake (and that the alternatives, as one saw them, would have been far worse).

One might thereby think that this was the kind of moral courage shown by President Truman, when he made the decisions to bomb Hiroshima and Nagasaki. What he did was terrible, and many would say that it was manifestly wrong, and yet Truman did what he believed necessary to end the war. However, G.E.M. Anscombe offers a different perspective:

I have long been puzzled by the common cant about President Truman's courage in making this decision. Of course, I know that you can be cowardly without having reason to think you are in danger. But how can you be courageous? Light has come to me lately: the term is an acknowledgement of the truth. Mr. Truman was brave because, and only because, what he did was so bad. But I think the judgement unsound. Given the right circumstances (e.g. that no one whose opinion matters will disapprove), a quite mediocre person can do spectacularly wicked things without thereby becoming impressive. (Anscombe, 1981: 64)

The important point Anscombe makes is that one *might* think that in Truman's case "no one whose opinion matters will disapprove." For if social risks flow from those "whose opinion matters," and no such people will disapprove, then one is not in a situation requiring moral courage.

Of course, in the case of dropping the bombs, to think that "no one whose opinion matters will disapprove" might be thought to take an incredibly narrow view of whose opinion matters. What about the opinion of the citizens of Hiroshima and Nagasaki? Can we pry apart saying that their opinion does not matter from saying that *they* do not matter? Maintaining a sense of the

reality of the other from a vast distance, so that it could seriously be said that one is facing them, too, as the morally courageous person would, may be incredibly difficult. Indeed, the whole notion of facing others may fall apart (or become purely, and unhelpfully figurative) in such cases. William Manchester, for example, says of the artillerymen launching mortar shells at their foes (during World War II), “There is something grotesque and outrageous about a man safely behind fortifications, miles away, pulling a lanyard and killing other men who cannot see, let alone reach him” (1987, 103). There seems to be little courage involved when one is able to attack from a comparatively safe distance, or when one’s foes are particularly vulnerable. But one might still wonder, *pace* Anscombe, could it be *morally* courageous to do such things as part of a larger end, perhaps especially if the alternatives seem worse?

From a moral perspective, the question is whether the end justifies the means. However we resolve that question, I think there is something to be learned by considering why such actions could not be seen—from all relevant perspectives—as morally courageous, regardless of the risks and dangers one incurs by doing them. The morally courageous person is able to engage with those others affected by her actions as particular, individual moral subjects, and since the moral stand she takes is directed toward those others as moral subjects with whom moral discourse is possible, it is possible for the morally courageous person to offer justifications for his her actions *to those others*.

It might be asked: why does the morally courageous person *owe* others a justification for what he or she is doing? I think the simplest answer is that offering justifications is part of what it means to engage with another as a moral subject, for it is by offering justifications (or reasons) that we make the point of what we are doing clear to those others against whom our stand, and our action, is directed. And it is by offering such justifications that we acknowledge the capacity

of others to give and receive reasons, to modify their views, revise their intentions, and to change their minds, and show ourselves capable of reasoned reflection in our choices and judgments.

The whole point of taking a moral stand is to bring certain—in our view neglected or dishonored—values to attention and to preserve them. But we can only bring those values to the attention of other moral subjects. Thus, the refusal to give an account of our reasons is effectively a refusal to face others as moral subjects.

Thus, whatever we might say about the political or military effectiveness of Truman's dropping the bombs, or of a political extremist using terror tactics to bring an opposed government to financial ruin, these tactics themselves involve a failure to face those others who are most immediately affected by one's actions. Those others are instrumentalized and in that respect objectified, and as such, need not be treated as deserving justifications.

Even if one *did* attempt to offer justifications to those one is about to sacrifice in the name of one's convictions, it is not clear that one could offer those justifications in the spirit of one subject facing another. Thomas Nagel suggests that there is an important difference between bureaucratic justifications of harm and the kind of justification we could offer to another as a potential victim of that harm. He writes,

If one abandons a person in the course of rescuing several others from a fire or a sinking ship, one could say to him, "You understand, I have to leave you to save the others." Similarly, if one subjects an unwilling child to a painful surgical procedure, one can say to him, "If you could understand, you would realize that I am doing this to help you." One could even say, as one bayonets an enemy soldier, "It's either you or me." But one cannot really say while torturing a prisoner, "You understand, I have to pull out your fingernails because it is

absolutely essential that we have the names of your confederates”; nor can one say to the victims of Hiroshima, “You understand, we have to incinerate you to provide the Japanese government with an incentive to surrender.” (Nagel, 1972: 137)

Now, one might ask, why *couldn't* one say those latter things? As Nagel goes on to note, a utilitarian might think that such justifications are perfectly in order, where the greater good hangs in the balance. However, Nagel argues that such justifications

are really justifications to the world at large, which the victim, as a reasonable man, would be expected to appreciate. However, there seems to me something wrong with this view, for it ignores the possibility that to treat someone else horribly puts you in a special relation to him, which may have to be defended in terms of other features of your relation to him. (137)

Nagel recognizes that this latter possibility needs further elaboration. The basic idea, however, is consistent with what I have been suggesting about the centrality of facing others as moral subjects in genuinely morally courageous action. One might object that if facing others as subjects just means being willing to offer justifications for what one is doing, then it is unclear why “bureaucratic justifications,” or justifications directed “to the world at large,” are not sufficient.<sup>12</sup> One has thereby given one’s reasons, and could give them to those others one is prepared to torture, terrorize, or sacrifice.

Such impersonal and bureaucratic justifications may seem like an attempt to acknowledge the moral agency of the other, an acknowledgement that the objectified other could nevertheless understand one’s reasons. But as long as one holds to that objectified (or

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<sup>12</sup> In this spirit, one might say that the U.S. Military *did* face the Japanese citizens, at least after Hiroshima, by dropping leaflets in other cities explaining the military justifications for the bomb, and warning those civilians to evacuate their homes, since further bombs would be dropped if their government refused to surrender.

instrumentalized) view of the other, the other's moral agency—and in particular their capacity to receive one's reasons—*does not matter*. The bureaucrat's stand, as it were, only incidentally involves *this person*, and since this person has been reduced to a pawn, it does not particularly matter how the bureaucrat faces him or her, or even whether the bureaucrat offers any reasons to this person.

This is unacceptable from the perspective of moral courage. That is, we could not say, in full voice, that such a bureaucrat is morally courageous, because the kind of stance he takes toward those who have only instrumental value in the service of his cause implies that even if he attempts to engage with them as moral subjects, that engagement doesn't matter. That is, there is no *point* in facing the objectified other as a subject anymore, because his or her fate has already been settled. Furthermore, the person who is faced with the personal indifference of the bureaucrat could only accept the bureaucratic justification by objectifying him or herself, by agreeing with the bureaucrat that in an important sense his or her own moral agency and personhood do not matter.

In this section, I will seem to have taken something like a Kantian position on what moral courage requires—that one must treat all of humanity always as ends in themselves and never merely as a means—that one must see others as exerting that sort of moral claim upon oneself. However, my suggestion is not that *others* exert this claim (though arguably they do). Rather, one makes this claim (or imposes this constraint) *upon oneself* in taking a moral stand. Again, I cannot engage in a *moral* struggle against someone who is not a moral agent. Thus, if I am taking a moral stand, I must be doing so in the face of other moral agents. Furthermore, it seems reasonable to hold that the relevant class of agents to whom this requirement extends includes (in principle) all those moral agents affected by one's own moral stand. The morally courageous

person faces others—those she challenges, as well as those she would seek to defend—with a continued awareness and mindfulness of the individuality and moral agency of those she must face.

Orwell illustrates the thrust of this point when he writes of an enemy soldier who ran from a trench “half-dressed and...holding up his trousers with both hands as he ran.” Though Orwell had a clear shot, he withheld fire: “I had come here to shoot at ‘Fascists’; but a man who is holding up his trousers isn’t a ‘Fascist’, he is visibly a fellow-creature, similar to yourself, and you don’t feel like shooting at him” (1968, 254). Perhaps we would not say that Orwell showed moral courage at this moment, but it is this capacity for seeing the other as what he calls a “fellow-creature”—which aligns with what I have had in mind when invoking “moral subjects,” “moral agents,” and so forth—which is necessary for those who would be morally courageous, rather than cowards who fear such clarity of vision, or reckless tyrants who see nothing but the blood-red of their anger, or both.

## VII.

Although I have emphasized that facing others with moral courage requires attention to their particularity as distinctive moral subjects, and suggested that this prevents the morally courageous person from treating others as mere objects (or means to one’s own ends), I have not said that the morally courageous person would not do things that strike us as terrible. In part, this is because I believe we can identify moral courage in those with whom we morally disagree. It might perchance be thought that a person could acknowledge the particularity and moral agency of others, and yet still be motivated and willing to subject them *as other moral subjects* to what

seems like terrible treatment. Could there then be a morally courageous torturer or terrorist?

Consider what Nietzsche describes as “greatness” in *The Gay Science*:

*What belongs to greatness—Who will attain something great if he does not find in himself the strength and the will to inflict great suffering? Being able to suffer is the least...But not to perish of internal distress and uncertainty when one inflicts great suffering and hears the cry of this suffering—that is great; that belongs to greatness. (1887, §325)*

One may well ask: *does it?* How does one distinguish such “greatness” from heartlessness (or psychopathy)? I suspect that Nietzsche might say, in a Kierkegaardian manner, that there may be nothing on the outside that does distinguish them. No doubt, the morally courageous person who takes a stand may hear the cries of those who wish that she would not risk her life (or livelihood), or their lives or well-being (because their fate is bound up with hers), for the sake of her convictions. Here, we might think of Crito’s pain at seeing his friend and teacher Socrates preparing for his final hour, while Crito believes that Socrates is betraying himself, his friends, and his children. But we could just as well think of someone who is pained by the prospect of torturing another person, but believes that it must be done in order to stop, say, the notorious “ticking-bomb.” We could imagine the torturer pleading with his victim to confess, acknowledging that they are both deeply harmed by what he is doing, but that it comes at the cost of what his victim is attempting to do to vastly many others. Similarly, we might imagine a father seeking to avenge the murder of his child, convinced that the murderer does not deserve to live. At the same time, he does not disguise to himself the intent to kill another person, to take a life, as merely the intent to destroy a “monster.” He believes that this person, reformed or not, regretful or not, no longer has a right to exercise his own moral agency.

I do not think there are easy answers to the questions raised by these cases. Furthermore, it may not help to frame the issues in terms of whether such persons could be acting in a genuinely morally courageous way. The perspective of moral courage tells us that we cannot take a moral stand without facing others as moral subjects, but it simply does not tell us, beyond that, what more specific principles one is obligated to live by. Honoring our values and principles may put us in a position where a morally courageous struggle comes at the cost of great pain for others—not because of what we ourselves do, but because of how others intend to thwart us (through intimidations and threats to those we love). This observation does not justify the use of others' pain or fear, or the instrumentalization (and objectification) of their lives, for the ends of one's moral stand. Importantly, it may be a substantively empirical (and psychological) question as to what a human being can do to another human being *without* losing sight of the other's moral agency—and also without losing sight of *one's own* moral agency. For if it is a failure of moral courage to objectify others in taking one's stand, then it must also be a mistake to attempt to diminish one's own agency, through the relentless hardening of one's own heart, and the abandonment of one's own sense of individual will—as is recommended by Sergey Nechayev in his notorious *Revolutionary Catechism* (1869).<sup>13</sup>

It is important to note that this discussion of moral courage is idealized and to acknowledge that not every instance of genuine moral courage involves the kind of direct confrontation of that idealized picture. The whistleblower may not in fact face those he or she reports to a regulatory agency, and it might be imprudent to attempt a literal facing of those against whom one must take a moral stand. (To be prudent is not to be cowardly here.) This is particularly true when the person who needs moral courage is at a severe power disadvantage, and where a literal facing might be grossly ineffective. A person who finally resolves to leave an

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<sup>13</sup> On this point, see Bar On (1991).



abusive spouse may do so with moral courage—particularly in a time and place where others fail (however horribly) to support or understand her decision. Indeed, even though we may be willing to recognize the individuality and moral agency of others, the dangers of a direct confrontation—given their coldness, rage, or zeal—might make a direct confrontation pointless. That does not, of course, give one an excuse to ignore the individuality and moral agency of that person, though he or she may fail to recognize (or care about) those features in others.

Such cases may seem to put pressure on the psychological plausibility of this notion of moral courage, at least in some extreme cases where the things that others are prepared to do makes it nearly impossible to keep their moral agency, and more simply their *humanity*, in view. Prior to his official death sentence at the hands of the Nazis, Klaus Bonhoeffer (Dietrich Bonhoeffer's brother, who was also involved in anti-Nazi resistance and the attempt to assassinate Hitler), wrote:

I am not afraid of being hanged, but I don't want to see those faces again...so much depravity...I'd rather die than see those faces again. I have seen the Devil, and I can't forget it. (Bethge, 1970: 832)

No one could fail to understand Klaus' attitude or fault him for it. His moral courage, as well as that of his brother and the other anti-Nazi resistance members could not be brought into serious question. I must leave it to others to consider whether their courage in attempting to assassinate Hitler can be brought into harmony with the picture of moral courage I have offered here. (If it cannot, then I will gladly admit that this is so much the worse for my picture; however, the point made above in connection with the person who leaves an abusive spouse, and the pointlessness of a direct confrontation in some such circumstances, can presumably be employed to make sense of Klaus' desire not "to see those faces again.")

Assuming that Milgram's studies of obedience shed light on at least one of the psychological mechanisms that made the Holocaust possible, his insights point to an additional respect in which the morally courageous person resists self-objectification: the morally courageous in Milgram's experiments were the individuals who refused to accept the assurances that someone else would be responsible for their actions, and who asserted their own autonomy and agency within the situation, rather than allowing their agency to be usurped by an authority. Importantly, as Osswald et al (2010) have recently noted, it is not only fear of social punishment that prevents individuals from undertaking morally courageous action: "in moral courage situations people feel less competent to intervene than in other prosocial incidents" (159). People often do not know what to do, or how to act effectively, even when they recognize moral reasons for intervention. Thus, fostering moral courage cannot simply be a matter of getting our philosophical and moral principles correct, but also requires the truly practical wisdom of understanding the outlets and resources at our disposal when it becomes necessary to take a moral stand. It is such practical knowledge—which also includes experience in standing up for oneself in cases where others may have greater authority—which, in part, fosters the self-confidence necessary for morally courageous action,<sup>14</sup> and which makes it possible for individuals to map their sense of responsibility onto a concrete, feasible, and morally courageous course of action.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> On the relationship between confidence and courage, see Putman (2001).

<sup>15</sup> Several people have helped me in thinking about these issues by commenting on earlier drafts, directing my attention to helpful sources, and/or pressing me to consider difficult cases, especially Mike Austin, Joshua Kortbein, Ron Messerich, Duncan Richter, Rob Sica, Tommi Uschanov, and my wife, Christina. I must also thank an anonymous referee for *IJPS* whose insightful comments were of immense value in shaping the final version of this paper.

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