

# Emphasizing Virtue over Victory

## *Why We Should Adopt a Virtue Ethics Approach to Social Change*

By Jeffrey Allen Nall

### Introduction

As important as determining what is morally right or wrong, or how to address moral dilemmas, an important question is all too often overlooked: “Why should I make the often inconvenient effort to do the right thing?” This may seem like a simple question with obvious answers, but our experiences as morally fallible beings teach us otherwise. Even when there is agreement concerning whether or not a particular situation or practice is immoral, there is not always agreement about when we are obligated to address such moral problems, and whether making an effort to address a given moral problem would make a meaningful difference.

My experience as a father, friend, activist, and teacher, has taught me that people give a variety of reasons for failing to take action to address everyday moral problems. Upon becoming aware of pervasive injustices, many feel that there is nothing they can do to foster meaningful change; they feel powerless before deeply embedded, powerful, institutional networks of power and oppression. Second, many inspired to challenge inequality and injustice grow discouraged by their inability to effect *sweeping* social change in matters such as peace and militarism, economic inequality, corporate power, torture, gender inequality, animal rights, and so on. A common feeling in both cases is that individual or even small collective efforts are incapable of making a real difference.

One of the crucial claims I hear in the courses I teach on ethics and justice is: “Even

if I changed my own practices, everyone else would continue doing the same thing.” At age 8, my eldest daughter politely advanced this idea when we were discussing the terrible agony factory farmed cows experience in order to produce dairy milk. But these kinds of statements are not unique to the young. Over the course of many speaking engagements, I have heard similar statements from people of a variety of ages. There appears to be a firmly lodged idea burrowed into the conceptual framework of many Americans: “If I can’t succeed in bringing about *wholesale* or *sweeping* change, then my efforts would be wasted.” Put differently, “In order for my actions to be meaningful, they must be able to bring about sweeping or wholesale change.” The attending belief is that if one’s actions would not yield meaningful results, then one is alleviated of moral responsibility for failing to take such actions. Gandhi sums up these thought processes when he explains:

Men generally hesitate to make a beginning if they feel that the objective cannot be had in its entirety. Such an attitude of mind is in reality a bar to progress.<sup>1</sup>

Though understandable, these mindsets are nevertheless flawed and unjustified. The main error of this pessimistic line of thought is that it fails to account for the way in which our moral commitments are about much more than achieving particular “end results” or “victories”; specifically, our moral commitments are core components of our self-identity: they define us as individuals, and thus are as much about forging virtuous identities as achieving lasting victory over the forces of oppression. Secondly, such pessimistic outlooks are self-fulfilling prophecies that prevent the possibility of systemic change. Broad societal change is often the result of unpredictable surges in human solidarity. These surges and the social change they effect are arguably an emergent property resulting from countless acts of creative, compassionate moral thought and action in a variety of socio-cultural arenas of human life. Thus in diminishing the value of seemingly insignificant moral action, such arguments have the effect of preventing us from sowing the seeds of change.

Thus the present work seeks to advance two key claims: (i) we should emphasize living virtuously, for in doing so we embrace the moral weight and creativity of our individual lives, namely to manifest change through our exemplification of core values such as justice, care, and moral courage; and (ii) life offers us many examples of the

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<sup>1</sup> M.K. Gandhi, “Equal Distribution,” *Harijan* (August 25, 1940), quoted in Vandana Shiva, *Earth Democracy: Justice, Sustainability, and Peace* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2005), 97.

meaningfulness of individual virtuous lives, and the power they have to inspire broader social change.

### **Virtue over Victory: Seeking Change vs. Being Change**

The previously mentioned, fatalistic moral calculations miss one of the most important questions of human moral life: how will we define ourselves when we are confronted with facts of injustice? From a virtue ethics approach, those offering the *wholesale change or a waste of time* argument have too narrowly conceived of their life project. The question is not simply, “Is change possible,” or, “Is wholesale societal change possible?” Two important and too often overlooked questions are: “What kind of person do you wish to be?” And, “To what are you ultimately committed?”

Ethical theories such as utilitarianism and Kantian ethics begin by asking questions such as “What actions should I take?” In contrast, virtue ethics urges us to consider “What kind of person should I be?” Rather than thinking of morality as a question of one’s duties or as a question of balancing positive/negative consequences, virtue ethics contends that our objective in life should be to develop virtuous character traits and to be morally good people.<sup>2</sup> Put differently, virtue ethics emphasizes moral behavior as an expression of character or identity. As the philosopher Val Plumwood explains:

Virtue accounts, for example, are based on a set of commitments inherent in a particular type of identity, and from them care does “flow naturally,” that is, it expresses what the individual *wants* to do, as that particular sort of individual, rather than what he or she is constrained to do through duty.<sup>3</sup>

Virtue ethics, then, provides an interpretive lens that highlights the way in which our moral decision-making has at least as much to do with defining ourselves as it does with achieving a particular goal of helping others.

A focus on the virtuous life helps us understand the impoverishment of any morality solely concerned with expected outcomes. Even if we were in a situation in which change in one’s lifetime was not possible, a morally good person would nevertheless act with courageous defiance of the prevailing and at times undefeatable order. Consider the

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<sup>2</sup> Elliot D. Cohen, *Philosophers at Work: Issues and Practice of Philosophy* (New York: Harcourt College Publishers, 2000), 18.

<sup>3</sup> Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*. (New York: Routledge, 1993), 183.

following example. You live during a time of rampant sexism, but you know that sexism is immoral and based on the lie of male superiority. But it is nearly impossible for you to imagine that the whole of society will ever change its thinking on the matter. How would a “good”—anti-sexist—person act in such a situation? Would a person with such awareness or knowledge quietly go along with the injustice, or would a “good” person work to foster a just society in whatever ways possible, without overemphasizing likely outcomes? Would a good person ensure that, at the very least, he did not contribute to such immoral practices? Would a morally good person consent to complicity?

In *La Peste* (*The Plague*), which has been interpreted as an allegory for the Nazi occupation of France, Camus provides just such a thought experiment, and then offers his own view. In his book Camus’ protagonist, the physician Dr. Bernard Rieux, takes on the task of treating people who are beyond treatment. He does this because, in his estimation, a good life requires him to do so. His friend Tarrou, who joins Rieux in combating the plague, sums up this point this way: “All I maintain is that on this earth there are pestilences and there are victims, and it’s up to us, so far as possible, not to join forces with the pestilences.”<sup>4</sup>

Acting in this way requires that we realize the power of our ideas and our actions. Being a good person requires us to accept the moral responsibility of either endorsing the evil that pervades our world or combating it. While Camus’ work is read as absurdist, the fact of the matter is that Camus has given us a tale wherein individuals recognize that all they can really control is their identities, and this by taking possession of their actions, whenever possible, and living out fundamental principled commitments.

As the ethicist Elliot D. Cohen has written, virtues are habits of behavior or dispositions that inspire ways of acting, thinking, and feeling, “under certain conditions, which are *themselves* morally desirable.”<sup>5</sup> Put differently, a virtue is a morally desirable disposition that inspires a particular habit of thought, feeling, and action. Here the question becomes, “How is ‘morality’ defined?” The present work presupposes the truth of a particular pragmatic conceptualization of morality and the good life. Specifically, I am interested in securing a decent life for those with moral status. What entitles one to moral

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<sup>4</sup> Albert Camus, *The Plague*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (New York: The Modern Library, 1965), 229.

<sup>5</sup> Cohen, *Philosophers at Work*, 94.

status? Philosopher Peter Singer provides the following simple definition: having “interests” is the only requisite for moral status and moral concern.

It would be nonsense to say that it was not in the interests of a stone to be kicked along the road by a schoolboy. A stone does not have interests because it cannot suffer. . . . A mouse, on the other hand, does have an interest in not being tormented, because it will suffer if it is.<sup>6</sup>

The next question of course is, “What are ‘interests?’” Singer writes that interests include: avoiding pain, developing one’s abilities; satisfying basic needs for food and shelter; enjoying friendly and loving relations with others; and freedom to pursue one’s projects without unnecessary interference from others.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, the feminist philosopher Iris Marion Young conceptualizes the just society as one in which the members of the society enjoy the right to personal development and political autonomy.<sup>8</sup>

Such an understanding of justice leads us to contemplate its opposite: oppression. Those who are oppressed experience the “inhibition of their ability to develop and exercise their capacities and express their needs, thoughts, and feelings.”<sup>9</sup> To be oppressed is to experience unjustifiable barriers to one’s development. Oppression prevents people from flourishing. It is also worth noting that theories of oppression often focus too narrowly on violence as a form of oppression. While violence is most certainly a serious and far too common barrier to social justice, there are other frequently ignored forms of oppression. According to Young’s theory of oppression, there are five prominent “faces” of oppression: violence, exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, and cultural imperialism.<sup>10</sup>

Certainly some will object to Young’s ideas about justice and oppression or to Singer’s ideas about moral status. The present work seeks above all to address the many people who agree with Singer that suffering is something we should alleviate, whenever possible, and that oppression, as Young explains it, is wrong. For it is often these very people who draw on the previously discussed excuses for not taking action to resolve moral

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<sup>6</sup> Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 50.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 21, 27.

<sup>8</sup> Iris M. Young, “Displacing the Distributive Paradigm.” In *Ethics in Practice, An Anthology*, edited by Hugh LaFollette (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), 541.

<sup>9</sup> Iris M. Young, “Five Faces of Oppression,” in *Theorizing feminisms: A reader*, ed. E. Hackett and S. Haslanger (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 4.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

problems. Indeed it may be the weight of these moral burdens that provoke a kind of rationalization of desensitization to defend inaction and ambivalence.

With these general aims in mind the question becomes, “What virtuous traits should people strive to develop?” Cohen contends that the following virtues are crucial to being a morally good person: justice, benevolence, trustworthiness, moral autonomy, and moral courage. For Cohen, a just person is “consistent in her treatment of others,” “respects individual rights,” and honors “obligations to others.” The virtue of moral courage is, at its core, based on the *prima facie* principle that one ought to expose injustice and combat oppression even when it does not appear to be profitable to do so. Thus a morally courageous person “is disposed toward doing what he thinks is morally right even when he believes that his doing so means, or is likely to mean, his suffering some substantial hardship.”<sup>11</sup> A person is benevolent when “disposed to do good for others when she is reasonably situated, and to do no harm.”<sup>12</sup> Trustworthiness requires keeping promises with the understanding that, on some occasions, morally correct behavior calls for breaking promises if failing to do so would result in “some greater injustice.” Finally, a good person must be morally autonomous, meaning that one comes “to her own decisions about moral issues on the basis of her own moral principles; and then, in turn [acts] upon her considered judgment.”<sup>13</sup> To this list, feminist philosophers have added that good people are also compassionate and caring.

Some may say that moral courage often fails to procure relatively immediate results. Yet a longer view indicates that morally courageous people and their actions quite often sow the seeds of social reform, realized many, many years after their life. As the Russian author, literary critic, engineer, and public intellectual, Yevgeny Zamyatin wrote: “The germ of the future is always in the present.”<sup>14</sup> Tomorrow is written with the ink of today. In 1700, Mary Astell demanded greater marital rights for women and critiqued male domination in the home.<sup>15</sup> In the late 1700s, Nicolas de Condorcet argued that women were moral equals to

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<sup>11</sup> Cohen, *Philosophers at Work*, 94–96.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Yevgeny Zamyatin, *A Soviet Heretic: Essays by Yevgeny Zamyatin* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970), 127.

<sup>15</sup> Mary Astell, “Some Reflections Upon Marriage,” in *The Portable Enlightenment Reader*, edited by Isaac Kramnick, (New York: Penguin Books, 1995), 560-567.

men and advocated their full enfranchisement.<sup>16</sup> Astell and Condorcet offer examples of how social change can begin in lonely cries, cries that echo and eventually grow into a cacophony that propels change. Many may recognize that certain virtues and actions are laudable and yet do not feel up to them. While someone like the Egyptian democracy activist Asmaa Mahfouz, for instance, may seem wonderfully courageous, “I” could never act as she did. Virtue ethics rejects such essentialism.

Specifically, virtue ethics rejects the notion that our identities and capabilities are determined at birth. Moral virtues are learned through practice, by doing. Aristotle writes: “[M]oral virtue comes about as a result of habit. . . . We become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts.”<sup>17</sup> Similarly one becomes gentle by treating others gently; one becomes kind by being kind to others; one develops the virtue of care by caring; one develops the virtue of hard-work by working hard. In sum, our character is forged by our practices, by our actions.<sup>18</sup> As Professor of Philosophy Emmett C. Barcalow writes:

If Aristotle is correct, we deceive ourselves if we think that our character is not at all up to us; it is simply an excuse for lack of effort. If we discover that we are cowardly, or disloyal, or selfish, we can take steps to perform courageous, loyal, and unselfish actions. If Aristotle is correct, by repeatedly practicing such actions we can eventually extinguish the unwanted trait and acquire the wanted trait.<sup>19</sup>

John-Paul Sartre wrote that a human being is “nothing else but the sum of his actions, nothing else but what his life is.”<sup>20</sup> Similarly, the philosopher Cornel West says:

The question becomes, what kind of choices will you make in terms of the kind of human being you will be? What kind of traditions will you be a part

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<sup>16</sup> Jeffrey Nall, “Exhuming the History of Feminist Masculinity: Condorcet, 18<sup>th</sup> Century Radical Male Feminist,” *Culture, Society & Masculinities* 2, no. 1 (2010): 42-61.

<sup>17</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. W.D. Ross, book II, chapter 1, eBooks@Adelaide, 2004, quoted in Lewis Vaughn, *Doing Ethics: Moral Reasoning and Contemporary Issues* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010), 135.

<sup>18</sup> Lewis Vaughn and Theodore Schick, Jr., *Doing Philosophy, An Introduction through Thought Experiments* (New York: McGraw Hill, Inc., 2010), 424.

<sup>19</sup> Emmett Barcalow, *Moral Philosophy: Theories & Issues* (New York: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1998), 123.

<sup>20</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, “Existentialism Is a Humanism,” translation of lecture given in 1946, in *Existentialism from Dostoyevsky to Sartre*, ed. Walter Kaufman (Meridian Publishing Company, 1989). Accessed via <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/sartre>, April 2013.

of? What kind of story will you locate yourself in? What kind of narrative or set of narratives will you situate yourself in? Most importantly, what kind of legacy will you leave? Maybe we're most human when we stand before the coffins with the corpses of our loved ones, like our mothers and our fathers and our brothers and our sisters. Because that's where the deep existential question is: who are you gonna be in light of the past—the corpse; the present—you; the future—those who come after you?<sup>21</sup>

From this perspective, the question is not simply, “Can you achieve this or that singular goal?” but rather, “What kind of person are you determined to become?” Virtue ethics calls on us to supplant an emphasis on outcomes with an emphasis on being the best people we can be.

Instead of focusing on large, wide-ranging outcomes that may be often beyond our ability to predict or effect, we should focus on being the best possible people we can. In so doing we are at the very least assured of significantly reducing our contribution to the forces of oppression we object to, and increasing our contribution to the forces of justice with which we identify.

A morally good person is necessarily concerned with how his/her behavior impacts the people and beings in our community and world. But the calculation of likely outcomes is not sufficient for a moral life. For this work must be coupled with the moral insight that in order to be good people we must lead good lives, committed to not merely periodically pursuing noble goals but also regularly practicing—manifesting—the virtues of justice, love, compassion, moral courage, and nonviolence. In short, the overemphasis on identifying the ultimate strategy to make immediate, widespread social change comes at the expense of this foundational understanding: A good person, above all else, lives a life that is a testament to the social change she or he seeks. A good person may, sometimes, accomplish only a few seemingly small changes in her own time, but contributes to defeating oppression in the future in ways she can hardly imagine today. Her own life is in fact a concrete manifestation of the goodness she wishes to grow in the world. Virtue ethics offers us an important perspective on the question of how I can make the world a better place. The answer is an often repeated piece of persistent if ignored wisdom: be the change you seek.

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<sup>21</sup> Cornel West, “[President's Forum - Dr. Cornel West](http://www.hws.edu),” *Hobart and William Smith Colleges*, accessed April 2013 via <http://www.hws.edu>.

## Exemplifying Virtue

Virtues are best understood as existing in a web of relationality. Yet it seems appropriate to emphasize the enactment of moral courage given this virtue's import for social change. The importance and value of moral courage is evident in life of the Roman Christian Vibia Perpetua and of the anti-Nazi resister Sophie Scholl, as well as in a number of recent examples of moral courage, such as that exhibited by Mahfouz and by U.S. Army Private Bradley Manning. Each of these individuals offers inspiration to those who aspire to develop their own virtuousness. They further remind us not only of their mortality, but also that it is *because* of their mortality that the willing embrace of virtue stirs admiration. Their humanity, perhaps, reminds us of our own often latent capabilities.

### *Asmaa Mahfouz*

Mahfouz's efforts helped inspire the 2011, eighteen-day uprising against the oppressive regime of the long-time, U.S.-backed Egyptian leader Hosni Mubarak. In response to four Egyptians having set themselves on fire to protest government abuses, Mahfouz attempted to organize a spontaneous protest in one of Egypt's central plazas, Tahrir Square. Only a handful of people participated, and security forces quickly ended the action. In response, Mahfouz made a short video in which she called on her fellow citizens to rise up and take to Tahrir Square on a given day. Mahfouz disseminated the video via Facebook, not at all aware or capable of knowing what her actions would lead to. Mahfouz did this despite the fact that, according to American diplomatic cables made available by WikiLeaks, Egyptian security forces had engaged in torture and had possibly sexually assaulted regime opponents. In the video Mahfouz urged her fellow citizens to join her in standing up against the security forces terrorizing the people and in demanding their people's fundamental human rights. She goes on to denounce the pessimism and fatalism plaguing the people:

Your presence with us will make a difference, a big difference. Talk to your neighbours, your colleagues, friends and family, and tell them to come. They don't have to come to Tahrir Square. Just go down anywhere and say it, that we are free human beings. Sitting at home and just following us on news or Facebook leads to our humiliation, leads to my own humiliation. . . . If you stay at home, then you deserve all that is being done, and you will be guilty

before your nation and your people. And you'll be responsible for what happens to us on the streets while you sit at home.<sup>22</sup>

While a number of factors played a role in precipitating the uprising, many believe Mahfouz's videos contributed to its success. Her moral courage and compassion for those suffering in her nation were inspiring and effective in promoting social change in ways she could not have realistically predicted.

### *Bradley Manning*

Manning provides a related example of moral courage and moral autonomy. Manning is currently facing life imprisonment for the largest leak of state secrets in U.S. history. Indeed he was responsible for making the previously mentioned cables available to WikiLeaks to publish. One of the most notorious secrets he apparently leaked is the so-called "collateral murder" video. The video, made by the U.S. military, documents soldiers in an Apache helicopter attacking and killing twelve people on July 12, 2007, in Iraq. The soldiers appear to believe the men they are attacking are insurgents, though none of them are engaging in offensive military actions. In the end the soldiers' kills included a Reuters' videographer, Namir Noor-Eldeen, and another man who had attempted to help victims of the helicopter attack.

Manning can be heard taking responsibility for his leaks in a secret recording of his February 2013 pretrial hearing in military court, at Fort Mead.<sup>23</sup> Facing a lifetime sentence, and having already spent nearly three years in a military prison, Manning spoke about the previously mentioned video. He explained that his conscience was alarmed by the helicopter team's "delightful bloodlust," and the manner in which they "dehumanized the individuals they were engaging," referring to them as "dead bastards" and congratulating each other on the kills. Manning said he was saddened to hear one of the aerial crew members expressing hope that a wounded victim, who was trying to crawl to the curb, would pick up a weapon, and thus give the crew members cause to do more shooting. Further, he was "disturbed" by

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<sup>22</sup> Asmaa Mahfouz, "Uprising in Egypt: A Two-Hour Special on the Revolt Against the U.S.-Backed Mubarak Regime," *Democracy Now*, February 5, 2011, accessed via <http://www.democracynow.org>.

<sup>23</sup> "Bradley Manning Speaks: In Leaked Court Recording, Army Whistleblower Tells His Story for First Time," *Democracy Now*, March 12, 2013. Accessed via <http://www.democracynow.org> ; "Daniel Ellsberg: In Hearing Bradley Manning Act Out of Conscience, Secret Tape Refutes Media Slander," *Democracy Now*, March 12, 2013. Accessed via <http://www.democracynow.org>.

the callous response of the soldiers to the realization that their attack had significantly wounded children in the van that had been used in an attempt to rescue the injured.

The aerial weapons team crew members sound like they lack sympathy for the children or the parents. Later, in a particularly disturbing manner, the aerial weapons team crew verbalizes enjoyment at the sight of one of the ground vehicles driving over a body.<sup>24</sup>

Manning stated that his motive for leaking the documents was to “spark a domestic debate on the role of the military and our foreign policy in general.”<sup>25</sup>

Indeed, by providing journalists with information, Manning helped spur debate about U.S. military policies and actions in Iraq. A March 2013 *Guardian* and BBC Arabic report and documentary, “James Steele: America’s Mystery Man in Iraq,” draws in part on some of Manning’s leaks to detail the way in which the U.S. military armed and trained Iraqi death squads, which in turn ran torture centers around the country. The film’s executive producer, Maggie O’Kane, notes that the news “would not be coming out, if it hadn’t been for Bradley Manning. This information, the basic information, has been very key.”<sup>26</sup>

Specifically, the investigators began to piece together their story when they were tipped off by a reference in Manning’s leaks to Fragmentary Order 242. According to O’Kane, this is “a U.S. military order instructing U.S. soldiers to ignore Iraq-on-Iraqi torture,” an order that appeared in the documents more than one thousand times.<sup>27</sup>

I believe that Manning did have noble intentions in turning over leaked documents to WikiLeaks. His course of action came with enormous risk; risk that has now materialized in years of imprisonment and isolation which some have likened to inhumane treatment. His thoughtful moral analysis of the materials he leaked provides perhaps the best evidence that his intentions were motivated by sincere commitment to the virtue of justice. As regards virtue ethics and social change, it is worth considering that, while Manning may have hoped

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<sup>24</sup> Bradley Manning, “Bradley Manning Speaks: In Leaked Court Recording, Army Whistleblower Tells His Story for First Time,” *Democracy Now*, March 12, 2013, accessed via <http://www.democracynow.org>. N.B.: Manning was given a prepared statement; hence the stiffer rhetoric.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Maggie O’Kane, “BBC-Guardian Exposé Uses WikiLeaks to Link Iraq Torture Centers to U.S. Col. Steele & Gen. Petraeus,” interview by Amy Goodman, *Democracy Now*, March 22, 2013, accessed via <http://www.democracynow.org>.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

something good would come from his actions, all he knew for certain was that the reports and videos he examined revealed morally troubling conduct on the part of his own military organization. The existence of these materials, many of which are morally disturbing, was known by a great many other people. Yet it was not until Bradley Manning decided to take action that the American public and the global public, including citizens of Egypt, came to know of the misconduct of the U.S. government. So while Manning could have very well quieted his moral concern with pessimistic serenades or fears of punishment, his decision to act upon his commitments to moral equality has not only defined him as a heroic human being in the eyes of millions around the world, but has also exposed U.S. military abuses in ways that may well reverberate for many years to come.

### *Sophie Scholl*

The film *Sophie Scholl: Final Days* (2005)<sup>28</sup> offers an example of a virtuous life and the power it has to effect change in others. The film tells the story of Sophie and Hans Scholl who were, in life, brother and sister members of a non-violent, anti-Nazi student group, the White Rose. Sophie and Hans are German university students working under cover of night to write, print, and publish a series of letters or pamphlets challenging Hitler and the Nazi party. Their actions, as depicted in the film, are motivated by a desire to end the suffering the Nazi regime is causing the German people and those whose countries have been occupied and are being devastated by the regime.

The film's interrogation scenes are based on records from the actual interrogation. In one of them, the Gestapo investigator, Robert Mohr, confronts Sophie with evidence proving that she collaborated in the production of anti-Nazi literature. He assails her for violating her nation's laws, saying: "Without law, there is no order. What can we rely on if not the law?" Sophie replies that conscience is the true and rightful guide. Sophie's assertion that her conscience is the ultimate judge of right and wrong exemplifies the virtue of "moral autonomy," the idea that a good person comes "to her own decisions about moral issues on the basis of her own moral principles, and then, in turn," acts "upon her considered judgment."<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> *Sophie Scholl: The Final Days*, directed by Marc Rothemund (2005; New York: Zeitgeist Films, 2006), DVD.

<sup>29</sup> Cohen, *Philosophers at Work*, 94–96.

Frequently our movies and the media more generally present us with stories that start with some hideous crime—a common trope is the rape and murder of a loved one, or perhaps a political injustice—that, we are urged to believe, forces a protagonist to make a choice: either courageous, violent retaliation, or cowardly, passive withdrawal. Once courageous retaliation is chosen, a tidal wave of righteous violence is unleashed, and audiences are encouraged to cheer not in spite of but precisely because of the carnage. This vision of courage pollutes mainstream media including such Hollywood films as *Law Abiding Citizen*, *The Crow*, and *The Gladiator*. However, *Sophie Scholl* challenges this vision of courage as violent retaliation, a willingness to respond to threat or injustice with unsympathetic, punishing force. Members of the White Rose respond to the callous militarization of society and the bureaucratic destruction of innocent life by rejecting rather than adopting the dehumanizing means of those they oppose. Sophie, age 21, quotes her brother, “Strong in spirit, tender in heart.” Here the model of courage is not violence or retaliation; rather, it involves rejecting defeatism in favor of bold, defiant assertions of truth and justice, and this at the risk of one’s life.

During Sophie’s interrogation, investigator Mohr gives her the opportunity to reduce her punishment by renouncing her activities. When asked why she will not do so, she answers that she will not betray the ideas she has been defending. Here, and in her refusal to implicate her friends, the virtues of integrity and loyalty are exemplified. And when we hear Sophie’s agonized cry—when she is notified that she will immediately be put to death—we come to respect her actions all the more. She is human, vulnerable and afraid just like us. Her example forces us to realize that we are equally mortal, and all that is left to determine is whether or not we are equally morally courageous. Ultimately, Sophie’s efforts urge us to ask fundamental questions that lie at the heart of virtue ethics: “What do we ultimately stand for?” “Who are we?” “Who do we want to be?” “What will our legacy be?” “Whose side are we on?”

The Sophie Scholl of this film also embodies the virtue of reverence, a concept that is perhaps essential to a moral existence. Throughout the film Sophie is depicted as maintaining an awe for life itself, often looking out of windows to cherish blue skies, which symbolize freedom and possibility. This awe represents an awe for not merely her own existence but for all people who can also see the beauty and potential in an open blue sky. Sophie states simply, “Every life is precious.”

In *Reverence: The Forgotten Virtue*, Paul Woodruff writes:

Reverence is the virtue that keeps human beings from trying to act like gods. . . . Ancient Greeks thought that tyranny was the height of irreverence, and they gave the famous name of hubris to the crimes of tyrants. An irreverent soul is arrogant and shameless, unable to feel awe in the face of things higher than itself. As a result, an irreverent soul is unable to feel respect for people it sees as lower than itself.<sup>30</sup>

By contrast, the reverent lack hubris and feel respect even for even those who may be unlike them. For some like Sophie Scholl, the more one recognizes the fully beauty of life, the more anguish one feels when others are robbed of its bounty. Perhaps it is those who are most awake to the full glory of existence who are most persistently disturbed by the deprivations others are forced to endure. Yet, for Sophie this model of bravery does not come at the expense of her humanity and, thus, of her reverence. She does not convey inhumanity, cruelty, or abusiveness. She is, at critical moments, profoundly irreverent. This irreverence, however, is not the mocking of the innocent or of suffering or justice, but rather the appropriate mocking of the arrogance of authorities drunk on power. Perhaps it is this virtuous elegance that provokes her interrogator to become fond of her. The film suggests that as the persecuted retain their humanity, persecutors grow squeamish of their own inhumane ugliness. Thus we see that Mohr is morally conflicted, swinging from outrage over Sophie's actions, to soft, thinly veiled pleas for her to renounce her actions so that he may save her life.

Scholl died while Hitler was prevailing. Perhaps she was naïve to believe her moral stand was meaningful. Yet our admiration for her—something my students' reactions to the film suggest is fairly ubiquitous—teaches us that victory is not the ultimate mark of moral success.

### *Vibia Perpetua*

Very often losing with dignified moral courage is all the more inspiring. Indeed this was precisely the case with the once popular story of an aristocratic Roman woman, Vibia Perpetua, who, at the age of 22, refused to renounce her Christianity, and was consequently sentenced to be killed in the Roman amphitheater. According to Professor of Religion

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<sup>30</sup> Paul Woodruff, *Reverence: Renewing a Forgotten Virtue* (New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 2002), 4.

Elaine Pagels's account in *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent*, Vibia Perpetua was "forcibly stripped naked and placed in nets," and then "gored and thrown to the ground" by a "mad heifer." After suffering additional torment she was slain by a gladiator. Accounts of the event contend that she "screamed as she was struck on the bone; then she took the trembling hand of the young gladiator, and guided it to her throat."<sup>31</sup> Available accounts suggest Perpetua's actions were motivated by her religious convictions. They were acts of both moral courage and moral autonomy. Her actions, from what we know, were not planned to provoke a particular effect. Yet such examples of courageous Christians boldly and righteously confronting the Roman Empire inspired Christians such as Tertullian and Justin the Philosopher to become Christians, in spite of the Roman authorities and prevailing dangers.<sup>32</sup> Perhaps the lesson is that we too often underestimate the power of virtuous selfhood to produce meaningful social change, and that we would do well to become and live out the ideals we wish to see manifested in the broader culture.

### **Virtuous Struggle over Eternal Victory**

A variation of the *wholesale change or a waste of time* argument is what one could call the *winnable or worthless* argument. The basic idea here is that injustices are only worth fighting against when we can stop them forever. But this argument faces problematic implications that few could honestly embrace. For if the inability to permanently achieve something made trying to achieve it pointless, then the effort to live as long and healthy a life as possible would itself be pointless. Yet it is clear to a great many that striving to live a full life, despite the inevitability of death, is not pointless. Equipped with this realization one could see the profound error of making one's efforts to make the world a better place contingent on being able to achieve widespread and presumably permanent change. Broad societal victories—in politics, policies, and so on—are difficult to predict and they are fleeting. But championing just causes and living just lives are not. And they are, in more ways than not, up to us.

Bemoaning whether we can end racism, sexism, homophobia, exploitative capitalism, or militarism often distracts us from fundamental existential questions such as: "What kind

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<sup>31</sup> *Passio Sanctarum Perpetuae et Felicitas* 3, trans. H. Musurillo, in *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs* (Oxford, 1972), 106-131, quoted in Pagels, *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 35-36.

<sup>32</sup> Pagels *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent*, 36.

of person do I wish to be?” “What kind of life do I wish to lead?” And, “What sorts of principles will I exemplify?” As Zamyatin wrote in 1923:

Today we can look and think only as men do in the face of death: we are about to die—and what did it all mean? How have we lived? If we could start all over, from the beginning, what would we live by? And for what?<sup>33</sup>

Zamyatin’s demand for focus on the character our lives attest to was echoed, years later, by Vaclav Havel who wrote that it is a mistake to think of the struggle for social change as one that can be permanently won.

Neither I nor anyone else will ever win this war once and for all. At the very most, we can win a battle or two—and not even that is certain. Yet I still think it makes sense to wage this war persistently. It has been waged for centuries, and it will continue to be waged—we hope—for centuries to come. . . . It is an eternal, never-ending struggle waged not just by good people . . . against evil people, by honourable people against dishonourable people, by people who think about the world and eternity against people who think only of themselves and the moment. It takes place inside everyone. It is what makes a person a person, and life, life.<sup>34</sup>

In determining what to do, how best to live, we must turn over our morality to a simple calculus of likely outcomes. Though such a task has its place, for instance in crafting strategies for effective change, morally good persons—virtuous persons—are not motivated merely by outcomes. We must not live for victory, but rather we must live for virtue, perhaps above all the virtue of compassion-driven moral courage. Sometimes such moral courage outshines both our accomplishments and even our failures.

The practice of moral courage is itself a good. For example, in addition to the extraordinary leadership role he played in the Civil Rights Movement, one of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s most important legacies is his challenging of capitalism and U.S. militarism. The very act of giving a speech such as “Beyond Vietnam,” wherein King directly called the U.S. government the greatest purveyor of violence in the world at the time, was itself a moral victory. This is what virtue ethicists mean when they say that virtues, such as moral courage, are not merely a means to an end, they are ends in themselves. Their worth is not simply bound up in their capacity to affect some other kind of change, but is also indicated in their very engendering in the world. As the historian Howard Zinn wrote:

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<sup>33</sup> Zamyatin, *A Soviet Heretic*, 109.

<sup>34</sup> Vaclav Havel, *Summer Meditations* (New York: Vintage, 1993), 16.

To be hopeful in bad times is not just foolishly romantic. It is based on the fact that human history is a history not only of cruelty, but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, kindness. What we choose to emphasize in this complex history will determine our lives. If we see only the worst, it destroys our capacity to do something. If we remember those times and places—and there are so many—where people have behaved magnificently, this gives us the energy to act, and at least the possibility of sending this spinning top of a world in a different direction. And if we do act, in however small a way, we don't have to wait for some grand utopian future. The future is an infinite succession of presents, and to live now as we think human beings should live, in defiance of all that is bad around us, is itself a marvelous victory.<sup>35</sup>

While many of us view social change as involving something dramatic such as the ending of a war, passage of a new law, or abolishing an unjust cultural practice, Zinn reminds us that these climatic moments are often the consequence of countless numbers of individuals embodying virtues of justice despite the unfavorable conditions in which they find themselves.

### **Manifesting Our Desired Change**

Over the years I have regularly encountered feelings of powerlessness in friends, fellow activists, family members, and students. In the classroom, many students are dismayed and feel paralyzed when they think about confronting vast, institutional forces of oppression. In activist communities, some members feel their long hours spent working for justice have failed to procure meaningful results. These and other feelings are often present in the pews of progressive churches where I have spoken. As they are confronted with troubling facts, people are asking, “But what can we *do* about it?” On the one hand this is an important, honest attempt to move past knowledge to action. On the other hand the very question seems to ignore that promoting awareness and shifts in consciousness is a form of action in itself. Perhaps most importantly, such questions are meant, I fear, to disarm the feelings both of helplessness and of moral obligation that many people feel when they learn of some moral injustice. In many cases, underneath these questions lies the following protest: “But there is nothing we can do about these problems. We are too small, and the forces of oppression and injustice are too big.” And thus people are asking to be excused from having

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<sup>35</sup> Zinn, “The Optimism of Uncertainty,” *Common Dreams*, November 8, 2004, accessed via <http://www.commondreams.org>.

to even try.

Virtue ethics suggests that, when it comes to determining what our moral commitments should be, there is something profoundly wrong with overemphasizing the likelihood of “winning” certain battles or causes. From a virtue ethics perspective, we should replace our concentration on “victory” with a focus on “virtue”—a focus on morally desirable habits of thought, feeling, and action that are good in themselves, regardless of ultimate outcomes. A virtue ethics approach would, for instance, call on American citizens to replace the defeatist rhetorical questions “Why should I change when no one else will” and “What good can I do?” with “What would a good person do?” “What kind of person do I want to be?” and “Given this problem, how will I define myself?”

This is not to say that one should not be concerned with projected outcomes. Instead, the point is that our moral lives are about more than figuring out ways to foster change in others; they have as much to do with recognizing that our moral choices define us. Moreover, virtue ethics further functions to interrupt all-too-common reactionary rationalizations for inaction; turning the moral microscope, not so much on strategies for affecting others to alter their course of action, but towards *our* everyday habits of thought, feeling, and action. In doing so this moral lens reminds us that the manifestation of values we hold dear, such as justice, need not be put off until the world shifts in a new moral direction. Instead we may each choose to exemplify our most cherished values in our individual lives, thus directly and literally manifesting the change we seek.

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