Should Humanitarians be Heroes?

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ABSTRACT: Humanitarian aid workers typically reject the accolade of hero as both untrue and undesirable.1 2 Untrue when they claim not to be acting beyond the call of duty, and undesirable so far as celebrating heroism risks elevating “heroic” choices over safer, and perhaps wiser ones.3 4 However, this leaves unresolved a tension between the denial of heroism and a sense in which certain humanitarian acts really appear heroic. And, the concern that in rejecting the aspiration to heroism an opportunity is lost to in­spire more and better humanitarian action. Having set out this problem in more detail in Part I, the argument in Part II will suggest that a virtue ethics approach to humanitarian moral obligations can make good sense of our intuitions concerning the role of heroism in humanitarian action. In Part III I will argue that at least “professional” humanitarians, instead of rejecting heroism, should aim to be heroes, in the sense of displaying a virtue of humanity in high-stakes context, because this is consistent with the aim of humanitarian action. Finally, some lingering problems of demandingness and motivation are considered.

KEY WORDS: ethics, humanitarian, heroism, virtue, professional.

PART I—HEROISM POSES A PROBLEM FOR DEFINING AND PROMOTING THE ETHICAL ASPIRATIONS OF HUMANITARIAN AID WORK

To situate the argument, we will start with a case.

The Case of Prue

Prue is an intensive care physician who is experienced at working as a profes­sional medical humanitarian aid worker. She is aware that the COVID-19 pandemic is beginning to overwhelm the health system in a country where she has lived and worked before. She knows that if she were to volunteer to return to work as a humanitarian aid worker in that country she would be welcomed and would be very likely to make a positive impact on the lives of patients and her colleagues. Prue is currently sharing the care of her elderly mother with her sister. Prue’s departure to treat COVID-19 patients will have a major impact on all of them in terms of worry for Prue’s safety, loss of income to the family (hu­manitarian work does not pay so well), extra stress on her sister and separation from her mother.

The two questions we will deal with in this paper are: 1) If Prue decides to help treat COVID-19 patients (for right-making reasons)—is she a hero? 2) Should she aspire to be one?

To answer the first question, we must have a robust and coherent definition of heroism. To answer the second, we will need to link a definition to a normative claim that humanitarian aid workers (at least) ought to do such acts.

Heroism is a concept with a long history, divided, we can say, into two impor­tant branches.5 The first, and oldest, is that of the hero-as-champion. Achilles, for example, perhaps the greatest hero in the Iliad, is the best warrior, the champion of the Greeks. He typifies the kind of hero often seen in classical literature who we might classify as the “hero-as-champion.” The second concept is of the “hero-as-self-sacrificer.” This concept is at least as old as the New Testament, where the depiction of Jesus Christ is sometimes one of the self-sacrificing hero, but doubtless it is older than that. Perhaps most commonly, we recognise it in stories of the selfless actions of otherwise ordinary people who take risks to save lives, alleviate suffering, or fight for justice. This is the hero of the brave firefighter, or the tireless health worker, and perhaps especially of the brave bystander who stands up for a stranger.

It is this self-sacrificing type of hero that is most interesting both from a hu­manitarian and ethical point of view, but, as we shall consider later, the hero-as-champion model still has a role to play in ethics. However, for many humanitarian aid workers, and indeed moral philosophers, this kind of heroism as self-sacrifice simply does not make sense. The humanitarian—at least publicly—is wont to reject their classification as hero, insisting as respondents to a 2019 review of attitudes within the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) did that there are “no heroes, no medals, no statues” in humanitarianism.6 And moral philosophy, as we shall see, either situates heroism in a contested category of “supererogatory” action or denies that it is a coherent ethical category at all. It seems that heroism is more problematic than commonly thought.

To make progress here we first need to refine our definition. The idea that links both the concepts of heroism we have sketched is an act which goes be­yond the efforts of ordinary people, either in excellence or in self-sacrifice/risk of sacrifice. This idea is commonly captured in the concept of “going above and beyond the call of duty,” which is to say, acting even better (more ethically praiseworthy) than demanded by a common understanding of our moral obliga­tions in a particular circumstance. These acts are, of course, done free of coercion, there is not space in the common understanding of heroism for the hero to be forced into their heroic acts. And they are done in pursuit of significant moral worth—heroism is not concerned with the trivial only the weighty and good. In addition, it is necessary that the “hero-as-self-sacrificer” concept must involve some significant self-sacrifice. It is this significant sacrifice—or risk of such—that the appraiser of the act sees as turning what would otherwise have been simply obligatory (e.g., saving a drowning child when it is easy and low cost to do so) to something praiseworthy (e.g., saving the drowning child when the hero risks their life to do so). But this is only true if the relation between the sacrifice and the good achieved by it are appropriate—those who risk their lives for trifles are not heroes but fools. These acts must also produce a good result, ethically speaking, or be reasonably expected to produce that result—no one is labelled a hero for daringly risking their life to achieve some morally neutral or even vicious goal.7 Finally, it is not sufficient that heroes’ acts produce moral value, the hero must have intended that outcome. An accidental act is not heroic, and nor is one whose motive is different from the reasons that morally justify the act. That is to say, the hero must be appropriately motivated to do the good that the heroic act achieves (or attempts to achieve).8

Thus, we can identify criteria for a definition for the “hero-as-self-sacrificer.”

A hero:

(i) Freely commits an act/s that goes beyond their duty.

(ii) Is motivated to do the good that the act/s is intended to bring about (i.e., for right making reasons).

These acts:

(iii) Produce significant moral worth.

(iv) Entail appropriate significant sacrifices, or risk of appropriate significant sacrifice, to achieve this moral worth.

Arguably, this definition fits the case of Prue if she chooses to work as a medical humanitarian aid worker. However, it is still an ascription that is typically denied by those in Prue’s position, and is still not a prescription that humanitarian aid organisations are comfortable to make.

These reactions are not trivial. They go to conceptual and normative complexi­ties with the idea of heroism that are not easy to resolve. We ought, also, to be concerned with what is lost in this refusal to countenance the role of heroism in being a good humanitarian aid worker. We might ask whether in rejecting hero­ism, and instead asserting a more circumscribed set of duties, a way to inspire more and better humanitarianism is lost. Before introducing a conception of the virtuous humanitarian that we might find more inspiring, let us consider these two concerns of ascription and prescription.

The misgivings individual humanitarians feel with the heroism label perhaps stem from a reluctance to see themselves as acting beyond the bounds of ordinary morality. Indeed, as Julia Annas has pointed out, we rather expect heroes to assert just this denial.9 Heroes, who themselves claim to be acting “above and beyond” immediately bring suspicion on themselves as not being appropriately motivated (perhaps being somewhat vain or narcissistic) and therefore not really heroic in the sense that they don’t meet the appropriate motivation clause (iii) of our defi­nition. Isn’t this a paradox, Annas wonders? How can a hero be both be acting beyond the bounds of duty and convinced that they are not? It surely cannot be a criterion of heroism that the hero be self-deceiving, she asks.10 But we need not see this rejection of the heroism label by the “hero” as paradoxical, rather it is telling as to the kind of moral classification heroism is. I follow Julia Markovitz’s assessment that heroism is a comparative, or at least relational, concept between agent and appraiser. As such it is a judgement of praiseworthiness—that focuses on the agent rather than the act—for the performance of a morally valuable act that the appraiser feels they either could not match, or at least are very unlikely to match even were they to try.11 Whether the agent subjectively feels duty bound to act heroically is irrelevant to their classification as a hero.

More challenging to refute is the refusal by humanitarian organisations to prescribe or celebrate acts of heroism. This reluctance, we might hypothesise, is based on at least two concerns.12 The first is a concern that encouraging heroism would lead to recruiting and training humanitarians with the wrong kind of motive (a motive to be heroic), which in turn will lead to worse outcomes for the people needing humanitarian assistance (as well as the humanitarians themselves) where this motive leads to choosing “heroic” actions incurring risk and sacrifice that are not strictly necessary. The second concern is that promotion of heroism is unwise because it asserts an overly demanding moral framework that includes heroic action as required. Were this to be adopted, the argument continues, even if agents were to achieve this dauntingly high standard, their efforts to do so might engender the same problem of incentivising unnecessarily risky decision making.

Let us start with this “demandingness” concern, because this goes to the heart of what is troubling for moral philosophers about the nature of heroism, that is, the limits of duty. J. O.Urmson set the hare running in this debate in his famous 1958 paper “Saints and Heroes.” Urmson claims that moral frameworks, whether they put an emphasis on consequences, virtues, or duties, typically al­low just three classifications for actions, those we have a moral duty to do, those that are simply permissible, and those that we have a duty to not do (that are prohibited), but no room for heroic or saintly actions which are morally admired but not required. He illustrates this with two examples. The first suggests that a soldier who jumps on a dropped grenade and thereby kills himself to protect his comrades acts beyond his duty but is clearly morally praiseworthy for doing so. Further, claims Urmson, we would not say that his comrades, who did not sacrifice themselves, were wrong to not jump on the grenade. Urmson’s second example is of a doctor who volunteers to travel to a plague affected city to assist in the outbreak control, concluding that this voluntary effort cannot be regarded as obligatory.13 Here he anticipates the example of Prue. Urmson suggests that we need a fourth category of action “the supererogatory” to capture those acts—like heroic acts—which are good but not wrong not to do.14

But, this schema raises a question: if our duties are derived at least in part from the good they do for others, then how can really significantly good actions, like heroic actions, be beyond all duty? To explore this concern let us develop the case of Prue’s choice. Imagine that Prue does decide to go and treat COVID-19 patients. In doing so she claims that she is no hero, and that anyone in her position would do the same. This, let us say, elicits a few quizzical looks from colleagues who clearly interpret the claim that “anyone *would* do the same” as “anyone *should* do the same” which is to say anyone in Prue’s position should have the same motivation to, and in fact, act as Prue does. Hogan and Timmins have labelled this instinct to link producing good with duty as the Good/Ought Tie-Up.15 We might summarise it as three related claims about the normativity of moral value.

(a) the moral value of an act gives the moral agent a reason to perform it.

(b) the greater the moral value there is in an act the greater the reason to perform it becomes.

(c) we at least ought, if not must, do what would produce the greatest moral value from the available options.

On this view the good (moral value) is tied up with what we ought to do. But this is a problem for the common-sense conception of heroic acts which are highly morally valuable but also optional, which is to say that their non-performance is not blameworthy, as Urmson points out. Prue bumps into this problem when, in rejecting hero status, she appears to implicitly blame her colleagues for not joining her.

Urmson wants to allow for the optional status of heroic acts because of a concern that the demands of morality are simply too high if we do not allow for countervailing non-moral reasons—such as not wanting to take personal risks or make personal sacrifices—to weigh against our pro tanto duty to produce (or to be) good. Urmson suggests two important justifications for this view. The first is a practical consideration that amounts to a claim that given certain facts about the moral psychology of imperfect humans, insisting on very demanding moral standards will damage confidence in moral authority, leading, Urmson suggests, to an overall lessening in observance of moral norms. We will return to this claim a little later. The second, is that duties are a kind of constraint that exerts pressure on agents to act in a certain way, and that “there is something horrifying in the thought of pressure being brought on [the agent] to perform an act of heroism.”16 Here he suggests—if not explicitly—that additional moral value attaches to acts done free of moral pressure—and this possibility is lost if we insist on a duty to maximise the good or maximise being good. To these we might add a third consideration, nicely set out in Susan Woolf’s “Moral Saints,” that “moral perfection. . .does not constitute a model of personal well-being to­ward which it would be particularly rational or good or desirable for a human being to strive.”17 That is to say that Prue’s choice, if cast in only moral terms will lose much that is also important to Prue’s well-being, her personal goals, her familial life, her career perhaps, and that to insist on the existence of a duty to be as good or create as much good as possible is to impose a life style that would be irrational to universalise.

To summarise the argument so far, the accolade of heroism is commonly rejected by humanitarians as either untrue or undesirable (or both). Undesirable because heroic acts are damaging to acknowledge and promote as they might cultivate motives that lead to unnecessary risk and sacrifice, and untrue where those who appraise Humanitarians as heroic have not recognised the duty the hero feels. However, heroism as we have defined it appears to map onto cases of Humanitarian aid work such as Prue’s case, even if Prue does not feel heroic. However, in addition to the practical worries of Humanitarians not to promote heroism, moral theorists raise important theoretical concerns. To insist on heroism as a duty, according to Urmson and Wolf, seems to impose irrationally demand­ ing requirements on agents that we would be unwise to ask of them. However, there remains an argument—the good-ought tie up—for some level of obligation to do the “heroic,” and the concern that ruling out heroism as an aspiration for humanitarian aid workers impoverishes the possibility of inspiring more and better humanitarianism through celebrating excellence of this kind.

We can now turn to an alternative conception of moral obligation that might be able to rehabilitate a positive use of “heroism” or at least behaviour which meets our definition, as an ideal to inspire moral excellence for humanitarian aid workers. To be successful, this alternative must allow for a plausible rebuttal of the demandingness critiques of Wolf and Urmson and show how its adoption would guard against a tendency to motivate unnecessarily dangerous “heroic” decision making.

PART II—A VIRTUE ETHICS VIEW OF HUMANITARIAN OBLIGATIONS AND HEROISM.

To approach moral questions from the perspective of character is to answer the question “what should I do?” with the answer “do what the virtuous person would characteristically do.” Virtue ethicists draw on a tradition that reaches back into ancient history to identify correct behaviour with what is courageous, honest, temperate, generous, etc, to understand what the best course of action is in any context.18 There is, of course, no definitive way of defining the virtues and therefore what virtuous action is, but I will follow a neo-Aristotelian approach, in identifying virtues as character traits to feel and behave in ways conducive to achieving Eudaimonia—meaning fulfilment or contentment. To do so success­fully, to be truly virtuous, is a very difficult task. It is a kind of excellence that Aristotle likens to the excellence of a master craftsman which emphasises that the acquisition of virtue is a matter of long practice and learning. 19 To the extent that a moral agent is virtuous they will be more fulfilled, or happy in a profound sense of experiencing contentment and satisfaction with their own life, says Aristotle, but also and importantly contribute to the fulfilment of the moral community of which they are a part. Because, according to this tradition, such is the function of human beings—to live well together through rational action. Of course, all of this is very much up for debate in term of a convincing theory of moral value. But let us take it as granted that positing character virtues and exploring how they might influence ethical thought is one valid way of engaging with questions of morality, and that the neo-Aristotelian version of that theory is a credible attempt at fleshing this out.

How does a virtue ethics approach change our intuitions about Prue’s claim to not be a hero, even whilst acting in a way that meets our definition of hero-as-self-sacrificer? The first thing to notice about a virtue ethics approach is that it tends towards a perfectionist view of morality. The perfectly virtuous person is an impossible ideal. They serve as a guide towards a more virtuous path, to a destination that cannot be reached.20As such the humanitarian choice of Prue—if we are to accept it as a virtuous choice—is not strictly supererogatory. There is no space in this conception of virtue ethics for the supererogatory because it eschews a model of basic duties.

But here we must say something of the role of duty in a theory of moral vir­tue. Virtue ethics approaches do not typically use the language of duty, but it is not wholly alien either. Roger Crisp has pointed out that whilst in Aristotle duty does not play a motivational role his description of the virtues is couched in the language of duty.21 Rosalind Hursthouse’s neo-Aristotelian exposition of virtue ethics cites Virtue Rules—or V-Rules—which act as principles or duties would in a deontological theory—such as the V-Rule “be honest” in place of the duty “do not lie.”22 What these theories typically do not do is make a distinction between perfect and imperfect duties, between “musts” and “oughts,” as Urmson wants to do. Those motivated to act as the virtuous agent would characteristically act in the same circumstances are always under some level of obligation to do the virtuous act. Failure to do so—if it is possible to do so—is always blameworthy. But as we shall see this caveat—of possibility for the agent—does much work in partially explaining the phenomenon of supererogation, if not justifying it as a category in ethics. However, this still leaves this approach open to the demanding­ness objections raised by Urmson, who would likely object that such view does not do justice to our strong intuitions that some acts are good but not wrong not to do, and perhaps made impossible if subject to moral pressure.

The proponent of virtue ethics might elect to take this criticism head-on. Being virtuous—attaining a level of excellent behaviour comparable to an ideal virtuous agent—is just always difficult, they might say, most people do not manage it even when they try. And this is especially so when the stakes are high. Julia Annas says something like this when she asserts that heroism is the admirable capacity to demonstrate ordinary virtues under challenging circumstances. She says: “*A hero [in a challenging situation] is not someone of outsize virtue; she is just someone who continues to act decently, bravely and so on. What most people fail to do is to sustain even the everyday level of decency and bravery that they did before.”*23

We can hear echoes of Albert Camus’s Doctor Bernard Rieux here, when in the novel “The Plague” Rieux defends his decision to stay and risk his life treating bubonic plague patients saying, “There is no question of heroism in all of this. It’s a matter of common decency.”24 Annas and Camus are supporting a minimalist conception of heroism, the capacity to remain generous, diligent, and to do your job even in the face of death. But even if this view blunts the criticism of demandingness by asserting a view of heroism as simply “common decency” in extremis, it does not offer an explanation of the actions of those who are more proactive in their beneficence—like the doctor who travels to the outbreak. It does not really explain our strong intuitions that these actions are supereroga­tory and even heroic.

Nevertheless, this view of heroism as common decency in extremis has a lot to recommend it, but it is perhaps incomplete.25 A slightly different view, which does better justice to our everyday assumptions about heroism we might call the “uncommon decency” view. In the “uncommon decency” view paradigmatic heroic acts are located on the outer end of a continuum of acts that run from vice to perfect virtue. They are not beyond virtue; however, they still can meet the requirements of our first clause in the definition of “hero-as-self-sacrificer” after a small but significant amendment. Under the “uncommon decency” view we can define the hero as someone who:

**Freely commits act/acts that go beyond** *ordinary virtue***.**

Here the replacement of “their duty” with “ordinary virtue” captures the sense in which their actions are uncommon, whilst still allowing for them to be situated within a virtuous continuum, not beyond all virtue. By ordinary I do not mean that some people have obligations to be virtuous that others do not, at least not at this first order level of obligation.26 Rather, by ordinary virtue I mean the level of virtue that can be attained with ordinary levels of wisdom and effort. The hero is someone who demonstrates virtuous action with significant moral worth, where that action requires extraordinary levels of wisdom and effort—showing “uncommon decency.”

On this view heroic action would be found as a subset within the very good. The key variable that identifies the heroic is the level of difficulty that pertains to that context in terms of meeting the target of virtuous behaviour—which we can call the *virtue-difficulty*. At and beyond some level of virtue-difficulty we are tempted to describe actions as heroic and their authors as heroes.

It might be objected that difficulty and moral value are not in a linear re­lationship, and that there are plenty of morally valuable actions that are easy to perform, well within the capacities of most people, but which are typically considered supererogatory. Acts of gratuitous kindness are a paradigm case. For example, the choice to offer to mow your elderly neighbour’s front lawn whilst their son is away, is hardly a difficult choice to make and implement, but also not obviously a basic duty to do. If *virtue-difficulty* is the variable that allows for the feeling of supererogation how can we make sense of these kinds of “virtue-easy” supererogatory acts?

The answer lies in recognising that many such acts are not in fact easy and in the grasp of most people. When understood as part of a lifetime of choices that must be well balanced to remain virtuous, we can see that the virtuous agent makes the right decision as to how much time they should devote to such benevolent acts such that they can consistently, as a matter of character, maintain a benevolent disposition and behaviour, even whilst suitably cultivating and displaying other virtues suitable to their role and situation. That is no straightforward judgement. Those who get it right, or mostly right, we are apt to see as virtuous. Those who err too far on the side of self-sacrifice we might see as foolish and those err too far the other way as mean.

Heroic supererogatory acts, in the “uncommon decency” view, are similarly the result of a wise judgement that balances the virtues which bear on that mo­ment of choice, as one of many over a lifetime, and come out with an appropriate attitude and action. Indeed, this is true of many virtuous acts. But for heroic acts, I claim, these choices concern matters of high moral worth, and sacrifice (and or risk of sacrifice). Which is to say that heroic acts are *virtue-difficult* acts with high stakes. These high stakes are such that rouse admiration in others, of course, but also add to the difficulty in exercising practical wisdom. With this emphasis on difficulty, I stray from the view of Annas, and perhaps Camus, by reintroducing an element of the idea of “hero-as-champion.” In these high-stakes situations, where the choice to be virtuous is both difficult to discern and hard to put into practice, then the successful virtuous agent is somewhat like an ethical champion, demonstrating excellence that few could match, were they in that situation.

PART III—NORMATIVE SUGGESTIONS

It is with this idea of “situation” that we now turn to the normative implica­tions for this view of heroism for humanitarians like Prue. Because to make sug­gestions as to how this approach might affect such decision-makers we must put some normative meat on the bones of this theory, sketching at least what being a virtuous humanitarian might involve. Understanding this, is to understand something of Prue’s situation, and therefore to understand why she does not feel heroic—as per our “hero-as-self-sacrificer” definition—but how we might think she is.

The first thing to say is that Prue is not an ordinary person, she is an experi­enced medical humanitarian aid worker. This role is one that brings additional ethical demands. In this way we can say that humanitarianism—whether medical or not—can be treated as a profession. Indeed, modern humanitarian aid work­ers—like established professions—are increasingly required to undergo specific training and accreditation. And they can only access their place of work—though employment by appropriately accredited organisations. Further, like medicine, law, education, social work the humanitarian aid “profession” has as its goal a public good—to save lives, alleviate suffering and protect the dignity of victims of war and disaster—which generates special ethical obligations and entitlements for those who perform these roles. Theorising the obligations of such profession­als is a well-established field of ethical inquiry. We can agree, along with virtue theorists in this tradition, that the ethical significance of assuming a professional role is shown in how it alters the obligations an agent feels through modifying the virtuous ideal to which they strive.27 In their elaboration of a virtue ethics approach Oakley and Cocking suggest the concept of the “regulative ideal” as a psychological theory of how decision-making agents target their actions:

To say that an agent has a regulative ideal is to say that they have internalised a certain conception of correctness or excellence, in such a way that they are able to adjust their motivation and conduct so that it conforms—or at least does not conflict—with that standard.28

They go on to claim that the adoption of certain professional roles entails the focus on a regulative ideal that is specific to that profession. For example,

. . . being a good doctor, on our account, involves having appropriate disposi­tions, emotions, and sensitivities in a medical context, as well as performing appropriate actions,29

Specifically, Oakley and Cocking suggest that the good doctor will possess the virtues of medical beneficence (including compassion), Truthfulness, Trustworthi­ness, Courage, Humility, and Justice. Whilst they do not use this label, we might call this approach a “virtue-set.” A “virtue-set” is a collection of virtues that are especially relevant to excellence in the performance of a particular role. Such a set is what is encapsulated—whether explicitly or implicitly—in the regulative ideal of the profession. In the case of humanitarianism, I believe it is possible to sketch out a plausible virtue-set which would conform to a regulative ideal of the/or an excellent humanitarian.30

Whilst the job of elaborating such a virtue-set would be a book length exercise we can say with confidence that the set must—as a whole—support a portmanteau virtue of humanity. This virtue is sometimes expressed as synonymous with benevolence, or compassion. Hume sees it as a compound sentiment to feel both *with* and *for* someone suffering, such that motivates the agent to act benevolently to alleviate that suffering. Aristotle is famously silent on this kind of benevolence, but we can assert that there is an “Aristotelian mean” of disposition that lies on a continuum from pure self-absorption to selfless universal love, and that such a mean we might call humanity. For professional humanitarians, the devotion to their role—to the public good of their role—has the effect of shifting the mean of this virtue further towards universal love. Such a virtue will be central to a humanitarian virtue-set, helping to regulate such virtues as generosity, respectful­ness, courage, loyalty, and humility—that would be likely candidates for inclusion in such a set—ensuring that the tendency for self-sacrifice is generous but well balanced for achieving the aim of humanitarian action over time. This sketch of the character of the virtuous humanitarian is, of course, ludicrously brief, but it can perhaps offer enough to suggest how such an agent might approach her high-stakes decision making.

Having such a virtue-set as a professional humanitarian entails a shift in dis­position to act and feel in accordance with that virtue-set when one is “wearing one’s humanitarian hat.” If we consider Prue’s case in this light, we can see that Prue, when faced with the knowledge that help is needed to fight the pandemic, is immediately going to feel an empathy with those effected, a compassion for this plight and a desire to help. As a professional humanitarian, she will feel an obligation to act congruent with her loyalty to the cause of humanitarianism, and she will feel empowered to act through her disposition to generosity to those in need, and courage to face uncertainty risk and sacrifice to do so. Finally, tempered by humility in terms of her capacity to achieve her desire to help she will exercise her practical wisdom to adjudicate the tensions between these and other (perhaps virtuous) motives she may have, and make her decision. However, the implica­tion of having a virtue-set is to load the dice on this adjudication. The fact that Prue has cultivated these virtues in the context of her professional humanitarian work, are going to make it more likely that she will find the demands they suggest weightier than if she did not. This is not to say that she has brainwashed herself to be a self-sacrificing zealot to the cause. That would not pass muster as a virtuous disposition, which, by definition, must be congruent with a broader regulative ideal of general virtue. But what it does mean is that where there are grey areas in terms of understanding individual obligations—and there are many—she will tend towards more selfless, benevolent, courageous etc, which is to say humane decisions when she is called upon to be a humanitarian We can illustrate this by making a rough comparison between two “Prues,” one aspiring to the humanitarian virtue-set and another operating with common-sense morality but who has made no special effort to cultivate the virtue-set. We can reasonably claim that Prue1 will be more likely to choose to volunteer in cases like the one we have outlined. More importantly, she will reliably volunteer in more cases where her humanitarian obligations are not obvious than Prue2. This claim is justified by the observation that having any virtue is to reliably react to situations in “the field” of that virtue in a virtuous way.31 Prues’s virtue-set dis­poses her to reliably tend toward humane, courageous, generous etc. responses. Prue2 may also choose to volunteer, but it is reasonable to suppose that, given her relative lack of virtue, she will not do so as reliably as Prue1. This gives us grounds to think that a focus on developing a humanitarian virtue-set is going to better achieve the aims of humanitarianism in so far as it delivers a more reliable supply of professional humanitarian volunteers.

But what of the nitty gritty of humanitarian action, the life and death decisions in the field—of whether to be a hero there or not? Would Prues’s tendency to take high-stakes virtuous action be better—in terms of the aims of humanitarian action—than the less reliably selfless, courageous etc. of Prue2?

This is not obvious. As we noted at the outset, humanitarian organisations are keen to avoid emphasising an ethic of self-sacrifice let alone heroism. Of course, the heroic disposition that is of concern to these organisations is not that of the high-stakes virtue we have outlined. However, the point remains that whilst there may be obvious reasons to prefer an individual humanitarian to act consistent with a “high-stakes virtue” approach it may be that from a collective organisational point of view this disposition could be harmful. One version of this claim is the concern that professional humanitarians ought to be more like disciplined soldiers, following orders to better achieve the general’s strategic aims. Those with the virtue-set we have described may be more likely to under­mine organisational decisions (say to refuse to withdraw medical services from a village in the context of heightened insecurity) because of their compassionate, brave, selfless character. Their loyalty to the vocation of humanitarian relief of suffering could outweigh their willingness to follow organisational directives and so undermine the collective ability of the organisation to direct their efforts according to their best judgements. This is, at least in part, what is implied by the idea that “humanitarian heroes” can be dangerous decision makers, even when their motives are right-making. I think this criticism needs to be taken seriously. However, its strength depends on a somewhat skewed interpretation of both the humanitarian context and the proposed virtue-set.

When considering the role of the virtuous professional we must include the idea that they are often functioning within a wider collective effort. Professional doctors are often working in teams, in hospitals, or as part of public health efforts. Professional teachers are implementers of school policies, education department directives, as well as their own classroom decisions. Similarly, professional hu­manitarians are not solo operators but typically work in teams as part of large organisations. Like these other professionals, they must bring to this element of their work a critical, creative and pragmatic approach that respects the interests of the people they seek to help as a primary value. It is likely an oversimplification to understand the extent of the obligations of the modern professional soldier as the unquestioning following of orders. It certainly is even more true of profes­sional humanitarians. The virtue-set of the virtuous humanitarian includes the loyalty to the aim of the profession—what Oakley and Cocking call its “public good”—which must entail the responsibility to critically engage with organisa­tional decisions in order that they better serve this good.

Similarly, the reality of humanitarian decision making is not always—or even often—a top-down affair that leaves most professional humanitarians as recipients of instructions more than decision makers. Professional humanitarians must make decisions with high stakes at all levels. The driver who has to make a call as to the safest route to take, the project level manager who has to decide whether to evacuate her mobile health team from an insecure site, the medical coordinator who must decide how best to manage a disease outbreak with very limited resources, and the operations manager at headquarters who must decide whether to deploy a team to an active warzone all have this responsibility. My claim then, is that were more of these professional humanitarians approaching these decisions with a humanitarian virtue-set then this would tend towards more high-stakes virtue decisions being made. Further, these decisions would be beneficial for those they seek to help through a tendency for more “high-stakes virtue” heroism which must be cashed out—at least in large part—by better hu­mane outcomes over time. But these decisions are also beneficial to humanitarians themselves—as virtues are their own reward—and in terms of the fitness of the organisations with which they work through constructive critical engagement.

PART IV—PERSISTENT PROBLEMS OF DEMANDINGNESS AND MOTIVATION

On this view then it appears that there is a case to be made for “professional” humanitarians like Prue to aspire to heroic action as has been redefined. However, despite asserting that the mean of the virtue of humanity is defined by an effective balancing of self-directed and other-directed love, I have allowed for the role of “professional” humanitarian to shift this balance towards other-directed love and therefore reopen the objection that such an ethic may be too demanding, resulting in too much failure or not enough “heroes.” It must be conceded that such an objection comes along for the ride when an aspiration to virtue is invoked. What matters then is whether more is lost than gained in this clash of values. Urmson claims that examples such as the failure of alcohol prohibition in the United States demonstrate that too demanding a standard (in this case a criminal law) serve to undermine faith in the authority of that standard. But, we need not accept such a claim. Where the justification of the standard is well grounded—as prohibition case perhaps was not—and the severity of the blame for failing to meet it is re­flective of its difficulty, then high standards might still command respect—if not universal adherence. What they must also do, to shake off this demandingness objection, is inspire a greater level of virtuous action than would otherwise be the case, even if it—inevitably—falls short of perfect virtue. Whether this would be true of promoting a humanitarian virtue-set is untested, and whether there are enough would-be humanitarians willing to (and capable of) cultivating such a virtue-set is unknown. But the effort is surely worth consideration.

Finally, a word on motivation. At the outset we noted the objection that celebrating and promoting heroism may engender the wrong kind of motive in humanitarian aid workers. The virtue ethics approach we have sketched might respond to this objection by asserting that the definition of a virtue includes the need to be motivated by the target of the virtue not the attainment of the virtue. For example, the virtuous motivation to be generous is to bring joy to your benefi­ciaries, not to attain the virtue of generosity. On this view virtuous humanitarians are more likely to act heroically but will not do so for the sake of heroism, but only for the target of the humanitarian virtue-set. However, such a neo-Aristotelian approach remains open to the related charge that the meta-motivation is to achieve personal eudaimonia, and that this is irreducibly egoistic. To defend this objec­tion well beyond the scope of this paper, but we hardly need to. Whether virtue ethics is built on some kind of egoism or not, at the level of action, as a normative framework to guide humanitarians, it bears careful consideration.

ENDNOTES

1. Throughout this paper I will use humanitarian aid workers and humanitarians to refer specifically to those aid workers who work for recognised aid organisations dedicated to “humanitarian” aid work as defined by the Sphere Standards as pursing the humanitar­ian imperative “. . . that action should be taken to prevent or alleviate human suffering arising out of disaster or conflict, and that nothing should override this principle.”Sphere Handbook: Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response, 2011, (SPHERE, 2011).

2. Hugo Slim, *Humanitarian ethics: A guide to the morality of aid in war and disaster* (London: Oxford University Press, 2015), 226–7.

3. Respondents to a 2019 review of attitudes within the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)reported that there are “no heroes, no medals, no statues” in humanitarianism. Claudia Brühwiler, Patricia Egli, and Yvette Sánchez, “The ICRC at a crossroads: Swiss roots—international outlook,” *Journal of International Humanitarian Action* 4, no. 1 (2019). https://doi.org/10.1186/s41018-019-0060-0.

4. For example, this testimony from a Humanitarian worker surveyed about motiva­tion “When someone says, “oh aren’t you good doing that,” I kind of think “who are you talking about?” I mean I don’t think I’m good doing it, I feel like it’s my duty to do it.” (Humanitarian Worker) in Natasha Tassell and Ross Flett, “Motivation in humanitarian health workers: a self-determination theory perspective,” *Development in Practice* 21, no. 7 (2011). https://doi.org/10.1080/09614524.2011.590889.

5. A third meaning which is synonymous with protagonist in a literary or filmic context is not so relevant here as it is quite distinct from the meanings interesting to ethics.

6. Claudia Franziska Brühwiler, Patricia Egli and Yvette Sánchez, “The ICRC at a crossroads: Swiss roots—international outlook,” *Journal of International Humanitarian Action* 4, no. 13 (2019). https://doi.org/10.1186/s41018-019-0060-0

7. This can be a point of contention where the moral status of goals is contested. Is the Nazi soldiers’ self-sacrificing attempt to save his comrades, good and so heroic? It seems hard to agree that it is, and this is because so much turns on whether the moral justification for the action must be subjective or (somehow) objective. If we allow it to be subjective—as I am inclined to do—then we must allow for objectively bad motives to underpin acts of genuine heroism.

Julia Markovits, “Saints, Heroes, Sages, and Villains,” *Philosophical Studies: An Inter­national Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition* 158, no. 2 (March 2012).8. For a deeper discussion of this point see:

9. Julia Annas, “Virtue and Heroism” (2015), 6.

10. Although it has been argued that this is possible, even required if heroes are to be taken as incorrect in their claims not to be doing something supererogatory. See Alfred Archer and Michael Ridge, “The heroism paradox: another paradox of supererogation,” *Philosophical Studies* 172 (June 2015). https://doi.org/10.1007/s11098-014-0365-1

11. Markovits, “Saints, Heroes, Sages, and Villains.”

12. A third is also possible but less relevant to our discussion, that to emphasise the protections afforded humanitarian aid workers under International Humanitarian Law, aid organisations are reluctant to imply through celebrating self-sacrifice that the killing of aid workers is somehow to be expected.

13. Urmson contrasts this example with that of the doctor who lives in the plague affected city and chooses to continue to work and not try and flee the plague. This Urmson sees as a case of doing one’s duty, even though it is difficult, and therefore not supereroga­tory.

14. This formulation of the supererogatory comes from David Heyd not Urmson, but is neater than Urmson’s in so far as it avoids problems associated with definitions drawn from Urmson such as “good to do but not bad not to do” which fails to capture examples of where a failure to do supererogatory acts may be “bad” in terms of consequences.

15. Terry Horgan and Mark Timmons, “Untying a knot from the inside out: reflections on the “paradox” of supererogation,” *Social Philosophy and Policy* 27, no. 2 (16 June 2010), http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S026505250999015X

16. J. O. Urmson, “Saints and Heroes,” in *Essays in Moral Philosophy*, ed. Melden A. I. (University of Washington Press, 1958).

17. Susan Wolf, “Moral Saints,” *Journal of Philosophy* 79 (Augst 1982), 419–39.

18. Of course debate continues concerning the full list of virtues, but what is remark­able is the consensus over thousands of years over what some version of the following list of virtues or categories of virtues: courage, honesty, benevolence, justice, temperance, humanity, transcendence and wisdom.

19. Aristotle and W. D. Ross, *Nicomachean Ethics*, ed. ProQuest (Blacksburg, VA: Virginia Tech, 2001), 91–2.

20. Because as Annas, “Virtue and Heroism” points out the ideally virtuous person is virtuous in all situations, whereas real people’s virtue is tested in a comparatively small set of situations.

21. Roger Crisp, “Supererogation and Virtue,” in *Oxford Studies in Normative Ethics: Volume 3* (Oxford University Press, 2013). 7.

22. Rosalind Hursthouse, *On virtue ethics*, ed. ProQuest (Oxford, NY: Oxford Univer­sity Press, 1999), 37

23. Julia Annas, “Virtue and Heroism,” 2015.

24. Albert Camus, *The plague*, 1st Penguin Edition ed. (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1960), 136.

25. Andrew Crowden notes its relevance in recent piece in the Scientific Inquirer.Andrew Crowden, “Decency, Kindness, and Virtue in the Time of COVID-19,” *The Scien­tific Inquirer* (9 July 2020). https://scientificinquirer.com/2020/07/09/the-big-question-with-andrew-crowden-decency-kindness-and-virtue-in-the-time-of-covid-19/.

26. Although I will argue later that adopting professional roles alters adds obligations for those professionals.

27. Justin Oakley and Dean Cocking, *Virtue Ethics and Professional Roles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/virtue-ethics-and-professional-roles/D1959F52733725C9FBD35F0E88D0EAF7.

28. Oakley and Cocking, *Virtue Ethics and Professional Roles*, 25.

29. Ibid., 92.

30. We need not insist that there is only one model for the virtuous humanitarian although perhaps all will share a certain core virtue-set.

31. See Christine Swanton for a useful elaboration on the “field” of virtuous Chris­tine Swanton, “Cultivating Virtue: Two Problems for Virtue Ethics,” in *Cultivating Virtue: Perspectives from Philosophy, Theology, and Psychology.* (Oxford University Press, 2014).

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