Hunt, Luke William. The Police Identity Crisis: Hero, Warrior, Guardian, Algorithm.

New York: Routledge, 2021. Pp. 182. $160.00 (hardback), $48.95 (paperback).

Work on policing has long been a backwater in philosophy. Rarely have the leading figures in political and moral philosophy of the past century paid much attention to the subject. Though there are some important philosophical works on policing like John Kleinig’s *The Ethics of Policing* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), nothing resembling the expansive literature on just war theory exists for policing. The discipline’s neglectful attitude toward policing appears to be changing, however. In recent years, as mass uprisings sparked by police brutality have put policing at the center of public debate, philosophy—like many other fields—has begun to take greater interest in the topic.

Luke William Hunt’s research is representative of that trend. *The Police Identity Crisis: Hero, Warrior, Guardian, Algorithm* is his second book on policing, which follows *The Retrieval of Liberalism in Policing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019). Though only two years separate the publication of these books, much occurred in the intervening period. On Memorial Day 2020, Minneapolis police murdered George Floyd and soon after Black Lives Matter protests broke out across the world. In *The* *Police Identity Crisis*, Hunt builds on his earlier book’s project of developing a conception of policing within the liberal tradition while addressing issues raised by recent protests, like calls to defund and abolish the police.

Unlike most philosophers writing on policing, Hunt has experience in law enforcement, having previously worked as a Special Agent in the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). He acknowledges this background in the Preface but rejects that it gives him any “sort of privileged perspective” (ix). Here Hunt downplays what his perspective brings to philosophical debates on policing. Even if his perspective is not privileged, his years working with the FBI certainly gives him a different perspective from others in his field. Though a philosophical literature on policing dominated by law enforcement voices would lack critical distance from the subject, a literature devoid of such voices would have its own limitations. It would rely on a narrower range of perspectives and miss out on potential insights that come from having diverse points of view. The discipline benefits from having in Hunt an astute observer of both the dangers and promises of policing, informed by firsthand experience wrestling with that tension.

In *The Police Identity Crisis*, Hunt considers and ultimately rejects four candidates for how police should understand themselves—as heroes, as warriors, as guardians, and as officials guided by algorithms. These identities are problematic in different ways, but they all are part of a larger problem of police seeing themselves as distinct from their communities and in conflict with them. As Hunt puts it near the close of his book, the fundamental question for policing comes down to: “Are the police at war with the community, or are they collectively seeking justice as members of the community?” (160). In both theory and practice, there is a failure to develop and embrace a conception of police as partners with the community in advancing justice. Hunt sees that failure at the root of many ills that plague policing today.

The divide between police and the communities they serve is present in popular notions of officers as heroes. Police are taught that they “are heroic sheepdogs on a warrior’s path to protect the sheep from wolves.” Hunt points out the pitfalls of this mindset: “But who are the wolves? They are not like most of us (sheep), meaning that they are a different type of person altogether—what we might call *other*. The idea of the *other* becomes manifest through ‘us versus them’ rhetoric in policing” (31). By lifting themselves up as heroes, police come to see significant portions of the population whom they should serve as irredeemable villains.

There is much to admire in Hunt’s critique of the hero identity pervasive in policing. What police departments and the media often celebrate—daring feats of crime fighting, arrests, and stereotypical masculine qualities—minimizes skills and traits increasingly in demand (see Michael Sierra-Arévalo, “Reward and ‘Real’ Police Work,” in The Ethics of Policing: New Perspectives on Law Enforcement, ed. Ben Jones and Eduardo Mendieta [New York: New York University Press, 2021], 66–90). Police departments need officers adept at building relationships in the community, de-escalating conflicts, recognizing inequity and racial bias, and collaborating with partners to keep individuals out of the criminal justice system while preserving public safety. But it is wishful thinking to expect police forces to embody those skills and traits if the underlying culture fails to actively foster and incentivize them.

One worry with Hunt’s critique of policing’s hero identity, though, is that it leaves little room to develop alternative exemplars to guide officers. At various points he emphasizes that focusing on the “ideally virtuous police persona” distracts from what should be our focus: the collective pursuit of justice (5, 7, 97, 98). But these goals are not necessarily in conflict. In her work on role morality, Robin Zheng notes that roles are where individuals come in contact with societal structures and can exercise agency in fighting or reinforcing structural injustice (see “What Is My Role in Changing the System? A New Model of Responsibility for Structural Injustice,” Ethical Theory and Moral Practice21 [2018]: 869–885). This framework for understanding roles makes space for conceptions of individual virtue grounded in what contributions one makes to fighting structural injustice. It is unclear how celebrating heroes who embody that conception of virtue would undermine the pursuit of justice. The problem appears not to be with police having heroes, as Hunt suggests, but with them having the wrong heroes.

The next identity that Hunt considers, the warrior identity, illustrates most starkly the distorted conceptions of virtue and heroism influential in policing. This identity stresses the dangers of policing and encourages a mindset that has no place in a domestic context—seeing others as enemies and being at war with one’s own community (see Michael Walzer, “Soldiers and Police,” in The Ethics of Policing: New Perspectives on Law Enforcement, ed. Ben Jones and Eduardo Mendieta [New York: New York University Press, 2021], 93–106). The warrior mindset goes hand in hand with the militarization of the police, a trend that has come under increased criticism from both sides of the political spectrum (see Radley Balko, The Rise of the Warrior Cop: The Militarization of America’s Police Forces[New York: Public Affairs, 2013]). Hunt builds on previous critiques of warrior policing by focusing on how it undermines liberal conceptions of justice and respect for the dignity of each person. His analysis weaves in incidents like the 2016 killing of Philando Castile, who was compliant during a traffic stop yet still shot by an officer trained in warrior-style policing that stressed the idea of danger being everywhere (65). Such real-world cases remind readers of what is at stake in these debates.

Hunt’s rejection of warrior policing is unsurprising given its fundamental points of conflict with the liberal framework he defends, but his critique of police as guardians is less expected. Proponents of reform critical of warrior policing often point to the guardian ideal as an alternative to guide officers (see, e.g., Seth Stoughton, “Law Enforcement’s ‘Warrior’ Problem,” Harvard Law Review Forum128 [2015]: 225–234). Notably, the presidential task force on policing convened by Barack Obama championed the idea that police should be guardians rather than warriors (see Final Report of the President’s Task Force on 21st Century Policing [Washington, DC: Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, 2015], 1, 11). On this point, Hunt departs from other proponents of reform by raising doubts about the guardian ideal’s value for policing. In his view, the guardian identity—like the warrior identity—still sets officers up as heroes and creates a disconnect between them and the communities they serve (5).

Hunt admits that “almost all of the policing strategies that fall under the guardian banner are admirable and uncontroversial. Who wouldn’t want policing that ‘seeks to instill officers with values that encourage public engagement, foster trust, and build lasting community partnerships’?” (91). He questions, though, that the guardian ideal embodies those values. Some proponents of the ideal trace its lineage back to the guardians of Plato’s *Republic* (81), which Hunt rejects as an entirely unhelpful model for democratic societies today. Plato’s vision for the ideal society takes a dim view of democracy and concentrates dangerous amounts of power in the guardian class (86–87). Hunt wants officers who are partners with their community, humble, and willing to learn from others, not rulers who assume they know best.

*The* *Police Identity Crisis* offers novel and plausible critiques of the guardian ideal in policing, but its conclusions may be too quick in places. Hunt notes that the term guardian has been used to describe police for decades (81). Beyond noting the references to Plato, he does not attempt to trace in detail how the guardian archetype developed in the context of debates over policing in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Without such a genealogy, it is impossible to identify the range of sources and values informing this archetype. In short, Hunt lacks the evidence needed to substantiate his claim that “there are no natural historical, logical, or conventional connections” between the guardian archetype and the values often attributed to it, like building trust and avoiding unnecessary conflict (92). Close genealogical analysis of the guardian concept in policing may reveal that Hunt is correct, but that work first needs to be done.

The final police identity examined by Hunt is one guided by algorithms. Increasingly, police departments rely on data analytics to predict areas with high crime and make decisions about where to deploy officers based on those algorithms. The approach of flooding areas predicted to have high crime with officers dehumanizes both police and the people who live there, according to Hunt. It conditions officers to see those they encounter as sources of crime and disorder rather than individuals who “live, work, and play” in neighborhoods they call home. It also makes officers cogs in a machine focused on making arrests, leaving little room for them to develop and exercise more critical skills related to building relationships and trust in their communities (116). In addition to questioning predictive policing’s effectiveness in achieving its goal of reducing crime, Hunt stresses that evaluations of the police are morally impoverished when they only look at its impact on crime. Even if certain police practices reduce crime, they can undermine other important values like legitimacy through violating fundamental rights and failing to treat individuals with dignity (108–109).

Hunt is certainly correct that it is a mistake to focus on crime reduction at the exclusion of other values when comparing and evaluating different approaches to policing. At points, though, he may downplay the importance of crime reduction too much. When discussing community policing, which Hunt proposes as an alternative to the approaches he rejects, he notes that social science research finds “that it has limited impact on crime” (132). According to Hunt, this finding “doesn’t matter because community policing promotes other values—beyond crime reduction—that are vital to the police’s role as *justice seekers*” (136).

There are several problems with this response. First, as work by Patrick Sharkey and others has shown, crime and violence have profound and detrimental effects on communities, from educational achievement to life-expectancy rates to psychological well-being (see Uneasy Peace: The Great Crime Decline, the Renewal of City Life, and the Next War on Violence [New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2018]). These harms disproportionately fall on marginalized communities and perpetuate structural injustice within society. So it is a mistake to claim, as Hunt does, that community policing’s effectiveness in reducing crime is irrelevant to evaluating whether it best advances justice compared with other approaches to public safety. Second, any form of policing—community policing included—inevitably involves some amount of coercion and the grave harms that come with it. If a proposed form of policing proves ineffective at reducing crime, why not opt instead for alternatives that address the social determinants of violence—such as poverty, homelessness, and lack of mental health services—and rely far less on coercion? Police abolitionists make exactly that argument (see Allegra McLeod, “Envisioning Abolition Democracy,” Harvard Law Review132 [2019]: 1613–1649; Mariame Kaba and Andrea Ritchie, No More Police. A Case for Abolition[New York: New Press, 2022]).

Ultimately, Hunt does appeal to policing’s role in reducing crime and violence when rejecting the abolitionist position. In his view, “without some form of political authority and enforcer,” society will suffer increased violence and disorder, inflicting even greater harm on already marginalized communities that police abolitionists hope to benefit (152). Despite his skepticism toward abolishing the police entirely, Hunt is more sympathetic to calls to defund the police that increase investment in services addressing the root causes of violence. It strikes him as common sense that “we need to target the underlying structural problems in society relating to economic opportunity, education inequality, and so on,” which has the potential to “reduce both crime and police violence” (151).

At the end of *The Police Identity Crisis*, the reader is left wanting further detail on Hunt’s positive vision for policing. The end of Chapter 4 (“Algorithms and Justice”) and Epilogue (“Reorienting the Police Identity”) provide some of that vision, but the bulk of the book focuses on what policing should *not* be rather than on what it should be. For this reason, *The Police Identity Crisis* is best read in conjunction with *The Retrieval of Liberalism in Policing*. This earlier book by Hunt explores in greater detail the moral foundations of the police and how, when functioning properly, they contribute to promoting peace within a liberal democracy. Together, his books offer one of the most comprehensive accounts available of what policing committed to liberalism’s principles would look like—a conception that deserves serious consideration at a moment when the role of police in society is increasingly contested.

Ben Jones

Rock Ethics Institute

The Pennsylvania State University