

Puzzles of Heroism

ABSTRACT

I propose that the criteria for our highest moral praise, the conditions for what constitutes the Hero, are puzzling. We find people most praiseworthy that meet the following three conditions: they perform some supererogatory acts (acts above and beyond the call of duty); they do these acts from the motive of duty; and they do not hold those who fail to do the same as they blameworthy for that failure. These conditions reflect the attitudes that we take toward those we deem most heroic. Though we may approve of and praise those who do not meet each condition, we will prefer those that do. The above conditions point to puzzling perhaps incoherent sets of beliefs that we hold with regard to these heroes. How can we hold that the hero believe herself obliged to act where we are not, yet not hold that the hero is simply mistaken? How can the hero believe herself to be merely acting in accordance with duty, yet not see others as having failed to meet that standard? Despite these apparent puzzles, I will suggest that my criteria can and should be maintained, and can be without falling into incoherence. In this paper I provide a prime-facie defense for these criteria and offer a solution to the apparent paradoxes. I believe that a robust notion of moral commitment can salvage our intuitions about what makes heroes so great from the most troubling puzzles, without sacrificing the things that make them great.