

# Are Pacifists Cowards?

## A Consideration of This Question in Reference to Heroic Warrior Courage

Robert Gould

### Introduction

*"If you ever die a hero's death, Heaven protect the angels"<sup>1</sup>*

*"Since the greatest test of courage is the readiness to make the greatest sacrifice, the sacrifice of one's life, and since the soldier is required by his profession to be always ready for this sacrifice, the soldier's courage was and somehow remained the outstanding example of courage."* (Tillich, 1952, p. 5)

*"Do you believe that a coward can ever disobey a law that he dislikes? . . . Believe me that a man devoid of courage and manhood can never be a passive resister."* (Gandhi, 1951, p. 51)

The virtues of pacifism occur in two parts: first, pacifists to varying degrees reject war and violence; second, they to varying degrees affirm nonviolent communication and conflict resolution. However, pacifism still suffers under the shadow of cowardice. To many, pacifists are, on some level, cowardly; they do not have real courage—the courage to engage in combat. The suspicion is that pacifists, at least partly, desire the safer and less risky path. Even though some pacifists express their commitment to nonviolence through campaigns of nonviolent resistance, and these actions entail a certain measure of risk, these risks are usually not like charging into the bullet-and-explosive-filled jaws of war. On the other hand, the warrior image of courage is one of violently aggressive, fearless risk-taking in a just cause.

For those who promote peace studies and conflict resolution, the undercurrent of perceived cowardice may undermine our best attempts to advocate for a peaceful resolution to conflict. This perception of cowardice is made worse

given the preference for adversarial justice over negotiated settlements because of the bias that many cultures have towards “caring enough to fight it out”—letting the stronger person or position fight it out on the battlefield, the courtroom, or even in a paper presentation at an academic conference. However, this “fight it out” approach to conflict leads to win/lose outcomes that often submerge legitimate differences, as opposed to negotiated win/win resolutions that allow legitimate differences to see the light of day.

I became a pacifist and conscientious objector during the Vietnam War. Immediately thereafter, I became a draft counselor and peace activist. I wrote my PhD dissertation in philosophy on the moral strength of pacifism, and founded a peace studies program. My best friend during the late 1960s—and still a close friend today—also became a pacifist and conscientious objector during that war. Interestingly, he has had a long career demonstrating his courage as an emergency medical technician, as well as a member of a mountain rescue team. Neither of us has any regrets about opposing the Vietnam War, nor about a lifetime of affirming the pacifist position through careers of compassion. Nonetheless, we both seem to have had a need to overcome a lingering self-perception of cowardice. Consequently, we have developed moral commitments that have, at times, placed us in harm's way—though nothing like the vulnerability of combat.

The following quote illustrates the problem of pacifists viewed as cowards.

I was 18 years old and an apprentice-printer at Wanganui Herald, and New Zealand had been at war (WWII) for two years. Knowing my position on the war (as a conscientious objector), some of my work mates petitioned the manager with a demand for my dismissal. A parishioner abused me publicly in church, calling me a coward and a traitor. A favorite

---

**Robert Gould** currently serves as Director of the Conflict Resolution Graduate Program at Portland State University. He co-founded the Oregon Peace Institute, the Conflict Resolution Graduate Program at Portland State University, the Northwest Institute for Conflict Resolution, and the Newhall Nonviolence Institute. He is the editor in chief of the upcoming electronic journal, *Philosophy of Conflict Resolution*.

uncle of mine said, "I won't condemn you Merv, I'll leave that up to God." (Browne, 2006, p.221)

Merv Browne's experiences, along with many other pacifist experiences, including my own, create the impetus for this paper. Therefore, my work here is dedicated to all pacifists and peace education programs that hang under a cloud of suspicion concerning the perception of cowardice entailed within pacifism.

To overcome this suspicion, pacifists often find credibility by putting themselves in harm's way through their steadfast moral commitments. Key examples of this phenomenon are the famous nonviolent resisters, whether a Berrigan, King, Gandhi, or Chavez, who have—to a certain degree—overcome this cloud of cowardice in just this way. By placing themselves in harm's way, the moral commitments of nonviolent resisters often provoke a violent response because these commitments trigger the reactivity of the enforcers of structural injustice and oppression. Furthermore, their willingness to endure violence helps them be perceived as heroes, the supposed quintessential embodiment of overcoming moral weakness with moral strength. Gandhi (1951) expresses this view, by perhaps underestimating the courage of soldiers, in the following:

Wherein is courage required—in blowing others to pieces from behind a cannon, or with a smiling face to approach a cannon and be blown to pieces? Who is the true warrior—he who keeps death always as a bosom-friend, or he who controls the death of others?

As Gandhi suggests above, nonviolent resistance seems to overcome the shadow of cowardice when it conforms to our notion of heroic courage. This sense of courage embodies a turning point in dramatic and risk-filled circumstances. Against this drama of turning point heroism as moral strength, I suggest that courage, however laudable, should not be considered the central concern of the moral life. In my analysis, the moral life is one filled with moral commitments that do not necessarily have anything to do with courage. The essence of a moral life is not the dramatic struggle to overcome moral weakness with moral strength. Rather, the ordinary day-to-day moral commitments of a moral life are not necessarily dramatic at all. They are incremental efforts that, taken one-by-one, are quite ordinary and relatively stress-free. They are noteworthy when considered collectively, rather

than individually, over an entire lifetime.

On this view, the answer to the question, "Are pacifists cowards?" is that courage or cowardice is irrelevant to the rejection of war and violence. That rejection is based on the belief that there are nonviolent ways to resolve human conflict that can be achieved through compassionate commitments and careers that aim to overcome injustice and heartlessness. These commitments and careers rarely, if ever, involve mortal risks, nor the dramatic overcoming of moral weakness with heroic courage.

To support my position, outlined above, I suggest that moral courage is a special case of moral strength, rather than its archetypal expression. The vast majority of expressions of moral strength are not instances of courage, but rather day-to-day moral commitments. On this view, moral courage is expressed in rare circumstances when a person or people act ethically at some considerable risk to themselves, physically, emotionally, or psychologically. When an ethical choice looms, courage is expressed by doing something that is difficult and risky against the cowardly path that appears easier and safer.

It is interesting to note that philosophers use the term, "moral courage" to avoid the implication that criminal or self-serving courage is a good thing. The courage and daring of criminals and narcissists certainly entails a kind of strength or heart, but not one that is moral. Amoral or immoral courage fits the definition of acting at some considerable risk, physically, emotionally, or psychologically—against the easier and safer cowardly choice. On this analysis, courage or cowardice is the ability to express "heart" in daring circumstance. But, "heart" is not necessarily moral. In other words, what makes courage moral is not the courage part, but the moral part. One's morality is not necessarily "tested" in dangerous circumstances. Rather, the far more comprehensive test of one's morality is the strength of one's lifelong moral commitments and practices.

The argument in this paper addresses the tension between two different views of the problem of moral weakness. Both views spring from the insight that morality without strength is ineffective. Kidder expresses this view (on the side of courage) as follows:

*"In defining moments of our lives . . . values count for little without the willingness to put them into practice. Without moral courage, our brightest virtues rust*

*from lack of use. With it, we build piece by piece a more ethical world.” (2005, p.4)*

However, two views diverge from one another on what counts as “defining moments.” One view assumes that those defining moments require heroic courage—and the presence or absence of this virtue is the true test of moral strength. The other view assumes that those defining moments are quite ordinary moments of ongoing, lifelong moral commitments—and the presence of those commitments count as the test of moral strength. A reasonable third, and plausible, view is that both can count as the test of moral strength—or maybe two types of moral strength: one reactive and one proactive. Though the third view is reasonable enough, I am arguing that the second view should be the predominant test for moral strength because the opportunities for expressing moral courage are generally quite rare. Furthermore, an analysis of someone’s moral courage is complicated by the fact that a courageous act may be motivated by the thrill of the risk, rather than the moral benefit.

With this grounding, I turn to an examination of two key features of moral courage to show how moral commitment is a better test of moral strength. First, I look at the dramatic turning point element of moral courage against the incremental improvement element of moral commitment. Second, I examine the contrast between the element of reactivity in moral courage and the element of pro-activity in moral commitment.

#### **Dramatic Turning Point Element of Moral Courage vs. Incremental Improvement Element of Moral Commitment**

There is a long history (back to, at least, Aristotle) of thinking that courage is intimately connected to battlefield heroism. From this perspective, one either has the courage to fight or is a coward. Courage is understood as a binary *turning point* in battle—turning toward the courageous, or turning away in cowardice. This turning point is dramatic, just as the violence of war is dramatic. Therefore, this view of courage has attained archetypal status—our moral character is determined in these “defining moments of our lives.” However, thinking of courage, and even violence, as a dramatic turning point does not fit many ordinary contexts. For a great number of contexts, moral activity occurs on a continuum, with small incremental steps differentiating the

more moral to the less moral. (Interestingly, violence and nonviolence can also be expressed on a continuum of actions that are more violent to actions that are less violent.) In the considerations that follow, the use of these two continua seem to be quite helpful because incremental improvement is attainable in our day-to-day lives, whereas dramatic moral heroism is only tested in the rarest of circumstances.

Contemporary moral considerations of the connection between courage and violence seem to turn on examples such as the following: If one finds oneself trying to protect someone from violence, and the only way to defend that person appears to be violence, then it seems logical that violence is the way to demonstrate one’s care and compassion for a potential victim, as well as practically defending someone from harm. To be violent, in such a case, means to put oneself in harm’s way. Taking on such vulnerability takes courage. However, interceding nonviolently in this same scenario also requires courage because one is also placing oneself in harm’s way—perhaps more so. A pacifist may wish to re-describe this example by saying that nonviolence intends not only to protect potential victims, but potential perpetrators as well.

Unfortunately, there are times when potential victims and potential perpetrators cannot both be protected from the violence at hand. In these cases, one must choose to protect the person about to be victimized, rather than the perpetrator. Key to such examples is that courage has an object (showing care and protecting people and/or a principle, while being vulnerable). Different pacifists might prioritize the object of their courage differently: one can prioritize the courage to save someone over the courage of one’s convictions; or one can prioritize one’s principles over the survival of victims. Similarly, nonviolence often seems to have a similar object (showing care and protecting people, as well as making a stand against violence). In both courage and nonviolence, one must put one’s moral convictions into practice. This at-risk conception of courage turns on the supposition that one is neither courageous (nor nonviolent) when one is comfortably invulnerable.

To help illustrate this picture of courage, let us turn to something more specific. In the film, *High Noon*, the sheriff is about to be shot by the villain, and the sheriff’s wife, a lifelong pacifist Quaker, shoots the villain—her only choice to save her husband. Her violence shows both how much she cares for her husband and her courage

to do whatever is necessary to save him. She faces a turning point: turning to violence requires courage; turning away from violence could be seen as cowardice. We think of her as having courage because she put herself at risk, and also because she was capable of abandoning one principle for another more important principle, the protection of an innocent from death. On further reflection, if she had refused to use violence, we are likely to consider her to be rigidly principled, rather than cowardly because a coward is not able to do what she thinks is right—and in the sheriff's wife's case, if she resists violence, even at her husband's demise, she has still done what she thought was right.

In this way, strict adherence to absolute pacifism can be thought of as rigidly principled, just as adherence to absolute truth (as Kant suggests) can be thought of as rigidly principled when telling a lie might save an innocent life. Though moral courage does not necessarily require violence, it does take courage to put oneself at risk and turn away from a safer path. However, being rigidly principled does not mean one is cowardly; this is because a rigidly principled person is more concerned about holding principles tightly rather than worrying about impending personal harm. Furthermore, it is important to note that, in most situations, our care for others and our commitment to help them on principle does not require violence or courage—it simply requires ordinary kinds of nonviolent aid.

In light of highly unusual cases, such as the *High Noon* example, where violence *alone* can provide aid, absolute pacifists' refusal to be violent may be highly principled, but their adherence to principle has weakened their ability to do what it takes to protect someone fully. It is logically consistent for an absolute pacifist not to make such a commitment to protect others if such protection requires violence. This violence-refusal conception of pacifism has prioritized the principle of nonviolence as its object over the protection of potential victims *by any means available*. Violence-refusal pacifists certainly cannot be faulted for their principles when their nonviolent intervention demonstrates their care and compassion for a potential victim. However, if violence can save someone from being victimized, and nonviolence cannot, violence-refusal pacifism appears disconnected from the strongest conception of moral strength, where the protection of potential innocent victims is the central moral object, and principles must be flexible so as not to obstruct one's commitment to this

seemingly highest of moral objects. To make the strongest moral commitment fully consistent with pacifism, it seems necessary that pacifists think of their interventions as showing care and compassion, as well as protecting innocents from perpetrators by doing whatever it takes—as nonviolently as possible—to accomplish that end. On this formulation of minimal-violence pacifism, a pacifist is only violent in response to exceptional and unavoidable circumstances. Interestingly, we have applied the *turning-point* conception of courage to these considerations, rather than the *incremental* conception of moral strength. We have used an example where one is courageous by *turning* to violence; otherwise, we err by relying single-mindedly on nonviolence and refusing to turn to violence. I question the reliance on such a conception of turning-points in our consideration of moral strength and nonviolence, first, because the cases demanding such turning-points are so rare, and second, because they tend to rule out the fact that each of us normally experiences moral commitment and nonviolence incrementally along a continuum, not a turning point. As we seek moral improvement in our ordinary lives, we generally are capable of becoming only a little bit more moral, a little bit more ethically strong, and a little bit more non-violent.

One reason for the predominance of the turning-point conception is that it seems to arise largely in dramatic, reactive situations—ones that are generally filled with violence or the potential for violence. In these situations, our concerns focus on such questions as: How should we react to a potentially violent crime or war? This reactive, warrior mode of thinking has dominated both our understanding of courage, but also popular considerations of nonviolence as a life ethic. Popular worries include: Are we courageous enough to turn to violence? Will we react violently, if necessary? Will our nonviolence be enough to address a violent crime? My goal in this work is to switch the central focus of moral strength and nonviolence from reactivity to proactivity, from turning-point (either/or) to incremental (on a continuum), from sporadic heroism to lifelong moral commitments, toward a more ethical life, and away from a preoccupation with potentially violent situations.

It is important to note that my work here is not intended to make an extended argument against violence-rejection pacifism, in favor of a minimally-violent pacifism. However, the possibility that violence-rejection pacifism can put

one in the, admittedly rare, circumstance of choosing principle over preventing harm to someone, I will be using the minimally-violent incremental conception of pacifism in the following considerations of the relationship between pacifism, courage, and moral strength. I choose to use the minimally-violent conception of pacifism because I believe that it is at the heart of the moral life—a life of compassion and moral commitment.

In discussing the nature of pacifism so far, we have assumed that pacifism, like moral strength is, in most cases, probably best described as *incremental*, rather than *turning-point* or *either/or*. On this view, one is capable of having moral strength at a certain level, at a certain time, just as one is capable of being nonviolent at a certain level, at a certain time. This view isolates the turning point conception of heroic courage as a special case of moral strength, rather than as its more typical case. In this way the polarized, *either/or* notion that we are either courageous or cowardly is not usefully applied to our place on the continuum of moral strength.

#### Reactive Moral Courage vs. Proactive Moral Commitment

With these points reasonably settled, we can move on to the distinction between reactive courage and proactive courage. Key to this distinction is that we (in, at least, European/American culture) have a bias in favor of violent, reactive courage that is fueled by a romantic conception of redemptive violence, while losing sight of the gruesome reality of violence, and the commonplace success of nonviolent interventions. Further, I suggest that proactive courage is best understood as an ongoing moral commitment that is both nonviolent and the embodiment of true moral strength.

I offer a further refinement of moral courage toward a more fully realized virtue, where it is best understood as being informed by a *proactive moral commitment*, not merely the classical sense of the heroic. To support this assertion, I suggest using the term, “reactive moral courage,” to refer to heroic *responses* to danger, injustice, and adversity, and the term, “proactive moral strength,” to refer to having *moral commitments* that give one’s life more than momentary moral vitality, connection, community, and meaning.

As we humans make the slow, painful transition from a warrior identity to a civil identity, our concept of moral strength also seems to be transi-

tioning from the metaphors of *battlefield courage* to lifelong *civil moral commitments*. We might mark this distinction as a shift from reactive courage, typified by being *heroically responsive* to instances of danger, injustice, adversity, to a proactive moral strength, illustrated by one’s *lifelong moral commitments*—a truly strong civic virtue.

As an illustration of this shift from reactive courage to proactive moral strength, a documentary about Vernon Baker, the “only living black World War II veteran to receive the Medal of Honor—the nation’s highest distinction for battlefield heroism...”<sup>2</sup>, shown in conjunction with the 2006 Winter Olympics<sup>3</sup>, framed the narrative of Vernon Baker as a prelude to the greater narrative of Martin Luther King Jr. The connection between a military hero/Medal of Honor winner is not too distant from Olympic hero/medal winner—as there continue to be Olympic heroes, there continues to be war heroes. However, the Martin Luther King style, proactive moral courage of Olympic heroes has become increasingly important. This was exemplified by the way that Joey Cheek<sup>4</sup>, gold medal speed skater, became one of the most respected USA Olympians because he donated his prize money (\$40,000) to “Right to Play, a charity that helps children in Sudan” (<http://www.nbcolympics.com>).

The following example may help make this transition from battlefield courage to civil moral commitment clearer. A friend of mine was vacationing in Hawaii and had come down to the beach to sunbathe and play in the surf. In the distance, she observed a swimmer being pulled out to sea and the situation seemed so fearful to her that she froze. She was a national champion swimmer, but she could not overcome her fear of being pulled out to sea too—if she were to undertake a rescue alone (as a classic hero might). Instead, she alerted a group of local surfers, who collectively performed the rescue, averting a tragedy. Her action embodied a civil (cooperative) moral commitment that fit her ongoing care and concern for others around her, without necessitating what might have been her own catastrophic risk.

How should we think about her courage? She shrank from a fearful situation. She did not take a great risk that someone else with her ability—and heroic courage—might have taken. Within the context of virtue ethics, she failed to show heroic courage. However, as ocean lifeguards know, individual water rescues, even with a flotation device, are terribly dangerous, particularly

if the victim, in a panic, overpowers the rescuer. My friend's reluctance was completely reasonable. She might have thought of herself as too weak, morally, to take such a risk. She also might have thought that she had a character defect, inadequate virtue, and a moral weakness that undermined her ability to translate an ethical rule or perspective into action. However, these kinds of judgments arise from what occurs on the *center stage* of the dramatic focus—the potential drowning. What occurs *off stage* of the dramatic focus—in this case, her moral commitment to find appropriate help—is often not given its deserved weight. A true coward would not have taken any responsibility for a role in the rescue, and might have pretended not to notice the danger the swimmer was in. Her reaction was to find the best possible way to save the swimmer, which in this case, was to find a team of local surfers who knew the waters and could act as a group.

This example and others I have observed have contributed to my wondering why I don't seem to know any traditional heroes, whereas I know many people with what I call “moral strength.” The people that I admire have strong moral commitments that span many years and promise to span their lifetime. Interestingly, their moral strength seems to be expressed by their *entire life*, rather than *isolated acts*. The heroes that I read about seem distant and aloof—they don't work shoulder to shoulder with me in the peace movement, or with the people I admire. These center-stage heroes receive recognition and their acts are often touted as the very center of morality. The people with off-stage moral commitments, that I know, work in almost complete anonymity and their acts are hardly noticed in the sway of moral discourse. Where the history of heroes occupies center stage, the offstage history of people with lifetime moral commitments is underrated, overlooked, or denied.

From this observation, I began to wonder if the moral commitments of the nonviolent activists that I admire might lead us past a mere critique of heroic courage toward an alternative centering of morality. Though the support necessary for a universal claim of such magnitude is beyond the scope of this work, I do suggest that such reasoning about the moral strength of those with moral commitments is meaningful within my experience. Others may find this to also be meaningful within their experience.

Within this critique, I am making three interlocking claims about proactive ethical action.

First, in terms of lifetime moral commitments, proactive moral strength is more fully moral than reactive heroic courage. Second, ongoing moral commitments are more fully moral than isolated heroic acts. And third, ordinary morality made up of moral commitments—is more fully moral than extraordinary morality made up of heroic acts. I am suggesting that, while reactive heroic courage may be moral, proactive moral strength is a more filled-out morality because it is expressed through lifetime moral commitments. To illustrate these three contrasts in dramatic terms, I urge the reader to consider the lives of two people, Norma Rae, textile labor organizer, and T. E. Lawrence, English military adventurer and author.

The image of Norma Rae has always been more powerful to me than the image of Lawrence of Arabia. Norma Rae was an ordinary textile worker who simply made a commitment to help her co-workers by organizing a labor union. She was an ordinary person, with ordinary limitations and fears, but she had an important commitment in her life to help those close to her and those she worked with. She had her weaknesses that prevented her from rising to the heroic in certain crises, but she maintained what I suggest we call the “heraic”<sup>5</sup> through ongoing commitments that slowly built a better life for those around her. She is like so many others whose commitments are rarely noticed. In terms of the three contrasts just introduced, she had moral strength, she had ongoing moral commitments and those commitments, combined with her ordinary off-stage life, gave her an ordinary morality that rises above extraordinary courage.

On the other hand, Lawrence of Arabia was an extraordinary person, seemingly unlimited and fearless who, in his zest for adventure, both helped and harmed others. He was capable of great heroism and great vengefulness, alternately and episodically. His presence demanded center stage, but his moral accomplishments were undermined by his tendency toward violent frenzies. He is cast in the mold of the classical hero, courageous, yet somehow cold and inhuman. Interestingly, his adventurism sprang from his leisure class upbringing—the only class that can easily afford this kind of romanticism.

In terms of the three contrasts, T. E. Lawrence had a heroic courage that was not consistently moral, nor consistently strong. He engaged in acts of heroism that were episodic and unpredictable. And the drama of his actions expressed an extraordinary morality that raises

moral difficulties not present in the ordinary morality of Norma Rae. Not surprisingly, Lawrence's drama was a ruling class drama and Norma Rae's drama was a working class drama. It seems that ruling class dramas, such as Lawrence's, are historically and conceptually privileged over working class dramas.

Closer to home, a lifelong social and political activist in my hometown, Portland, Oregon, Julia Ruutilla, never pushed herself forward; she just kept doing all the little things that made a difference. Unknown to almost everyone, but those she helped, she was not cast in the hero mold—far from it! Rather, she was cast in the *hera* mold—warm, human and engaged in ongoing moral commitments.

Compare her life to that of Abbie Hoffman. He made a reputation for himself even while using a false name and plastic surgery to mask his identity. He fit the hero mold—complete with frenzies of his own. His episodic life was almost always center stage. And his suicide was simply the last scene in a self consciously public life. Undoubtedly, Abbie Hoffman did good works. However, his eccentricities often undermined those good works. My key point is that he did not demonstrate the consistency of an ongoing moral commitment—and there was something a bit cold and inhuman about him. He achieved the heroic, but failed to achieve the *heraic*.

The reader has probably noticed that I have contrasted female experiences against male experiences. This is no accident. I suggest that heroic courage is predominantly dramatized as male experience and that moral strength, in the form of ongoing moral commitments, tends to be more central to undramatized female experience. Even though it could be argued that there is something heroic about Norma Rae and Julie Ruutilla, I use the term *heraic* to show the contrast between the expressions of consistent, proactive strength, against the expression of sporadic, superhuman, reactive capability.

This contrast is unwittingly dramatized in the film *Hero* starring Dustin Hoffman, Andy Garcia and Geena Davis. The two clearly morally-flawed male characters compete on center stage for the moniker “hero”—savior of those trapped in a burning jetliner; while the two female background characters, with obvious moral strength, either do not have their commitments recognized or are mentioned in throw-away lines.

My worries about the heroic start with the feminist critique; however feminism often offers only a negative critique, whereas I develop a

positive alternative though the notion of the *heraic*—lifelong moral commitments. Without a positive alternative, many feminist critiques lose force. It is left open to the challenge that we may not like everything about the heroic, but it is all we have to engage us. I believe that just offstage we have something far better.

## Conclusion

In summary, this examination of incremental proactive courage, though moral commitments, is an attempt to reorient ethics toward moral strength and away from heroic courage in three ways. First, I have shown how a conception of courage as incremental has advantages over a turning-point conception. Second, I have contrasted moral (*heraic*) commitments with heroic acts of courage where commitments are constituent of moral strength and heroic acts are constituent of moral courage. To analyze this contrast, I have examined incremental acts of proactive courage to illustrate that moral commitments are more central to morality than acts of reactive courage. Thirdly, I have contrasted center-stage reactive courage against offstage proactive courage to show that turning-point heroism has been unfairly privileged over incremental proactive moral commitments. This contrast is useful because it shows how the image of heroic courage is an elite image that seems to reinforce a battle-hardened ruling class. As a final summation of these contrasts, I have presented an argument against the privileging of reactive courage (following from the warrior courage) over proactive moral strength (civil nonviolence) that incorporates the contrast between moral commitments and acts of heroic courage.

I suggest that the traditional notion of courage as heroism has become inadequate because the notion of the heroic does not necessarily imply the fullest moral strength and commitment. I offer that a fully realized, and historically appropriate, sense of moral strength is found in ongoing moral commitments, not merely a momentary ability to carry out a reactive, heroic act. In other words, proactive moral commitments express moral strength more fully than reactive moral courage.

In addition to the strength to carry out a difficult or risky moral action, cases of moral courage tend to have a sense that moral agency is an individual, not a collective, trait. In this sense, heroic action is “up to me,” and not “up to us.” However, this sense of individual responsibility

may merely be a moral impulse, not a fully realized character trait. To fully be a virtue, moral strength must not merely be an occasional impulse. Therefore, the most thoroughly developed virtue of moral strength must be realized as an ongoing sense of moral commitment, with the strength to carry out appropriate action over a protracted period of time. Thus, one can only fully claim the virtue of moral strength if one has a fully developed moral commitment, a sense of ongoing responsibility, and the strength to carry out a lifelong series of actions that are consistent with one's moral commitment, and where one's vulnerability is not the central concern.

There is a legitimate worry that this formulation of pro-activity appears too isolated and individualistic. It certainly seems that courage is often tied to individual *virtue* and individual *agency*. In contrast to this conception, moral strength and nonviolence, *as more communitarian virtues*, would also include the ability and commitment to carry out ethical activity collectively, as well as conduct open-minded, though principled, dialogue with differing others, concerning the ethics of controversial activities.

Furthermore, a more communitarian virtue must affirm that moral strength is not simply an

individual strength, but we are strong to the degree that we live amongst a supportive, activist community. *Together*, we can find strength and create nonviolent change; *in isolation*, we are generally much weaker. However, individual courage and nonviolence does exist and is worthy for its sense of individual compassion and service.

To conclude, the work of this paper has been directed toward answering the question, "Are pacifists cowards?" If pacifism embodies lifelong, nonviolent, moral commitments, then it appears that pacifism is the embodiment of proactive moral strength. On this analysis, heroic reactive courage is not the full embodiment of moral strength because it does not necessitate lifelong moral commitments. So, the answer to this question is that pacifists are not necessarily turning-point heroes, but they do embody the fullest sense of moral commitment and strength through a lifelong discipline of incremental steps toward a more ethical world. In other words, pacifists may not necessarily be courageous heroes, at least not in the classical sense, but they are not cowards, taking the easy way out, when their lives are committed to moral projects that seek to uplift our world. Pacifists choose the heraic, though they are not immune to the heroic.

#### Endnotes

1. This was one of four final lines considered for the script of *Casablanca*. Instead, the line, "Louis, I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship," was used.
2. Focus of a special NBC television documentary airing Sunday, Feb. 26 (2006). Retrieved from: <http://www.nbcolympics.com>
3. The Olympics began as a way to showcase and celebrate military skills. However, with the conclusion of snowboarding and ice dancing, athletic skills seem to be evolving away from the martial arts toward the creative arts.
4. On August 5, 2008, Joey Cheek "was informed that his visa to enter China had been revoked," probably due to his plan to "rally Olympic athletes to the cause of Darfur and outline the steps that China—which has close ties to the government of Sudan—could take to stop the atrocities there." (p. 13, *Time*, August 11, 2008).
5. I coined the term, "heraic," to follow the view of Hera as one who privileges the garden over the gardener. From this, the heraic privileges moral commitment over heroic courage.

#### Works Cited

- Browne, Merv. "The Courage of a Conscientious Objector." *Peace Review: A Journal of Social Justice* 18 (2006): 221-226.
- Gandhi, Mahatma. *Non-Violent Resistance (Satyagraha)*. New York: Schocken, 1951.
- Kidder, Rushworth. *Moral Courage*. New York: Harper Collins, 2005.
- Royce, Josiah. *The Philosophy of Loyalty*. New York: Macmillan, 1908.
- Tillich, Paul. *The Courage to Be*. New Haven: Yale, 1952.