

Courageous Act: A Rational Choice or Driven by Emotion

ZHENG Wanqiu^{[a].*}

^[a]Faculty of Education, Southwest University, Chongqing, China.
*Corresponding author.

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Abstract

A courageous act for a just cause is a moral act, but it often results in regrettable and tragic consequences. Its moral value is often overlooked, and what’s more talked about is its economic value, which turns out to be an extremely unfavorable factor for the healthy development of a society. Kant’s theory tells us that morality should be out of pure good will and is reflected as responsibility. Our actions should be guided by moral order. Another question we need to pay attention to is: “What are the reaches of our abilities” when need to act bravely for a just cause. We must go through rational thinking before act, and act with the guide of rationality instead of emotion to be responsible for ourselves and others.

Key words: Courageous acts for a just cause; Reason; Emotion; Morality; Good will; Moral order; Courage

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INTRODUCTION

The so-called courageous act means to act courageously for a just cause. It is a moral behavior and according to Kant, a behavior has moral value as long as it is out of responsibility. However, courageous act often results in regrettable and tragic consequences. Its moral value

is often overlooked, and what’s more talked about is its economic value, which turns out to be an extremely unfavorable factor for the healthy development of a society. However, how we should correctly treat a courageous act, and how to measure it with rationality and emotion so that more people can recognize its moral value and take it into practice, are the questions that this article will concern about.

1. MORALITY: OUT OF PURE GOOD WILL

Kant believes that morality is out of pure good will, and the judgment on whether a behavior is moral depends on the intention of goodness instead of on the consequences it produces. The consequences of an act are unpredictable or not entirely predictable, so acting in accordance with the consequences is not reliable. The world we live in is complex and ever-changing, and we often recognize a thing inaccurately as people are capability-constrained. No matter how deeply we understand a thing, or how much a keen insight we have, we cannot know the full consequences of a behavior (including direct or indirect consequences, current or long-term consequences); there are a lot of accidental external factors, so no matter how hard we try we cannot fully determine the consequences of a behavior (Qu & Li, 2003). Therefore, we should evaluate a behavior not based on its consequences, but on whether it is out of pure good will.

Good will has supremacy. “In the world, in general, even outside the world, it is impossible to imagine an unconditionally good thing except for good will.” (Kant, 2005, p.8) Good will is an intrinsic goodness, which will not be generated because it can contribute to good things or expect good things, or be good at achieving desired goals, but is only out of good wish (Ibid., p.9). Although good will “is not the only or full goodness, it will certainly be the highest goodness.” (Ibid., p.12) Because real

morality is out of pure good will, in order to ensure the purity of morality, Kant excludes the quality, happiness and other factors from the scope of morality. Although quality and happiness have values which are critical for people, and without them, human existence may be threatened, Kant denies that they have a moral value. He stresses that morality is different from happiness and quality. This strict division aims to make morality stick to its domain, and morality, happiness and quality can better play their effects when they stick to their respective missions (Qu & Li, 2003). Therefore, morality takes place because of good will and does not contain any impurity. The judgment on whether an act is moral must depend on good will, which is the origin and destination for our judgment.

Maybe someone will ask that is morality out of good will possible? The answer is yes. "We, as mankind, are to be given with rationality", and rationality, "as a practical ability or an ability able to exert influences on will, is not missioned to produce tools for completing other intentions, but to produce intrinsically good will." (Kant, 2005, p.12) "Will is not without perpetual impulse, but it can refuse all perpetual impulses and all hobbies if they are not compliant with the rule. It is purely prescribed by the rule." (Ibid., p.99) Rationality "has the supreme practical mission to establish good will" (Ibid., p.12). Because rationality has this moral potential, it can serve as the highest goal of nature." (ibid.) Human being, as a rational and free existence, can not only produce and keep good will, but also take morality into practice for the highest target. From various courageous events, especially those events leaving us with regret and grief, we can find the good will of the people who acted bravely for a just cause. They acted courageously regardless of possible dangerous consequences and self-inflicted injuries. They may be driven by the so-called sense of responsibility.

2. RESPONSIBILITY: MANIFESTATION OF GOOD WILL

Responsibility is not equivalent to morality, and not all acts in line with responsibility are moral." Only an act out of responsibility has a moral value." (Ibid., p.16) So, what's the difference between "in line with responsibility" and "out of responsibility"? An act in line with responsibility refers to an act motivated by one's direct or indirect interests, or other selfish intentions, which is associated with desire and cannot be described with a unconditional moral value; an act out of responsibility, on the other hand, depends on the principle by which it is prescribed" (Ibid.), which is unrelated to any object of desire and we can find only moral value here. Similarly, when we determine whether an act is moral, we should make decision based on whether it is out of pure good will, and not on the results it produces; correspondingly,

the moral value of an act out of responsibility relies on neither the expected results nor any act principle motivated by the expected results, but on "what called as morality, a goodness beyond all other good things, which is unique for rationality and constituted by rules" (Ibid., p.17).

An act has moral value only when it is motivated by responsibility. This representation dominates will, and this goodness exists in people who act in accordance with rule rather than in results. Therefore, what is the rule by which representation can dominate will, without having to consider the consequences in advance, and make will an absolute and unconditional goodness? That is the general compliance of act to rule, and only this compliance can serve as the rule of will. To be specific, "Unless I am willing to make my rule to be a general rule, I should not act." (Ibid., p.18) When a good Samaritan act bravely for a just cause, he has such a rule in his consciousness or sub-consciousness: I expect others to act courageously when meet a just cause. This is a reflection of people's good will and responsibility. As a social member, each of us must bear the corresponding responsibility. We should also have a sense of responsibility, adhere to the principle of good will in order to promote the healthy and long-term development of our society. However, each of us plays more than one social roles, involving different kinds of responsibilities. This complexity sometimes makes us confused and overwhelmed. Thus, whether we have a basic criterion of act or not?

3. MORAL ORDER: RULE FOR ACT

Kant says: "For an act out of responsibility, it should be completely free from all impacts and objects of will. Therefore, there are only rules objectively, and there is only pure respect for these rules. Namely, only rule can specify will, make me obey and suppress my all hobbies." (Ibid., p.17) The so-called rule is a criterion of act and a moral order.

Moral order is a categorical imperative, including "not the materials for action, not the resulting effects, but the form of action, and the principle that actions follow." (Ibid., p.34) Therefore, there is only one categorical imperative according to Kant, "Act in accordance with the rule which you believe to be a universal rule." (Ibid., p.39) That is to say, if we believe an act can be a universal rule, or if others encounter this situation they will do the same, and we're also willing to see they do this, then we can take action. As mentioned above, if we believe that "acting courageously for a just cause" is a universal rule, we are able to do it as well.

If each of us acts in accordance with the categorical imperative, and gives a hand when others're in need of help, then when we need a helping hand, someone will also come to help us. This will form a virtuous circle of moral acts, forming an ideal social environment like

“a world without thieves”. However, to achieve such a society we need more courage and still have a long way to go.

4. COURAGE: A FRUIT OF RATIONALITY AND EMOTION

People often argue the “worth” after a courageous event. “If a valuable thing can be replaced by something else, they are equivalent; In contrast, if a thing is beyond all values and cannot be substituted by equivalents, it is dignity.” (Ibid., p.55) Only morality is dignified, and humanity is also dignified for its morality. It should not compare to things with an economic value or market price, and even should not compare to things with an aesthetic value or imaginable price. (Ibid., p.122) We should focus on the moral value of courageous act rather than calculate its economic costs. However, on the surface, people measure morality with money, in fact it is the reality allowing people to doubt. After a series of regrettable and sad courageous events, people would ask, “Does courageous act mean sacrifice? So why should we struggle for an invisible justice? Do we really need such a courage?”

In fact, this is not about “why should we act courageously for a just cause”, but is about “what is a real courageous act for a just cause”. After we affirm the moral value of good Samaritan acts, we need to clarify what is truly moral. Acting bravely for a justice is moral, but it is not moral to act rashly not according to the actual situation. In our traditional moral values, good Samaritan act is usually understood as “in order to protect national or collective interests, others’ personal or property safety, regardless of personal safety, fight against illegal or criminal acts, rescue or provide disaster relief.” Here we should note that the condition for a good Samaritan act is “regardless of personal safety”, which people often understand as at any risk. It is not. A more important question we should consider when need a courageous act is “what are the reaches of our abilities,” or “what can we really do in this matter.” We all know that human capacity is limited and no one is all-powerful. We must take rational thinking before act rather than driven by emotion, which is moral for ourselves and for others.

Lao Zi says: “Yong Yu Gan Ze Sha, Yong Yu Bu Gan Ze Huo”, which can be literally translated as that one will be killed if dares to act, and will survive if dares not to act (Fu, 2009, p.270). Here “dare” refers to an action without rational thinking on the objective situation, but considering oneself is omnipotent, acting on impulse, or “attempting the impossible”, which will naturally be “killed” as a result. This is a very dangerous problem in our previous moral education, which only inculcated the fixed “virtue” regardless of specific situations, and formed a morbid “good guy” concept: a “good guy” should

abide by the standards, but not have an independent judgment and selectivity. He cannot respond flexibly to the changing social conditions, cannot perceive the needs of others and respond accordingly.” The one “daring to act” is the so-called “good guy” in people’s hearts, and our moral education also passed along this idea to everyone. However, we do not realize that this idea is not comprehensive and not moral. Those “good boys” taught by this instruction are most likely to be the people who do not really understand “courage” and unwittingly end up in tragedy.

The Analects of Confucius • For the Government says, “It is cowardice not dare to defend righteousness when it is endangered.” “Courage” is an important moral character, and of course, each of us should develop such a quality. However, what is “courage” and how to “act” are what we need to seriously think about. “Dare to act” and “dare not to act” are two options and two different forms of “courage”. What kind of choice people will eventually make is closely related with how to analyze specific issues. The one “daring to act” may not correctly analyze a specific issue or not recognize the situation, and therefore is unable to make a right judgment and end up in a tragic result; He may know that what he’s doing will cause irreparable results, but for various reasons, or being blinded by emotion, he still chooses to act which later will be thought to be impulsive. On the other hand, the one “daring not to act” almost makes choices after correctly analyzes the specific issues, and he “dares not to act” because he concerns about his ability limitation and if reckless acts he will only cause a worse outcome, so he chooses not to act beyond his strength. This result is not necessarily bad. If an act is conducted after rational thinking and based on emotional drive, even it is out of the actor’s power, it may change to be within his capability and develop to achieve the best result. People need to control their emotions and make a rational choice in times of emergency, so the one “daring not to act” needs to have more wisdom and greater courage.

A real courage which can be universally recognized is a fruit of rationality and emotion. Therefore, when we encourage courageous acts we should examine our moral values based on both rationality and emotion, and examine whether the courageous acts are moral and whether they can be eventually recognized and accepted.

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