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Untangling Heroism

Classical Philosophy and the Concept of the Hero

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"Ari Kohen's book is a beautiful example of cutting-edge contemporary political theory. Kohen explores heroism as a procedurally determined category of concepts for personal identification that emerges as a timeless and universal social fact. He persuasively argues for a richer understanding of Socrates as the common man's hero par excellence and for Plato as the principle educator of the Greeks. *Untangling Heroism* links contemporary examples (Kerry, McCain, Korczak, and Munyeshyaka) to classical heroic archetypes in a way that celebrates both their heroic acts and their humanity. This book succeeds superbly as a work in cross-temporal political philosophy by illuminating not what heroism is and has been, but what a hero does and why."

—Robert L. Oprisko, *Butler University*

"Professor Kohen's exploration of heroism, its meaning and purpose, effectively reconsiders those virtues requisite to the heroic life. By looking at heroism first within the conceptual framework of the ancient Greeks and then moving the discussion forward into more recent cases and situations, the author has successfully provided a relevant, working framework for further explorations of the enduring qualities of heroism. This book will help to reinvigorate our discussion of heroism and what heroic acts mean to us and provide for us, and what kind of commitment is still needed for our own heroes to emerge in our time."

—Scott Hammond, *James Madison University*

Untangling Heroism

The idea of heroism has become thoroughly muddled today. In contemporary society, any behavior that seems distinctly difficult or unusually impressive is classified as heroic: everyone from firefighters to foster fathers to freedom fighters are our heroes. But what motivates these people to act heroically and what prevents other people from being heroes? In our culture today, what makes one sort of hero appear more heroic than another sort?

In order to answer these questions, Ari Kohen turns to classical conceptions of the hero to explain the confusion and to highlight the ways in which distinct heroic categories can be useful at different times. *Untangling Heroism* argues for the existence of three categories of heroism that can be traced back to the earliest Western literature—the epic poetry of Homer and the dialogues of Plato—and that are complex enough to resonate with us and assist us in thinking about heroism today. Kohen carefully examines the Homeric heroes Achilles and Odysseus and Plato's Socrates, and then compares the three to each other. He makes clear how and why it is that the other-regarding hero, Socrates, supplanted the battlefield hero, Achilles, and the suffering hero, Odysseus. Finally, he explores in detail four cases of contemporary heroism that highlight Plato's success.

Kohen states that in a post-Socratic world, we have chosen to place a premium on heroes who make other-regarding choices over self-interested ones. He argues that when humans face the fact of their mortality, they are able to think most clearly about the sort of life they want to have lived, and only in doing that does heroic action become a possibility. Kohen's careful analysis and rethinking of the heroism concept will be relevant to scholars across the disciplines of political science, philosophy, literature, and classics.

Ari Kohen is the Schlesinger Associate Professor of Political Science and Director of the Forsythe Family Program on Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln. His first book, *In Defense of Human Rights*, was published by Routledge in 2007.

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For Sara, Judah, and Talia:
Thanks to you I understand why Odysseus risked everything to get back home.

Acknowledgments

This book began during a meeting with Peter Euben, my dissertation advisor, who casually mentioned that the conversation between Achilles and Priam at the end of the *Iliad* might be a good example of Richard Rorty's offhand comment that personal identification with those who are suffering is the likeliest explanation for helping behavior. At the time, having just finished a book on human rights, it seemed clear to me that risking one's life for others was both heroic and very much related to the idea of human rights, but I had no idea that one comment would lead me quite so far down the rabbit hole of heroism.

In the time since that comment, I've amassed a wonderful group of friends and colleagues to whom thanks is owed. In one way or another they have all participated in the generation of this book, either by engaging me on the ideas or providing support and encouragement about the project. Thank you to Shira and Steven Abraham, Melinda Adams, Richard Avramenko, Chris Blake, Jean and David Cahan, Miguel Centellas, Liz and Dave Ciavarella, Michael Combs, Andrew Cohen, Lane Crothers, Phil Demske, Gerry DiGiusto, Anel Du Plessis, Mike Ensley, Dan Eschtruth, PJ and Jordan Feinstein, Becca and David Finkelstein, Dave Forsythe, Ted Goodman, Dana Griffin, John Gruhl, Scott Hammond, John Hibbing, Courtney Hillebrecht, Drew Jacob, Seth Jolly, Alice Kang, Heather and Mark Kelln, Elizabeth Kiss, Jonathan Knoll, Matt Langdon, Dave LaRoy, Howard Lubert, Patrice McMahon, Sarah Michaels, Megan Mikolajczyk, Ross Miller, Dona-Gene Mitchell, Mark Moon, Robert Oprisko, Jon Pedersen, Marcus Sanborn, Michael Schechter, John Scherpereel, Tom Scotto, Kevin Smith, Gerald Steinacher, Kerstin Steiner, Michael Strausz, Drew Taub, Beth Theiss-Morse, Michael Tofias, Michael Wagner, Alice Pinheiro Walla, Sergio Wals, Margie Williams, Anicee Van Engeland, and Dick Zinman. A special word of gratitude is owed to Bill Curtis and Dennis Rasmussen for reading drafts of each chapter and offering a great many helpful suggestions.

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Contents

1 Introduction
The Tangled Web of Heroism

The heroic ideal pervades popular culture in the United States. While other countries undoubtedly celebrate their heroes—think, for example, of Latin American revolutionary heroes like Bolívar or even Che—no one does it quite like the United States. Whether we are talking about the citizen-soldier, the Wild West lawman, or even the comic book superhero, Americans are either consciously or unconsciously the greatest lovers of the greatest number and variety of heroes. The superhero genre, for example, has generated billions of dollars in comic book revenue alone, without even considering the impact of the myriad television shows and films based on the same characters. Americans are partial to stories about outsized personalities—no matter if they rely on radioactive spiders or focus on a masked vigilante—and they reward their storytellers handsomely. But the attention paid to heroes is not limited to the superhuman in fiction and film; indeed, throughout the country's history, Americans have rewarded the real-life, everyday heroes who emerge from their midst by honoring them at gala events or with medals, writing books and articles about their deeds, and plastering their photos everywhere.

At the heart of this reverence for the heroic man or woman is almost certainly the egalitarian and populist sentiment that defines the American democratic experiment for the vast majority of Americans. As Alexis de Tocqueville (2002: ch. 3, pt. 1) noted in *Democracy in America*, "There is in fact a manly and legitimate passion for equality that spurs all men to wish to be strong and esteemed. This passion tends to elevate the lesser to the rank of the greater." While this might initially seem contradictory or at least confusing, the explanation is quite straightforward: Americans consider their ordinariness a virtue, especially when it comes to self-government, but because they recognize the ways in which they are very much alike, they are also drawn to anyone who falls outside the normal parameters.

The American fascination with the heroic often raises the status of an otherwise average citizen to that of a celebrity, at least for a bounded period of time. Consider the recent examples of Wesley Autrey and Chesley Sullenberger, whose respective actions in 2007 and 2009 saved lives and earned them well-deserved plaudits from their fellow citizens, the media, and even

Presidents Bush and Obama.[1] With the passage of time, their names are most likely no longer as immediately recognizable to as wide an audience as was once the case, and the fame that still attends them will likely continue to diminish. After all, the amount of time and attention paid to these heroes is far surpassed by that given to entertainers like Britney Spears and Michael Jackson—or to someone like Kim Kardashian, who seems to be famous for no particular reason at all. But it is also important to note that Americans' fascination with everyday heroes is seldom prurient in the way it often is with other celebrities; it is not at all the case that Americans want their heroes to fail in the way that they seem to relish when it happens to singers, models, actors, or athletes. In a certain sense, these heroes are rewarded with a small measure of fame but are then allowed to fade back into the broader American tableau before anything untoward might be revealed about them (if any such thing, in fact, exists). For the time that they capture our attention, their ordinariness is what shines through for us; they encourage us to think about what we might have done in a similar situation—and to hope that we would be able to take the heroic course that they took.

Of course, this distinctly American fascination with heroism is not free from problems. While we are happy to separate our heroes from our celebrities, and to assign a different sort of fame to them, we have some difficulty separating one sort of hero from another, and this leads to confusion about what to expect from our heroes. Perhaps the best way to think about this problem is to reflect very briefly on contemporary American politics and, in particular, claims about heroism that arose in two recent presidential elections. The first was an effort to discredit the heroic record of Senator John Kerry—a Vietnam veteran who received a Bronze Star, a Silver Star, and three Purple Hearts—during his 2004 campaign against President George W. Bush. While there have always been people who took a negative view of the fact that Kerry became an outspoken critic of America's entanglement in Vietnam after he returned home, at the heart of these recent attacks were the so-called Swift Boat Veterans for Truth, who alleged that Kerry's actions were not really so heroic and that his wounds were not at all serious. A great deal of the effort seemed to be aimed at leveling out Kerry's military record with that of Bush, who was a member of the Texas Air National Guard while Kerry was serving overseas (cf. Ignatius 2004).

Such leveling, however, proves quite difficult once the service records of Kerry and Bush are examined side by side. In the heat of combat and at risk of grave personal harm, Kerry performed his task with admirable skill; neither his opposition to the war nor his ability to avoid more serious injury should be thought of as somehow detracting from his battlefield heroics. As Jacob Weisberg points out, in a dialogue with William Saletan (2004), the attack ad against Kerry

> "planted doubts in the minds of 27 percent of independent voters who planned to vote for Kerry or leaned pro-Kerry. After seeing it, they were

> no longer sure they'd back him, the study found." The reason the ad really might be so effective, despite its fraudulence, is that it undermines the heroic part of Kerry's biography, which forms the basis of a big, positive personal contrast with Bush, while at the same time bolstering the GOP theme that Kerry is "untrustworthy."

At bottom, Kerry should be considered a war hero, based solely on his actions on the battlefield;[2] his public stance in opposition to the war does not change the fact of his heroism. By contrast, Bush did nothing that can be considered comparable during his time as a member of the Texas Air National Guard; indeed, many have argued that he joined the Guard to avoid far more dangerous service overseas and that he did not even fulfill his minimal obligations to the Guard (cf. Robinson 2004). Their service records could not be any more different, but voters were encouraged to think of them as similar and many did—in no small part because of a general lack of clarity about what it means to be a war hero.

Even more to the point about Americans' confusion when it comes to heroic behavior is the second example, the wide-ranging discussion of the war record of Senator John McCain—also a Vietnam veteran—throughout his 2008 campaign against a series of challengers for the Republican nomination and, eventually, against then-Senator Barack Obama. The prevailing sentiment among the electorate was that John McCain was a war hero, but the truth of the matter is that he was a very different sort of hero from John Kerry. Whereas Kerry's heroic stature is derived from actions he undertook in the midst of battle, McCain's heroism arose as a result of his imprisonment in Hanoi. To put a finer point on it, McCain was not particularly successful as a warrior: though he was injured in the line of duty, like Kerry, he did not successfully complete his mission as Kerry did. Instead, his plane was shot down, and he was captured and tortured, suffering a great deal at the hands of his Vietnamese captors over several years. Rather than accomplishing particularly impressive deeds on the battlefield, McCain's heroism is that of a survivor, one who has the ability to endure terribly difficult conditions or challenges.[3]

Interestingly, McCain's image has been tarnished a great deal in the years that followed his twice-unsuccessful presidential campaigns, in large part because of mistaken assumptions about his heroism. A recent article in *Vanity Fair*, for example, makes the argument that he stands for no principle in particular but simply shifts with the prevailing political winds. Implicit in this argument is that there is nothing heroic about the way that McCain has always conducted himself:

> It's quite possible that nothing at all has changed about John McCain, a ruthless and self-centered survivor who endured five and a half years in captivity in North Vietnam, and who once told Torie Clarke that his favorite animal was the rat, because it is cunning and eats well. It's

> possible to see McCain's entire career as the story of a man who has lived in the moment, who has never stood for any overriding philosophy in any consistent way, and who has been willing to do all that it takes to get whatever it is he wants. (Purdum 2010)

But why is it problematic that someone should be "willing to do all that it takes to get whatever it is he wants"? What exactly is the problem with being "self-centered," especially if that quality contributed directly to McCain's survival? And why *not* choose the rat as one's favorite animal—what's wrong with being cunning and eating well? These are precisely the attributes that allowed McCain to accomplish his heroic feats of endurance in Vietnam. What's more, it is a mistake to assume that McCain's endurance would somehow *not* be connected to the way he conducts himself even now. That is not to say that we ought not to criticize John McCain, the politician, because he is related to John McCain, the hero who suffered and survived. It is, instead, to say that we ought to realize that those things that allowed for his heroism might not make him the noblest politician in all of our eyes. We ought not to be surprised—or to assume that it would somehow be an obvious critique—that McCain continues to privilege the experience of the rat, who endures whatever life throws at him and who attempts to take care of himself at any cost.

Both of these examples ultimately highlight a problem for Americans' views of heroism: the traditional heroic categories have become muddled, resulting in the diminution of one sort of hero when judged by the standards of another, very different sort of hero. No one ought to confuse the actions of John Kerry with those of George W. Bush, just as no one ought to expect Kerry or McCain to behave like Nelson Mandela, who "reached out to his former enemies and did whatever he could to assure them that they would suffer no evil at his hands" (Govier 2002: 71). Of course, to argue that traditional categories have become confused, it will be necessary to present a detailed case regarding those categories. In what follows, then, I will make an argument for three distinct categories of heroism that can be traced back to the earliest Western literature—the epic poetry of Homer and the dialogues of Plato—and that are complex enough to resonate with us and to assist us in thinking about heroism today.

In making the case for the relevance of classical categories of heroic behavior, this book proceeds under the assumption that not all heroes are created equal. Though obvious to the Greeks both of Homer's day and Plato's, this might be something of a surprising statement today. In contemporary society, all behavior that is seen as distinctly difficult or unusually impressive is classified as heroic: everyone from firefighters to foster fathers and from quadriplegics to freedom fighters are our heroes. But what motivates these people to act heroically and what prevents other people from being heroes? And, in our culture today, what makes one sort of hero appear more heroic than another sort? In order to begin answering these questions, we must

untangle one kind of heroic behavior from another, examine the motivations of the particular heroes, and compare some very different heroic behaviors and motivations.

In chapter 2, "Heroism in Homer's *Iliad*: Violence, Mortality, and Difficult Choices," I explore the first of three classical archetypes, that of the Homeric battlefield hero. Central to that exploration is a detailed look at the connection between an appreciation of the necessity of death and the decision to take heroic action. While it might seem counterintuitive that recognizing one's mortality could lead to actions that result more immediately in death, I argue that it is only in recognizing the limits of our existence that we can open up a space for heroic behavior. The most striking classical example, of course, is the character of Achilles in Homer's *Iliad*, as Achilles' understanding of the limits of his existence leads to the question of the kind of life he will choose to live. In the end, Achilles chooses *kléos* [κλέος], the glory of heroic deeds, despite the recognition that doing so will lead to his untimely death. That said, it is important to think carefully about the fact that many of Achilles' heroic deeds—including the most famous, his victory over Hector—would likely be considered infamous today: both his desire for vengeance and the violence that he exhibits in attaining it are overwhelming. But this is not the end of the story, for Achilles experiences a noteworthy rehabilitation later in the *Iliad*. This shift away from being simply a murderous warrior is most apparent when he meets with Priam to negotiate the return of Hector's body. In particular, I consider here the role played by Achilles' reintegration into the community of human beings like himself, and I argue that his ultimate acceptance of the norms of his day is of fundamental importance to the enduring glory that he achieves through the poets' chronicling his great deeds.[4] Finally, in comparing Achilles with Coriolanus, one of the most infamous warriors of Rome's republican era, I demonstrate the priority of embracing societal norms to the classical understanding of battlefield heroism. Achilles, the battlefield hero *par excellence*, experiences a transformation that Coriolanus does not, and this allows for his extremely brutal deeds—which hearken back to an earlier, more violent age—to be seen in a more positive light.

Chapter 3, "The Polytropic Hero: Suffering, Endurance, and Homecoming in Homer's *Odyssey*," is built around the unusual epithet by which Homer refers to Odysseus—*polytropos* [πολύτροπος]—and I argue that it provides insight into the distinct type of heroism that Odysseus embodies. By introducing Odysseus as a "man of many ways," Homer (1999: I.1) identifies him as one who is well known and lauded for possessing some classically heroic trait even though it is never clear that he embodies that trait. Thus, Odysseus is often referred to as a "master mariner" and a "great tactician," but nothing that he does in the *Odyssey* suggests that he is particularly deserving of these epithets. Indeed, the *Odyssey* is a story about his inability to sail home, and, during the course of his difficult journey, every single member of his crew dies a distinctly unpleasant death: either

eaten by monsters, crushed by giants, or drowned by the gods. Further, the best examples of his tactical brilliance—his blinding of Polyphemos and his elaborate vengeance against Penelope's suitors—allow him to succeed against his enemies when they are largely defenseless, just as his most famous gambit—the wooden horse—allowed the Achaeans to defeat the Trojans while their defenses were down. While Odysseus might very well be both a master mariner and a great tactician, the *Odyssey* is not about celebrating those particular attributes; they are not the principal reasons that he is a Homeric hero. What's more, Odysseus is portrayed as the hero who prizes *nostos* [νόστος; homecoming] above all else, including the classically celebrated *kléos*. But this is another way in which being *polytropos* serves Odysseus well, as he is actually driven to achieve *nostos* at least in part *because* he values *kléos*. In this way, being *polytropos* allows Odysseus to seem like Achilles—a doer of great deeds—even though the *kléos* he ultimately achieves *actually* centers around his ability to endure a great deal more suffering than others in order to accomplish his *nostos* rather than some set of great deeds that he accomplishes.

In chapter 4, "Plato's Philosophic Vision: The Difficult Choices of the Socratic Life," I investigate the third—and very different—classical example of heroism, that of Socrates. While the sequence of dialogues that culminate in Socrates' execution might not seem to be the most obvious place to look for evidence of heroism, I take Plato's portrayal of his mentor there to be the centerpiece of his portrayal of Socrates as not only heroic but also the best of the heroes. Faced with charges of impiety and corruption of the youth, Socrates attempts a defense designed to vindicate the philosophic way of life. In this, he seems to be successful, as Socrates is today highly regarded for his description of the good life and for his unwillingness to live any other sort of life, a position that is most obviously exemplified by his defense in the *Apology*. After his sentencing, Socrates' arguments and actions—in the *Crito* and the *Phaedo*—also lend considerable support to the idea that the philosopher is committed to living a particularly good sort of life, both for himself and for others. Thus, I argue that these dialogues are intended serve to enshrine the character of Socrates as the best of the classical heroes for two reasons: first, the philosopher has an intimate understanding (or even appreciation) of his mortality and actively chooses to die. In this, he mirrors the choices of Achilles and Odysseus. But secondly, in choosing to give up his life, Socrates sacrifices himself for those with whom he identifies, both his friends and even the Athenians at large who seem to be his enemies. In this, he puts a philosophical commitment to others at the heart of the heroic experience in a way that the Homeric heroes—for whom sympathy or fellow feeling is at best tangential to their heroic deeds—do not.

After carefully exploring the characters of Achilles, Odysseus, and Socrates separately, I turn in chapters 5 and 6 to comparisons of Achilles and Odysseus with Socrates. In doing so, I point to their similarities but also highlight the important differences that make Achilles a battlefield