
From Intellectual Courage to Moral Courage

Eric M. Peterson¹

A COMMENTARY ON D. R. Comer and M. Schwartz (2015), “Highlighting Moral Courage in the Business Ethics Course,” *J Bus Ethics* 146(3): 703–723, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-015-2919-3>

ABSTRACT

Comer and Schwartz argue that the business ethics course should aim to cultivate moral courage within our students. Essential to their argument is the use of fictional exemplars of moral courage to motivate our students. I argue that the classroom, even when supplemented by good fiction, is not the right context by which to practice moral courage—the habituation of moral courage requires a context of risk. I suggest a virtue that can be practiced in the classroom—intellectual courage. By aiming at this virtue, we will also get the virtue of moral courage.

IN THEIR “HIGHLIGHTING Moral Courage in the Business Ethics Course,” Comer and Schwartz (2015) argue that moral courage is one essential virtue that we should attempt to cultivate in our business ethics courses. The problem is that we should not expect just any business ethics course to deliver this good. Instead, they argue that building the course around fictional stories highlighting protagonists who excel in moral courage is, at least, one way to have our business ethics courses develop moral courage within our students. While I am sympathetic to much of their discussion, I argue that they still can’t

¹ Creighton University. Email: ericpeterson@creighton.edu

deliver the good of moral courage. My argument is that the classroom, even when supplemented by good fiction, is not the right context by which to practice moral courage because the habituation of moral courage requires a context of risk. After developing this critique, I end by suggesting a virtue that can be practiced in the classroom context—intellectual courage. Because intellectual courage may serve as a proxy for moral courage, this may be the closest our business ethics courses can get to delivering the good of moral courage.

Comer and Schwartz: A Summary

Comer and Schwartz begin by reviewing the deficiencies in business ethics education. Business ethics education is not delivering good, ethical behavior in the workplace. One of the reasons for this is that students are learning about ethics, but they are failing to translate this into moral behavior. What is missing, according to Comer and Schwartz, is an emphasis on moral courage. Moral courage is the missing link between learning about ethics in the classroom and practicing ethics in the boardroom. Comer and Schwartz are not the first to recognize this. They applaud May et al (2014) for recognizing moral courage as an essential outcome of business ethics classes; however, Comer and Schwartz disagree with May et al that it will be an outcome. Instead, they argue for the need to intentionally structure the business ethics course with the goal of developing the student's capacity to exercise moral courage. Sounding in virtue ethics, Comer and Schwartz argue that we need to highlight exemplars of moral courage. In particular, they emphasize using fictional exemplars of moral courage. Fiction moves us by engaging our imaginations and our emotions. We come to *experience* ethics as opposed to merely thinking about ethics. By using short stories and plays with protagonists who excel in moral courage, we can inspire our students to value and practice moral courage.

Comer and Schwartz: A Critique

While I am sympathetic to most of their argument, there are reasons to be skeptical that moral courage can be an outcome of a class. These reasons actually come from reflecting on virtue ethics.² The nature of virtue ethics provides two problems for Comer and Schwartz's argu-

² Thanks to Doug Rasmussen for discussion on these points.

ment. The first problem comes from the necessity of practical wisdom for virtue ethics. On virtually all accounts of virtue ethics, practical wisdom is required (Hursthouse and Pettigrove 2016). We could then raise the question of why we should favor moral courage over practical wisdom. Without practical wisdom, you do not get moral courage. Because Comer and Schwartz do not discuss this, it is not clear to what extent it is emphasized in the classroom. However, even if they do emphasize practical wisdom along with moral courage, there is another problem with their argument: learning to be virtuous always happens in specific contexts (Annas 2011). This means we can only acquire a virtue by practicing it within a context calling for that virtue. The problem, then, is that the classroom is not the right context in which to practice (and, therefore, cultivate) moral courage. We can say that moral courage is the disposition to take a stand for what is right and good when doing so brings a (perceived) risk to one's well-being (Comer and Schwartz 2015: 706). The context that is ripe for us to practice moral courage is a context of risk, more specifically moral risk. Although business ethics discussions can become ethically contentious, it never gets to the point where students feel that they must compromise their moral identity. It follows then that the classroom does not (should not) provide a context of moral risk where our students can practice moral courage.

This problem carries over to the use of fictional exemplars of moral courage. While using fiction and engaging our imaginations is very useful in teaching ethics, our imaginations still do not provide the right context in which to practice moral courage. Comer and Schwartz cite the vast literature that supports the idea that fiction can make us more virtuous.³ However, there are some who are critical of this idea. For instance, Vogler (2007) argues that fiction does not provide the right opportunity by which to cultivate virtue. She makes a powerful point worth quoting at length:

. . . it is a stretch to treat reading as a technique for self-cultivation in the sense *habituation to virtue*. I habituate myself to virtue by taking the characteristic virtuous action. So, if I seek to cultivate generosity, I *give*. I give of my time, energy, concern, and resources, working against inclinations to hoard whatever I take to be mine. Since silent reading

³ For a good overview of some recent philosophical and empirical research related to this see the scholarly blog post by Young (2018).

induces *retreat* from my circumstances, silent reading is the *opposite* of habituating myself to noticing what's going on in my world *by* noticing. (Vogler 2007: 33, emphasis in the original)

Now it is beyond the scope of this paper to adjudicate this debate, but it is worth suggesting a way that both sides can be right. Much of the literature that supports the idea that fiction can make us more virtuous uses “virtuous” to be synonymous with a general pro-social behavior or to refer to certain affections such as empathy. Either way, the literature avoids making claims about specific virtues. This all may be right as it stands, but of course so would Vogler’s point. Thus, fiction may make us more virtuous in a generic sense of some pro-social behavior (e.g., making us aware of implicit biases), but once we focus on a specific virtue, Vogler’s point stands—fiction does not allow us to habituate to specific virtues such as generosity or courage. It follows then that using fictional exemplars of moral courage will not provide the context of moral risk for our students to practice moral courage.

Now to be charitable, maybe Comer and Schwartz will concede this. After all, when they recount the results they collected from their “test” courses, they claim they used “students’ discussions of what they could have done in the past and what they would do in the future as surrogates for morally courageous behavior,” due to the “difficulty in measuring ethical behavior in a real-life context” (Comer and Schwartz 2015: 714). I agree about the difficulty in measuring ethical behavior; however, we should be very cautious in using our students’ discussions about what they *would* do as any indication of what they *will* in fact do. One easy solution is to make the *aspiration* for moral courage an outcome of the business ethics course rather than the *cultivation* of moral courage. With this outcome, much of what Comer and Schwartz argue can remain intact, but we avoid the problems just raised. However, we can even go further. Our classrooms provide the context to practice another virtue that can act as a proxy for moral courage.

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The virtue that our classes are ripe for cultivating in our students is intellectual courage. Philosopher Jason Baehr (2011: 177) proposes the following general account of intellectual courage:

(IC) Intellectual courage is a disposition to persist in or with a state or course of action aimed at an epistemically good end despite the fact that doing so involves an apparent threat to one's own well-being.

Like moral courage, intellectual courage is a disposition, which means we can habituate it through practice. It is being willing to stand for a good, albeit an intellectual good as opposed to a moral good. And it is practiced or triggered in a context of (at least perceived) risk—i.e., a context marked by a (perceived) threat to one's well-being.

Why should we think the classroom can cultivate intellectual courage? We can see this by unpacking the phrase “apparent threat to one's well-being.” In the context of pursuing intellectual goods, the threat to one's well-being can refer to a lot of different things, but at the very least it will include a fear of failure or embarrassment. And our classrooms clearly bring such risks related to the pursuit of intellectual goods. Any context that involves learning, whether in the classroom or the boardroom, carries the risks of failure or embarrassment for individuals pursuing intellectual goods. Because of this, the business ethics instructor is in a prime position to use these risks as opportunities for our students to cultivate intellectual courage. Rather than merely reading about the virtue of intellectual courage, students can actually practice it in the classroom.

At this point, a natural question might be: why should we think that intellectual courage is a proxy for moral courage? One reason is that although it seems proper to distinguish the two forms of courage by the different ends at which each aims (moral goods for moral courage and intellectual goods for intellectual courage; see Baehr 2011: 163), drawing such distinctions can still seem contrived. Baehr (2011: 163n1) claims this much arguing that “few persons are likely to have one kind of courage but not the other.” Further, it is arguably the case that the same psychological mechanisms would be implicated in instances of the different forms of courage. That means practicing *any* form of courage can be a way of practicing *all* forms. The same readiness to take a stand will be triggered in all contexts of risk regardless if the end is an intellectual good or a moral good. Thus, intellectual courage is a proxy for moral courage because in practicing the former, one is not far from practicing the latter.

More work needs to be done to substantiate such a pedagogy. Highlighting moral courage through real-life and fictional exemplars

in the business ethics course is laudable. But our classrooms are ripe for the cultivation of intellectual courage. Designing our courses to allow students to practice the virtue of intellectual courage may be the closest our courses can get to delivering the good of moral courage.

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