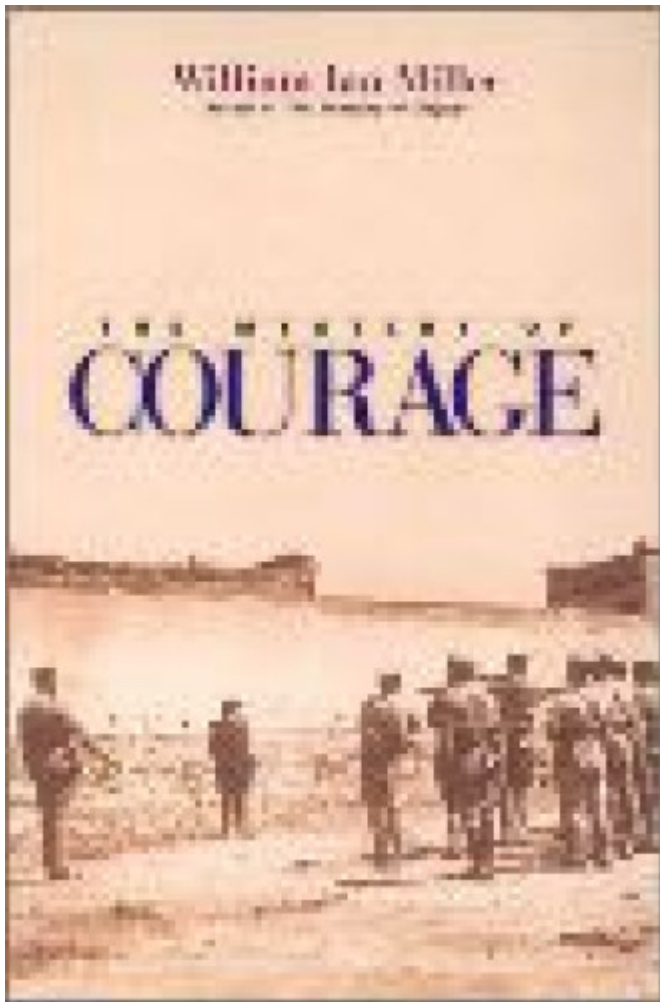# Everyday fortitude

By **Albert Borgmann** in the **November 14, 2001** issue

In Review

The Mystery of Courage

William Ian Miller
Harvard University Press

We will never forget the terror of September 11, but neither will we forget the heroic
efforts of the police and firefighters who rushed into the World Trade Center to help

people escape. Some of them paid for their courage with their lives. The catastrophes of that day led to extraordinary testimonies of sympathy, generosity and dedication. Yet a disquieting question begins to stir: Does it take a disaster to rouse us to virtuous action? Is our ordinary common life hostile or indifferent to moral excellence?

Courage is a fine probe for this difficult problem, and William Miller's book is a helpful guide to the enigma. Miller, who teaches law at the University of Michigan, has himself shown courage—and panache—in facing up to his task. He has not shied away from vigorous research, nor from the slings and arrows of postmodern know-it-all superiority, nor from the paradoxes of psychology and ethics. Miller is a fine writer, combining stylistic virtuosity with lawyerly precision and philosophical thoughtfulness.

A consideration of this greatest of human virtues begins with the puzzles of psychology, for it seems that courage is inexplicably distributed. Some people have it and some don't. But if courage is simply a matter of course for the truly courageous, should we—turning now to ethics—give them moral credit? Are not the fears and terrors we feel in the face of danger the crucial obstacles courage must overcome in order to be courage? If those terrors simply paralyze us, should we not be held blameless? But if we are blameless, what is the meaning of cowardice? Is cowardice the deliberate refusal to confront danger? Yet it has been said that in war most men overcome cowardice because they are not courageous enough to say no to war. And where does courage shade over into fanaticism?

It is a strength of Miller's book that it confronts such questions by bringing up the particulars of courage and cowardice in reports and testimonies from the ancient Greeks to the Vietnam War. Miller is suspicious of the philosophers who unduly extol the element of courage closest to their trade—the deliberate assessment of the dangers to be faced. At the same time, it is Aristotle's treatment of courage in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that provides the framework for Miller's book. Miller also adopts Aristotle's view as to the foremost setting of courage—mortal danger in war.

Such glorification offends our sense of justice and peace. Students of ethics, at least since Immanuel Kant, have insisted that moral norms and accomplishments must be open to all, not just to warriors and soldiers and certainly not only to those soldiers who have "the good fortune" of serving in a war. Christians share Kant's inclusiveness. More important, they have been told that the meek, not the

courageous, shall inherit the earth. To remember this today and to say it aloud requires its own kind of courage.

Courage is part of the ethics of virtue rather than the ethics of principle that has dominated modernity. According to virtue ethics, the cultivation and formation of character through virtues such as temperance and fortitude is the essential aspect of the moral life. According to principle ethics, most important is the knowledge of ethical principles—act from duty, not from desire; maximize pleasure and minimize pain—which will guide individuals and communities in choosing the good. Adhering to Kant and the utilitarian philosophers Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, modern ethics aspires to principles of universal scope and cogent force. Principle ethics was intended to rule anywhere at any time. Virtues, in contrast, are in a crucial sense always circumstantial. They are in large part moral skills, and a skill that is illuminating in one setting can be irrelevant in another. For example, the skill of reading tracks is valuable in the Rockies, but not in Chicago's Loop.

The Gospels in places read like an explicit rejection of principle ethics. When Jesus is asked for a definition, he tells a story. When in a parable the problem of the impartial administration of justice arises, the particular takes precedence over the universal, and the claims of justice are overruled by the grace of charity.

Virtue ethics has recently had a scholarly renaissance. But virtue ethicists have spent most of their energy on showing that the explanatory power of their brand of ethics can equal or surpass what its rivals—Kantian ethics and utilitarianism—have to offer. They argue that virtue ethics gives a more holistic view of the moral life than principle ethics does; it not only insists that we try to be blameless but promotes moral excellence; and it recognizes that the vitality of the good life is not codifiable in a set of principles.

Through William Bennett's best-selling *Book of Virtues*, virtue ethics appears to have enjoyed some popular success, but my guess is that the book was more often bought and given as a present than lovingly read to children. What makes recent virtue ethics (Bennett's included) so ineffectively pious is that it does not admit that the moral force of a virtue such as courage depends greatly on its circumstances. Recent virtue ethics has allowed itself to be coopted on this point by its rivals, and as a consequence its teachings seem old-fashioned and without purchase on our predicaments.

Miller shows that what is courage in hand-to-hand combat is foolishness in meeting a hail of bullets and plain stupidity in standing up to mortar shells. He recounts testimony to the effect that one can revel in courage when one engages in a perilous foray, but that courage inevitably seeps away, except among psychopaths, in the grind and squalor of trench warfare. In fact, Aristotle found it very hard to discuss courage because in his day its setting had shifted from the heroic to the civic.

Courage was the defining virtue of the Homeric hero, and Aristotle evidently loved heroic courage above all. When in the *Nicomachean Ethics* he says of the virtuous man that "he would prefer an hour of rapture to a long period of mild enjoyment, a year of beautiful life to many years of ordinary existence, one great and glorious exploit to many small successes," he surely had in mind Achilles, who lived and died by this precept. Aristotle ranks courage according to the dangers the hero meets, mortal danger being the severest test. He asks, "What form of death then is a test of courage?" and answers, "Presumably that which is the most beautiful. Now the most beautiful form of death is death in battle, for it is encountered in the midst of the greatest and most beautiful of dangers."

Aristotle must have been thinking of the grace and athleticism of heroic, warrior-to-warrior combat. Translators invariably mute Aristotle's aesthetic delight in war by translating "beautiful" as "noble," "fine," "admirable" and the like. In any case, warriors in Aristotle's time no longer fought for glory and spoils but to protect the city, the women and the children. And there was little beauty, if some nobility, in the famously effective Greek phalanx. The main concern was to keep those heavy shields locked to make an impenetrable wall and to advance steadily. Though Aristotle makes no explicit distinction between heroic and civic courage, his sympathies are evident. He wistfully concludes that civic courage belongs among the lesser kinds of courage, although it is first among them "since it most closely resembles true courage."

Like Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas looked back to a heroic age, an age when courage was a defining and unequivocally glorious Christian virtue. In the Roman Empire persecution was the ultimate test of faith, hope and charity, and to suffer martyrdom was to pass the test triumphantly. But Aquinas was just about as far from the time of martyrs as Aristotle was from the time of heroes—about a thousand years. By the 13th century, the church was secure and flourishing. To lead a faithful life no longer required a confrontation with torture and death but, rather, the struggle with the hardships and distractions of everyday life.

To agree with Aristotle, whom Aquinas simply calls "the Philosopher," was nearly as important to Aquinas as being faithful to Christian doctrine. Hence he did not want to deny that war is the preeminent setting of courage. But he widened the meaning of war to include particular attacks on one's life or well-being. Moreover, he divided courage into the aggressive and the enduring and, appealing to a throw-away line of Aristotle's, he elevated endurance over acts of daring—a point Miller is loath to accept. Miller wants to call this attitude "fortitude" and make it a separate virtue.

English is blessed with numerous pairs of near-synonyms that allow one to mark subtle differences in meaning. Fortitude refers more to the mental and patient side of encountering dangers well, while courage has a greater affinity to the physical and daring side of confronting perils. Aquinas's Latin, however, had just one word for it (*fortitudo*), as did Aristotle's Greek (*andreia*, whose original meaning was manliness). Aquinas's thinking is likely to be more helpful to our present state than Aristotle's.

Thomas did not conceal his admiration for the glory of martyrdom. As Miller tells us, however, David Hume and Adam Smith, who experienced the modern refinement of manners and the promise of technological comfort, began to worry about the fate of courage. The dangers and hardships that made courage prosper were receding, but the need for the moral vigor of courage continued.

For more than 300 years now, modern technology has been dissolving traditional structures and indulging our weaknesses. Every generation fears for what structures and virtues have been spared so far. Already in 1848 Marx and Engels noted: "All that is solid melts into the air, all that is holy is profaned . . ." Nietzsche, and in our day Daniel Bell, Christopher Lasch and a host of others, have all continued that lament.

As for courage, Smith's and Hume's apprehensions were followed in 1896 by William James's call for "The Moral Equivalent of War"—a setting where in peaceful times the "military ideals of hardihood and discipline would be wrought into the growing fiber of the people." The details of the process, as James imagined them, strike us today as strange, not to say bizarre, and are worth quoting because they show how intractable the predicament of courage had become.

"To coal and iron mines, to freight trains, to fishing fleets in December, to dishwashing, clothes-washing, and window-washing, to road-building and tunnel-

making, to foundries and stoke-holes, and to the frames of skyscrapers, would our gilded youths be drafted off, according to their choice, to get the childishness knocked out of them, and to come back into society with healthier sympathies and more sober ideas. They would have paid their blood-tax, done their own part in the immemorial human warfare against nature; they would tread the earth more proudly, the women would value them more highly, they would be better fathers and teachers of the following generation."

These words might as well have been written 300 years ago for all the distance in situation and sentiment that separates us from them. Mining is a declining industry, freight trains have been surpassed by trucks and planes, steel furnaces have all but disappeared. Most important, we would not think of restricting moral toughening to young men, nor would we confess, much less give praise to, "the immemorial human warfare against nature." We have crossed a cultural divide from the modern to the postmodern era.

Or have we? The conservative British philosopher Roger Scruton two years ago was appalled by the lack of courage the Allies showed in the Kosovo conflict. Risk was for him the wellspring of moral vigor, and so he thought it was wrong for governments to promote "moral obesity by reducing risk in activities, consumer products, and employment." Such a proposal would lead us from the bizarreness of James's proposals to the bizarreness of wanton risk, maiming and death. Imagine a world without lifeguards, seat belts and safety goggles.

Miller's lament about postmodern courage exhibits a similar concern, though it does so much more thoughtfully and with engaging ruefulness:

> A recent spate of books and movies look with great nostalgia on World War II. They have been written or directed by those who did not fight and who are now middle-aged, when it is safe for them to indulge in this kind of wistfulness about having missed out on war. Most of my social class in the U.S. (myself included) bought substitutes for the only war in which we were eligible to fight and would no doubt do so again. So when in middle age I come at last to believe that a nation builds up a moral treasury of merit by the sacrifices of its people in war and I begin to worry, like the ancient moralists did, that we grow fat, lazy and contemptible amidst our plenty, I don't have a leg to stand on. My father does, because he did fight

in a war, but he is too wise to make such an argument.

Is moral courage the virtue that remains, now that physical danger and hardship have receded from our lives? Not in the way Miller defines it. Moral courage is the willingness to suffer discomfort or disgrace in the defense of what is right and good. The need for such courage has not entirely evaporated, nor is physical courage obviated across the board. But in a decent society there is no need for the regular exercise of moral courage. The more we succeed in securing justice and fairness through laws and regulations, the less call there is for moral courage. If courage is to be a virtue, however, it must be a habit, a moral skill that is regularly tested and exercised.

A skill is context-specific, and perhaps the real question is not how we can hope to situate a traditional virtue in contemporary circumstances but what circumstances today are most hostile to a Christian life and what moral skills does countering them require. The relevant circumstances can't be the safety and well-being brought about by public health measures, medical care and insurance companies, wholesome food and clean water, etc. Surely God does not want us to court and suffer preventable harms.

Our circumstances are the opposite of those that made for martyrs. Where the martyrs' challenges were overt, ours are concealed; where theirs were mortal to their bodies, ours are lethal to our souls; and where theirs tore them out of their normal life, ours channel our lives between the unquestioned banks of the technological culture. Here is an example: We come home from work, frazzled and spent. We walk into our kitchens and are not surprised that our children and spouses are not at home. We take what we like most out of our refrigerators, put it in the microwave and stare at the paper on the kitchen table; it's Wednesday, our favorite TV show is on, followed by a game of the home team. Our pulses quicken a little. The show is good, our spouse comes home, we exchange a few words, we find the game boring, so we move to the den to do an overdue memo on the computer. But first we check our e-mail and the latest news, play a computer game and say goodnight to our spouse. Then we too go to bed.

Is this an unchristian evening? We have not coveted our neighbor's spouse, stolen anything or ordered anyone around. What we have done seems unexceptional. We enjoyed moments of a pleasant sort of freedom, eating what we liked when we liked while watching the program we like. There were moments of mild excitement as we

anticipated the baseball game or started to play the video game. We may have felt vaguely sullen by the time we went to bed, but we had not depended on anyone or inconvenienced anyone.

This sort of retreat to a cocoon of autonomy has been spreading enormously in the last generation, as Robert Putnam has shown so impressively and depressingly. And a life without grace and gratitude is unchristian, not in this failing or that but from the ground up. It denies our capacity for redemption. The rising specter of irredeemability is stalking us. It is more hidden when we are engaged in activity, when we go shopping, finish the basement or go after a promotion. Yet all of our activity is in the service of consumption, of increasing it and of deepening its hold on us.

Amazingly, we are still surrounded by the possibility of engagement. Here on the shelf is the poetry we could read to one another, there in the corner are the flute and the guitar we could play together. Right next to the kitchen is the dining room table around which we could gather. And not far from our home are the playing fields where we could teach our sons and daughters tennis or join a softball league with our beloved. Within easy reach is the museum where local painters are showing their work and the concert hall where the citizens' symphony plays.

These are the places where patience is tried and generosity rewarded, where disappointments can't be escaped and grace descends in what Virginia Woolf calls moments of being. Such places and activities are the precincts of faith where redemption comes into view again as the perfection the world cries out for.

To social critics the devotion to family and to communal celebration seem bland and retrograde goals, better perhaps than consumption and shopping but not exactly the stuff of bold designs and revolutionary politics. Nor would the conservative champions of courage get excited about these goals. Where are the hardships? Where the risks? All people would have to do to be "courageous" is cross the threshold from the TV room to the dining room or from the home to the community.

The physical thresholds are in fact low and smooth, but they coincide with moral thresholds that are so high and hard that few of us cross them. Those are the thresholds of unencumbered self-determination—of seductive promises, of self-indulgence and of lack of accountability. A residual tradition or the needs of a loved one occasionally get us on the other side of comfort, and we feel surprised and grateful. But the blandishments of technology will not disappear. The decision to

cross the thresholds must be made daily. Steadiness in crossing them can come only from an arduously acquired and faithfully maintained habit—a virtue, as Aristotle and Aquinas would call it. Courage is not quite the right name for it, but fortitude is. Fortitude needs to become the defining virtue of the postmodern era.