

Virtue and Vice in the Hurt Locker

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Kathryn Bigelow has described her 2009 film *The Hurt Locker*, which won six Oscars and many other awards, as having two aims. One is to take the audience as close as possible to a 'boots-on-the-ground' experience of the relentless, 360-degree threat within which US soldiers in Iraq have been operating. The other is to explore the psychology of soldiers who go willingly into such an environment and the psychological effects it can have on them.¹

Much of the critical praise for the film concerns the first of these aims. Bigelow's use of at least four film crews for every scene affords the sense of being present in the situation, continuously shifting perspective, alert to possible danger. The relative anonymity of the scenery, clearly somewhere in the Middle East but not clearly anywhere in particular, fosters this uneasy sense of immersion in an unfamiliar scenario where the sources of danger are unpredictable. Protracted periods of silence, punctuated by incidental sounds that often turn out to be irrelevant, increase this tension. The occasional quiet ring of tinnitus imparts a sense of the incessant nature of the soldiers' anxiety. Much of the negative criticism of the film, on the other hand, concerns the psychology of its central characters. Some veterans of the war in Iraq have claimed that it is a wildly inaccurate portrayal of the attitudes and behaviour of professional soldiers.²

It might be tempting to conclude that the film is a fine work of cinematography but one that fails in its aim of presenting a realistic account of daily life for US soldiers in Iraq. But this conclusion assumes that Bigelow's aim of exploring the psychological aspect of the soldiers' experience is part of her aim of presenting the audience with the realities of the Iraq war. If the aim of the psychology is realism, then it should indeed present the attitudes and behaviours common among US soldiers in Iraq. But if the aim of the psychology is to explore the different aspects of the soldiers' experience, and particularly if it is to explore a possible danger of their work, then it need not aim for an averaging of actual soldiers' behaviour.

If we see the main characters in *The Hurt Locker* as each presenting an ideal crystallisation of one kind of attitude towards their situation, then we can see the film as presenting a sophisticated account of the psychology of courage and the dangers of addiction. The aim of presenting the viewer with a realistic portrayal of the situations as the soldiers see them serves the further aim of exploring these questions of moral psychology. Bigelow immerses the viewer in the soldiers' experience in order to lead them through this complicated thought about courage and addiction. In so doing, she has articulated thoughts about the nature of virtue and vice that ought to be considered a useful contribution to moral philosophy.

The film centres on three soldiers. The story is driven by the behaviour of one of these characters as it contrasts with the other two. That the film is primarily concerned with the moral psychology of this character is signalled by his being named after the influential American philosopher and psychologist William James. He leads a bomb disposal team. His colleagues in the team are J. T. Sanborn and the more junior Owen Eldridge. When a bomb is discovered, their job is to defuse it or to explode it safely. They are constantly in danger from sniper fire or other bombs in the course of this work.

James is highly experienced in this task. His role is to deal with the bomb itself, while the other members of the team advise and ensure that the team is safe. The problem is that James enjoys the danger. He causally ignores obvious safety precautions and even goes out of his way to make situations more dangerous. Sanborn and Eldridge object to this, but to no avail. As the story unfolds, it becomes clear that James is driven by an addiction to the tension involved in his work. When the tour of duty is over, he finds that he cannot really engage with life back at home with his partner and son. The film closes with him beginning another tour of duty.

What is interesting about James is his relation to courage. Since he likes to increase danger to himself and his team, because he enjoys it for its own sake, we would not want to call him virtuous. There seems something wrong with his attitude to danger. But it hardly seems right to call him a coward. He certainly does not shrink from danger.

The first step in understanding him, then, is to realise that there is more than one way to lack the virtue of courage. James does not shrink from dangers that he ought to face. But he does face, and indeed generate, dangers that he ought not to face. Aristotle famously argued that all virtues have this structure. One can fail to have the virtue not only by being deficient in one's responses to the relevant kind of situation, but also by being excessive. Cowards are deficient in their responses to danger, whereas James seems a model of the rash or foolhardy person who faces danger where he ought not to.

While this begins to explain the character of James, it does not do justice to *The Hurt Locker* as a whole. Neither does it bring out the precise nature of Aristotle's doctrine of the mean. To see this, consider the way in which the film presents these thoughts about deficiency and excess in response to danger. Of the two other characters in the bomb disposal team, Sanborn seems a model of the virtue of courage. He correctly understands the dangers of each situation and responds appropriately, facing danger when that is the right thing to do but withdrawing when it would be better to do so. He is an exemplary professional soldier.

The junior member of the team, Eldridge, is less accomplished and so less confident around danger. He sometimes overestimates the degree of danger the team faces and is sometimes wrong about the correct way to respond to it. He falls short of courage; he is deficient in his understanding of danger. But he is not presented as a bad person. Far from it. The film presents him as a sympathetic character, struggling his way through the tough task of developing the appropriate knowledge of danger and how to respond to it. So although he falls short of full virtue, it seems wrong to call this a vice and judge him negatively for it.

Part of Eldridge's task is to stop seeing situations as more dangerous than they are. He needs to come to see the world as it really is. There are incidental characters in the film who have the inverse problem. They underestimate the danger they are in, or fail to notice it at all. These are presented as foolish, slightly comical people. One is the soldiers' padre, who offers spiritual guidance to Eldridge about how to deal with the danger outside the camp without having been out there himself. The others are the mercenaries who have ended up stuck in the desert with a flat tyre and no means of fixing it. These people have the vice of being rash or foolhardy.

James is different. He does not underestimate the danger he faces. He is not like the padre and the mercenaries. Neither does he overestimate it. He is not like Eldridge. In fact, like Sanborn, he correctly understands the complicated nature of the situations he is in and knows exactly how dangerous they are. Although he is not virtuous, he does not lack the appropriate knowledge of danger. If he did lack that knowledge, he could not play with danger as effectively as he does.

James differs from Sanborn not in their understanding of danger, but in their attitude towards the danger they face. Sanborn sees it in its correct context, as an intrinsic part of the job they are employed to do within the larger aim of bringing a democratic system of government to Iraq. Sanborn wants to do this job well, then settle down and raise a family. James already has a family, but cannot enjoy his time with them. He is addicted to the danger of bomb disposal. It is not only that this danger gives him great pleasure. It is also that the rest of life seems dull and grey by comparison.

Eldridge comes very close to understanding James correctly when he accuses James of being an adrenaline addict. James is indeed addicted. But it is a mistake to think he is addicted to a particular chemical running through his brain. If he were merely an adrenaline addict, then he could be happy getting his adrenaline highs from all sorts of activities. He could take up regular bungee jumping. Part of his tragedy is that he cannot be happy doing any other activity. He has become addicted specifically to the dangers of bomb disposal.

That one can become addicted to a particular kind of activity, rather than just to the chemical effects it has in one's brain, is one important part of the overall psychological picture presented by the film. The title of the film is taken from US army slang for suffering inflicted from outside, and conveys a sense of being trapped within a confined space by this suffering.³ It seems a very apt phrase for James's problem, even though he appears to be perfectly happy when engaged in bomb disposal. James is locked by his addiction into a very narrow range of activities. However much he enjoys those activities, this confinement is itself a harm that he suffers.

But there is more to the film's moral psychology than this. One further aspect is the way in which it dramatises the whole of Aristotle's doctrine of the mean. In addition to having the right understanding of the world, according to Aristotle, virtue involves taking pleasure in the right kinds of things. The difference between James and Sanborn is not one of knowledge, but one of pleasure and displeasure. James is not only driven by the enjoyment of his work, but by the inability to find enjoyment anywhere else. The world outside of the activity of bomb disposal is boring and frustrating to him. He cannot even take any joy in his family.

James could not have developed this addiction without a correct understanding of the nature of danger. He would not have survived. What is more, he could not have worked his way towards this understanding, a task which is itself complicated and dangerous, as we see from the troubles that face Eldridge, unless at that time he had roughly the right attitude to danger. It seems that his addiction has grown out of an earlier stage at which he must have had, more or less, both the knowledge and the attitude required for the virtue of courage. It seems that he did once have the virtue.

This thought contains three very interesting ideas for moral philosophy. The first is that vice need not merely be the absence of virtue. It can be worse than that. The enjoyment that James has found in his work, which he has indulged to the point of addiction, has eventually undermined his virtue of courage. This vice has destroyed the virtue that was there. It has corrupted James. This corrupting aspect of vice is rarely noticed in discussions of virtue ethics.

The second interesting idea is that this corrupting vice has not grown up alongside the virtue and then taken over, in the way that weeds take over the flowerbed, but has actually grown out of the virtue itself. It is from the state of correctly understanding danger and how to deal with it that James has developed an addiction to doing so. The lesson here is that virtue can be inherently unstable. Sanborn could end up like James. If this is right, then virtue ethicists need to give more consideration to the conditions under which virtues can become internally corrupted and to the ways in which the virtuous person should try to prevent this from happening.

Finally, this corrupting vice is not like cowardice or rashness. It is not itself either an excess or a deficiency of action in response to danger. It is an excess of pleasure taken in dealing with danger, specifically the danger involved in bomb disposal in the context of war, and a deficiency of pleasure taken in other activities. These are both symptoms of an underlying addiction. Addiction is itself a difficult issue in moral philosophy. There is quite some dispute over whether an addict can be held responsible for behaviour resulting from their addiction, or indeed whether they are responsible for the addiction itself. Virtue ethicists tend to assume that we are responsible for our vices, but if addiction can be a corrupting vice this assumption needs more consideration.

Far from being an unrealistic film attempting to show how western soldiers in Iraq actually behave, Bigelow's film is prime example of the way in which narrative film can present and support subtle ideas in moral psychology. *The Hurt Locker* is a detailed exploration of courage, of addiction, and of the ways in which they can be related, with surprising results for the philosophy of virtue and vice in general. We should see this as the film's central goal, one that it achieves with the help of cinematographic techniques that immerse the viewer in the tense and dangerous world the characters work in. That these characters do not behave like real soldiers is no objection to the film. Indeed, it might even have been necessary for the film to achieve its philosophical goal.

Notes

¹ Interview reported in: Nick Dawson, 'Time's Up: Kathryn Bigelow's *The Hurt Locker*', *Filmmaker* 5 March 2010 (available at www.filmmakermagazine.com).

² Responses to the film are summarised in the Wikipedia entry 'The Hurt Locker'.

³ See 'At the Movies: Plumbing the Depths of "the Hurt Locker"', *Visual Thesaurus* 5 March 2010 (available at www.visualthesaurus.com).