

Courage Without a Gun: Ethical Dilemmas in "Hacksaw Ridge"

In war films, Mel Gibson's "Hacksaw Ridge" (2016) stands out not for depicting heroic violence but for examining heroism without violence. This biographical drama tells the true story of Desmond Doss, a Seventh-day Adventist and conscientious objector who served as a combat medic in World War II. Doss's unwavering commitment to pacifist beliefs, even in the brutality of war, presents a compelling canvas for ethical analysis. This essay critically examines how "Hacksaw Ridge" portrays complex ethical issues, assessing the accuracy of these portrayals of ethical theories discussed in class.

The central ethical issue in "Hacksaw Ridge" is the tension between pacifism and patriotism. Doss, driven by his religious convictions, refuses to carry or use a weapon, stating, "I cannot bring myself to take a life." This stance sharply contrasts with the societal expectation that citizens should fight for their country, especially during a high-stakes conflict like World War II. The film presents varied perspectives on this issue. Doss's fellow soldiers and superiors initially view his pacifism as cowardice or shirking duty. Sergeant Howell scathingly asks, "Do you expect to move through a battlefield without a weapon?" This view aligns with virtue ethics, which emphasizes character traits like courage and duty. In this framework, refusing to fight is seen as a failure of virtues essential to a soldier.

However, the film challenges this perspective by redefining courage. Despite not carrying a weapon, Doss displays extraordinary bravery by repeatedly running into enemy fire to save wounded soldiers. In one gripping scene, he lowers dozens of injured men down a ridge, repeating, "Please, Lord, help me get one more." This portrayal aligns with care ethics, prioritizing compassion, empathy, and the responsibility to help others. Through Doss's actions, the movie argues that courage is not just about fighting but can also mean risking one's life to preserve life. It suggests that far from cowardly pacifism can require even more tremendous courage.

Another significant ethical issue is freedom of religion and its accommodation in secular institutions. Doss's refusal to bear arms stems from his interpretation of the Sixth Commandment, "Thou shalt not kill." The film shows him facing tremendous pressure to compromise his beliefs. He is ridiculed, physically abused by fellow soldiers, and even court-martialed. Captain Glover argues, "The lives of your fellow soldiers are at stake," suggesting that the greater good should override individual beliefs. This utilitarian perspective, focusing on maximizing overall well-being, implies that Doss's stance endangers more lives than it saves.

However, "Hacksaw Ridge" ultimately supports Doss's right to maintain his beliefs. His lawyer successfully argues that forcing Doss to use a weapon violates his First Amendment rights. This argument reflects deontological ethics, particularly Kant's concept of human dignity. Kant asserts that each person should be treated as an end, not merely a means. By this logic, using Doss to win the war without respecting his core beliefs would be unethical. The film's sympathetic portrayal of Doss's struggle, culminating in the military's accommodation of his pacifism, affirms the deontological view that individual rights should be protected even when inconvenient.

"Hacksaw Ridge" also grapples with moral dilemmas in war, particularly the ethics of violence. The Battle of Okinawa scenes are unflinchingly graphic, showing dismemberment, immolation, and psychological trauma. This stark realism forces viewers to confront the horrific consequences of war. Captain Glover's initial stance that "in peace, sons bury their fathers; in war, fathers bury their sons" suggests a reluctant acceptance of war's inevitability, resonating with ethical realism.

However, through Doss's perspective, the film questions whether violence, even in war, can be morally justified. His actions offer an alternative to the "kill or be killed" mentality. By saving American and Japanese soldiers, Doss embodies the principle of human equality central to many ethical theories. His approach aligns with the ethics of nonviolence advocated by figures like Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr., who argued that moral ends cannot be achieved through immoral means. In this light, Doss's Medal of Honor is a recognition of bravery and a validation of nonviolent heroism.

The film's depiction of these issues is mainly accurate and nuanced. It resists simplifying Doss into a flawless saint, showing his stubbornness and the actual conflicts his beliefs create. Similarly, it does not vilify those who oppose him; their concerns about unit cohesion and survival are presented as legitimate. This balanced portrayal encourages viewers to wrestle with the complexities rather than providing easy answers.

"Hacksaw Ridge" also uses cinematic techniques to reinforce its ethical messages. The contrast between the pastoral beauty of Doss's hometown and the hellish battlefields visually underscores the moral chasm he bridges. His upward gaze during prayers, juxtaposed with overhead shots of carnage, creates a visual dialogue between his faith and the war's brutality. Such techniques do not just tell but viscerally show the ethical tensions.

The movie's impact on audience perceptions is significant. By making a pacifist its hero, "Hacksaw Ridge" challenges the conventional glorification of violence in war films. It invites viewers to reconsider courage, suggesting it is not just about defeating enemies but also about staying true to one's principles and valuing all human life. This shift in perspective can influence public discourse, encouraging more nuanced discussions about military service, conscientious objection, and the ethics of war.

In conclusion, "Hacksaw Ridge" explores ethical issues rarely seen in war movies. Its portrayal of Desmond Doss's journey compellingly illustrates the conflicts between pacifism and patriotism, individual rights and societal demands, and nonviolence in a violent world. The film encourages critical reflection by accurately presenting these dilemmas through various ethical lenses—virtue ethics, care ethics, utilitarianism, deontology, and nonviolence theory. It challenges audiences to consider that courage has many forms and that even in humanity's darkest hours, there is room for moral choices that do not involve harming others. In an era where military intervention remains a complex issue, "Hacksaw Ridge" reminds us that discussions about war must go beyond strategy to include deep ethical considerations.