

2021-014 | August 2021

Cooper, Tom. *Doing the Right Thing: Twelve Portraits in Moral Courage*. UK: Abramis Academic Publishing, 2020, 300 pp., \$24.00 (paperback). Reviewed by Willie R. Tubbs, University of West Florida (wtubbs@uwf.edu)

In *Doing the Right Thing: Twelve Portraits in Moral Courage*, Tom Cooper uses history as a conduit to the study of ethical decision making, intermingling the nuance of historic moments with the ethical approaches that led well-known figures to make tough, often self-sacrificial, choices. While not a history book, this is an ethics text that will prove intriguing to historians who wish to understand the ethics behind the decisions made by a diverse collection of historic figures. Cooper's goals are simple. First, he shows the gnawing complexity people face when they seek to apply a consistent ethical code. Second, Cooper seeks to explore the approaches twelve moral exemplars used when faced with momentous and perilous choices, thereby better equipping readers to face their own tough quandaries.

On balance, the text paints a clear and detailed picture of episodes during which people of historical import faced perilous choices – instances when careers, reputations, and lives were at stake – and offers insight into why and how these decisions were made. Cooper selected a worthy dozen individuals around whom to build his case studies. It is inarguable that Queen Esther, Socrates, John Adams, William Wilberforce, Marie Curie, Mohandas Gandhi, Harry Truman, Rachel Carson, Edward R. Murrow, John F. Kennedy, Nelson Mandela, and Malala Yousafzai each faced what Cooper deems a “moral ‘dead end,’” that place at which the choice is no longer good versus bad but bad versus worse, or at least bad versus unknowable (p. 4). These moral exemplars might have been chosen because of their general acceptance as defenders of the less powerful, and the author is clearly a fan of each, but Cooper does not romanticize his subjects. Rather, he showcases how each made a morally courageous choice despite their frailties or previous failings.

The text is logically constructed, and each case study is easy to follow even for non-ethicists. Cooper uses a list of ten factors that underpin most moral dilemmas, a writing tactic that makes it easy to find the nexus of each ethical challenge. He also does a sterling job of cross referencing one case study within the analysis of another, which weaves this **narrative** into a more unified text and allows the reader to more easily appreciate how this disparate and unrelated group of historic figures relates to one another. The author also offers insight into his andragogy, which will prove helpful to educators who would like to use the **book** as a means of fostering meaningful, well-focused discussion in the classroom.

The role of history in the text is important, though not truly significant in terms of offering any new information to the field of historical scholarship. Cooper uses history only as a means of getting the reader situated in time and place, and of helping the reader to understand the personal, sociopolitical, and cultural pressures that complicated each subjects' situation. A person reading this book expecting an exhaustive historiography would leave disappointed; and academicians might bristle at Cooper's historical conclusions, which are stated briefly and without the backing of extensive secondary scholarship. However, based on the construction of the book, and the goals of the author, this is excusable. Simply put, Cooper did not set out to write an authoritative history. Thus, it would be unfair, even in an academic journal that caters to media historians, to judge an ethics book according to the standards one would use in analyzing a history book.

Doing the Right Thing is not without flaws. Cooper explains his core twelve subjects with skill, but on occasion he makes passing reference to other people and events, both historical and contemporary,

without providing explanation or context. Readers who are not immediately aware of the stories to which the author refers might not readily follow Cooper's line of thought. This distracts from, but is no way fatal to, the flow of the text.

Overall, this text is a net good and well worth the read. Cooper explores what beset each exemplar and gives the reader a complete explanation of what each subject did, what else she or he could have done, and what his or her decision yielded both immediately and historically. Most important, Cooper links each case

to something less cataclysmic readers might encounter in their lives, which makes the book infinitely relatable. Most people will never be in a position in which their action or inaction will meaningfully alter the course of world history, but each of us faces tough choices that will affect our immediate environs and change how we are perceived by those around us. Cooper delivers on his promise and provides a collection of models from whom we might draw inspiration.