

In a short 1751 [essay](#) titled “Discourse on This Question: Which Is the Virtue Most Necessary for a Hero and Which Are the Heroes Who Lacked this Virtue?” Jean Jacques Rousseau tried to identify a hero’s defining trait. Is a hero always just? Is he always prudent? What are his driving motivations? Does he always embody martial valor, or can heroes exist beyond the battlefield? How does a hero differ from a sage?

This essay is fascinating for several reasons, including its self-deprecatory “Notice,” which Rousseau must have added after he finished writing. The one that prompted the diagram below is Rousseau’s insistence on a hero’s incompleteness. A hero never possesses all virtues. Indeed, some virtues preclude heroism. Yet, Rousseau seems to suggest that heroes are essential—that a world without greatness would be disastrous for the “People,” about whose wellbeing the hero always cares, and for whom he is willing to fight resolutely, even though his ultimate objective is personal glory.

We all want to be heroes. We all yearn for recognition. We all dream of greatness. But Rousseau tells us that heroism requires, at one point or another, excess and disorder, be it manifest as a rash charge on the battlefield, a daring but ingenious polemical campaign against an opponent, or whatever else?

Are heroes necessary? Does heroism always undermine moral integrity? Is Rousseau’s notion obsolete, or can it still help us think about greatness, and maybe even display it in our lives?

Sage

- Embodies all virtues
- Virtues are mediocre
- No vicious qualities
- Only yields according to reason
- Stranger to weakness & violence
- Preferable as an individual
- Not preferable as a social agent
- Devoted primarily to the happiness of *man* (i.e., his own happiness)
- Hopeful, but ineffective

Hero

- Does not embody all virtues
- Could be vicious; compensates for vice with brilliance in other virtues
- No mediocre qualities
- Only yields through generosity
- Stranger to cowardice & passions
- Not necessarily just
- Preferable as a social agent
- Not preferable as an individual
- Devoted primarily to the happiness of *men*
- Completely selfless
- Ultimate goal is personal glory (Contradiction?)
- Realistic, useful, & effective
- Prudence is his enemy
- Patriotic
- Genius in leadership (i.e., must always be a leader)
- Martial valor is neither necessary nor sufficient
- Subjugates hearts more than minds (i.e., charisma)
- Vices “activate” him