

Acting Without Thinking: The Sagacity of Indiana Jones

Justin Kitchen

Indiana Jones gets the job done. He may stumble and fall along the way, but he picks himself up (or is forcibly picked up by a Nazi strongman) and keeps going without hesitation. What motivates a person who rarely hesitates? How does Indy make such confident decisions in the heat of the moment? The answer lies, not with a clear moral code or formula for how to behave, but with his character. Indiana Jones's confidence and spontaneity reflects his moral character. He's just a good person who is eager to be good.

Philosophy can help us elaborate on this idea: according to many ancient virtue ethicists, people with the *best characters* are those who are *most wise*—so-called “sages.” Sure, Indy is a good person, but is he a sage? Once we get a handle on the quality of Indy's character and how he has become a good person, we'll be able to say whether he has attained sagehood or is at least heading in the right direction. Through it all, we can rest assured that Indiana Jones is at least a “hero,” but maybe we'll be able to understand what that word amounts to by comparing it to the ideal of the sage.

Consequences or Character?

People adopt many different approaches when it comes to describing and justifying what's morally “right.” By far, the most popular approach is one that looks at the consequences of actions. This is broadly called consequentialism: right actions are those that lead to good consequences. Another approach, instead, looks at the character of the moral agent. This is called virtue ethics: right actions are those performed by agents with good character, those who exhibit virtue.

We'll be taking the virtue ethics approach because of its focus on the moral agent—the person doing the moral action—rather than the action itself. If we took the consequentialist approach and focused primarily on Indiana's actions (more precisely, the consequences of his actions), we might encounter some problems.

The character Amy Farrah Fowler from the CBS sitcom *The Big Bang Theory* expresses one such problem regarding Indy's role in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*:

Indiana Jones plays *no* role in the outcome of the story. If he weren't in the film, it would turn out *exactly* the same. ... If he weren't in the movie, the Nazis would have still found the Ark, taken it to the island, opened it up, and all died. Just like they did.¹

Amy's argument is strong. In fact, we could make her argument even stronger by correcting the claim that the Nazis would have taken the Ark to the island regardless of Indy's interference. A major scene in *Raiders* centers around Indy and Marion trying to board the plane set to fly the Ark to Berlin. If Indy did *not* interfere in the Nazi's archaeological expeditions, the Nazis would have still found the Ark, taken it to Berlin on an unexploded airplane, and opened it up in the presence of the Führer or some other high-ranking officials. This is a hypothetical scenario of a fictional story, but the theory holds water. And it befuddles anyone who is taking a consequentialist approach—Indy actually might have produced worse consequences by redirecting the Ark and keeping more important Nazis out of danger! If Indiana's actions do not bring about good consequences or—worse yet—if they cause harm, then his actions are not morally right according to consequentialism. This is a problem for fans of the movie because the conclusion conflicts with our strong intuitions that Indy is really a good guy, if not a hero.

Indeed, our intuitive admiration of heroes, including Indiana Jones, does not seem to depend on any of this consequentialist arithmetic—adding up the harmful outcomes, subtracting that from the beneficial outcomes, and comparing the net total to some hypothetical scenario in which the action in question did not take place. The moral quality of Indy's actions doesn't actually hinge on hypotheticals at all. We admire Indiana Jones and his actions because of *who* he is, because of the good character he displays when he throws himself into the mix of things and tries to act rightly.

So if some smarty pants like Amy says to you that Indy is not really the good guy we think he is because he doesn't influence the outcome of events, you can point out the assumption she's making. Whether or not someone is a good person doesn't (exclusively) rely on the outcomes of his or her actions. Rather, moral goodness crucially depends on the quality of one's character revealed by that person's actions.

“I’m Making This Up as I Go”

Since we’ve settled on assessing Indiana Jones and his conduct using virtue ethics, we have to look at his words and actions in order to find evidence of good character. When we do this, we find a hitch in our plan. What matters to virtue ethics is not that you succeed in doing the right thing, but that you *try* to do the right thing. Although Indiana Jones seems to exert a lot of physical effort, someone might argue that in many cases, he doesn’t appear to be trying very hard. That is, the decisions Indiana Jones makes throughout his adventures don’t often appear well thought-out. We could cite three cases when Indy’s lack of deliberation or planning is made very apparent:

[In *Raiders*]

INDY: Meet me at Omar’s. Be ready for me. I’m going after that truck.
SALLAH: How?
INDY: I don’t know. I’m making this up as I go.

[In *The Last Crusade*]

ELSA: What are you going to do?
INDY: Don’t know. I’ll think of something.

[In *The Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*]

MUTT: What’s he gonna do now?
MARION: Ha! I don’t think he plans that far ahead.

You would think that someone with good character would be more thoughtful about these serious life-threatening situations. This is especially problematic because what makes Indy so endearing is that he’s spontaneous and that there’s a confidence in his spontaneity. So, for us to be confident in our application of virtue ethics, we need to square these two thoughts. We’ll have to get a better sense of what it means to have good character and be virtuous. Then we’ll have to see whether Indy’s “I’m making this up as I go along” attitude makes sense according to virtue ethics.

Winter Training

The word “virtue” is a common translation of the Ancient Greek word *arete*, which can also be translated as “excellence”—so we should say that if something is virtuous, then it’s excellent. But,

excellent at what? In Ancient Greece, famed philosophers Plato (428–348 BCE) and Aristotle (384–322 BCE) used the word to describe what makes *anything* excellent: a pruning knife is virtuous when it's excellent at pruning vines; a harpist is virtuous when they're excellent at playing the harp; eyes are virtuous when they're excellent at seeing.² These things are excellent at what they're meant for, what they're uniquely capable of. So, when ancient virtue ethicists called a human being “virtuous,” they were saying that the person is excellent at being and doing what humans are uniquely capable of being and doing.

After Aristotle, the concept of virtue was elaborated upon in different ways. The ancient school of Stoicism continued to develop the virtue ethics approach up through the second century CE. The Stoics insisted that humans are uniquely capable of being rational *and* social. Thus, human beings are virtuous when they're able to exercise reason well and be congenial with each other.

Even if humans are prone to being rational and social, it still takes a lot of hard work to be excellent at being human. For starters, it takes many years for children to fully develop their rational faculties and social intelligence. And by the time they actually develop these capacities, they have been inculcated with values and beliefs that may be irrational or antisocial. If so, it would take a lot of hard work to recognize this and set themselves straight. But, as the Stoic Epictetus told his students, “No bull reaches maturity in an instant, nor do men become heroes overnight. We must endure a winter training and can't be dashing into situations for which we aren't yet prepared.”³ It makes sense that it takes a lot of hard work and preparation for someone to reach this state of “excellence”—we don't admire people who accomplish things that are easy.

Indy's “winter training”—when he undertook all the hard work that made him the hero we know and love—is the subject of *The Adventures of Young Indiana Jones* (also known as *The Young Indiana Jones Chronicles*). This television series showcases Indy's many adventures during his formative years as a child and young adult. Episodes mostly center around Indy becoming aware of his shortcomings and learning important moral lessons from various role models. Young Indiana's adventures fit well into what the Stoics described as the proper path of moral education.

Epictetus's teacher, Musonius Rufus (25–95 CE), introduced some popular analogies between moral education and other kinds of education:

The doctor and the musician must each not only learn the principles of his own skill but be trained to act according to those principles. Likewise,

the man who wants to be good must not only learn the lessons which pertain to virtue but train himself to follow them eagerly and rigorously.⁴

The Stoics insisted that moral education, as with proper medical and musical training, actually has two stages: a theory stage and a practice stage. As with medicine, we must first study a bit of theory. This just means examining our assumptions about how we should behave and making sure we have the right idea about what's good and bad, virtuous and vicious. This is what the prepubescent Indy does when he confronts his wrong assumptions or plain ignorance about life and learns from his mistakes with help of T.E. Lawrence, Teddy Roosevelt, Krishnamurti, and others. Here's a particularly poignant lesson that Indy learns, at least at the theoretical level:

- KRISHNAMURTI: I want you to think of something you want more than anything else in the world.
- YOUNG INDY: I want ... I want to live forever!
- KRISHNAMURTI: But everybody has to die. You cannot live forever. How does that make you feel, Indy?
- YOUNG INDY: I feel sad, I guess.
- KRISHNAMURTI: That is the answer to your question [about why people suffer]. You see, people want things they cannot have and that makes them sad and they suffer.⁵

After we get oriented with theory, then comes the more difficult process of really internalizing this information through practice. In medicine, this stage entails a long internship and residency under attending physicians. But in ethics, this entails life experience and honest conversations with other good people. This is what the teenage and young adult Indy does in fighting alongside revolutionaries, activists, and the allied forces of World War I. But, as Indy himself put it, "You don't start at the top. You work your way up, perfect your style until you *are* at the top."⁶ Indy was referring to waiting tables as a college student, which requires less theoretical training, but the sentiment could apply to all kinds of human excellence including virtue.

By the time we reach the events in *Temple*, Indiana Jones has perfected his style and has achieved a noticeable form of excellence. I'm not talking about being an excellent archaeologist or teacher, but an excellent overall *human being*—excellent at being rational and social. He has cultivated his rationality by vetting his beliefs about right and wrong and addressing his prejudices. He has cultivated his sociability by relating to other people and sympathizing with their causes. And for the Stoics, this is what it means to be virtuous.

But how can we *really* tell that Indiana Jones has become virtuous? What has all his moral education and training amounted to? Again, according to the Stoics, we can distinguish a virtuous sage from a less-than-virtuous person by how they act and make decisions. So let's now examine how Indy makes decisions.

“Knowledge Was Their Treasure”

The Stoics said that someone who has become excellent—who has become virtuous—lives consistently or harmoniously (the Greek word is *homologomenos*). Such people live harmoniously with themselves because they're acting rational, free from contradictory beliefs and bias. They live harmoniously with others because they're being congenial, showing compassion toward other people and helping them when they can. This “harmony” is what led the founder of Stoicism, Zeno, to describe virtue as providing a “smooth flow of life.”⁷ Once someone has become virtuous, continuing to be virtuous and navigating through life should be as easy as swimming leisurely downstream—going with the “flow.” Here's the Stoic Seneca (4 BCE–65 CE) describing this special person, what has come to be called the wise person or sage:

he was always the same, consistent in every action, good no longer from policy but under the guidance of a habit that made him not only able to act rightly but unable to act other than rightly. In him we understood that virtue had been perfected. ... That man's orderliness revealed [virtue] to us, his seemliness and consistency, the harmony among all his actions, and his greatness in surmounting everything. It was thus that we came to understand happiness, the life that flows smoothly and is completely under its own control.⁸

Considering that Indiana Jones has gone through a very thorough Stoic-like moral education, we can see some sage-like qualities. This isn't in reference to his outward appearance, of course—he's obviously not the contemplative long-bearded sage we know from religious texts or kung-fu movies. Stoic sages live “harmoniously” and enjoy a “smooth flow of life” not because they're still and fluid in their motions and easily avoid every punch thrown at them. Rather, the “harmony” that sages experience is in their decision-making. Their good decisions flow out of them; they just intuitively *know* what the right thing to do is without having to deliberate.

Indy's quick, spontaneous, and confident decision-making—which always seems to be the right decision—is the key evidence for his potential sagehood. He appears to not hesitate (or even think!) when cornered into a tight spot: “Oh, the plane ran out of fuel and is careening towards a mountain? Everyone get in the lifeboat!”; “Oh, an atomic bomb is about to go off? Ah, here's a lead-lined refrigerator!” These examples may seem ridiculous, but instead of guffaws maybe we should be awestruck at how much moral education and training Indy has undergone—to the point where he can stay clear-minded and make the best choices possible (considering the circumstances) with little to no deliberation. In fact, we can add examples more commonplace but equally deserving of admiration: swinging on his whip or a vine, running off platforms or under doors, and even engaging in quick repartee with his sidekicks and love interests. Far from pointing to Indy's thoughtlessness and counting it against him we should admire him *more*, knowing that he has trained himself to be unencumbered by the thought process.

A more conventional way that virtuous people are described is by talking about the so-called cardinal virtues: courage, temperance, justice, and prudence. The Stoics insist that the cardinal virtues are just different ways to talk about the knowledge that people acquire through their two-stage moral education. Courage is knowledge of what should truly be feared and what is not to be feared. Temperance is knowledge of what truly should be desired. Justice is knowledge of what others indeed deserve—be it tangible or intangible. Prudence is knowledge of what someone actually should do when it comes to actualizing the other three virtues. The insight that Indy expresses at the end of *Crystal Skull*—“knowledge was their treasure”—can be appropriated and expanded by virtue ethics. Knowledge is *our* treasure! It is the most valuable thing a human can possess according to the Stoics—it not only underpins our beliefs it also allows us to be truly courageous, temperate, and just.

Indy has learned that not much is to be feared; he has a good sense of what's not dangerous and he seems to know how to navigate things that *are* dangerous. This manifests in the spontaneous acts of courage like the lifeboat and refrigerator examples. Indy has learned that not many things are desirable in themselves; he pursues valuable artifacts, but only because they belong in museums—where the public can appreciate and learn from them. This manifests as spontaneous acts of temperance when he runs through treasure chambers without a second glance, focused on the tasks at hand. Indy has also learned that people deserve more appreciation than a “fortune and glory” approach allows. This manifests as spontaneous acts of justice and compassion. An important example of this occurs in *Temple*: there's a remarkable moment when Indy first gets possession of the Sankara Stones and

starts to make his exit from the underground temple when distant sounds of agony stop him in his tracks and compel him to investigate.

The fact that many of Indy's actions can be described as courageous, temperate, and just is important evidence for his virtue and potential sagehood. And just as important is that these actions flow out of him during his adventures confidently and spontaneously, without hesitation or deliberation. What initially seemed like a flaw becomes a crucial feature of a good person.

“Fortune and Glory” (... and Snakes)

What counts against Indy are the instances where his actions are not in line with the cardinal virtues, where he expresses irrational fear, irrational desire, or when he does not treat others in a manner they deserve. Let's rip the bandage off quickly: Indy is *not* a sage. He has learned and internalized a lot of moral knowledge. But he has also displayed some behavior that is not consistent with that of a sage.

Though courage is the most prominent cardinal virtue that Indy exhibits, we all know of one instance where he falters: yes, *snakes* ... it had to be snakes. Indy's emotional reaction and hesitation toward snakes indicates that he has some work to do. Of course, snakes should be approached with caution, especially cobras and asps, which are very dangerous as Sallah reminds us, but they should not be feared to the point where one's rational decision-making is compromised. This seems to happen to Indy every single time he spots a snake (except when they are served for dinner for some reason), but in most cases they are relatively harmless boa constrictors, garter snakes, or rat snakes. In fact, recall in *Crystal Skull* when Indy insists that Marion and Mutt call the giant rat snake a rope. Only then (and only after closing his eyes) will he grasp it and be rescued from the dry sandpit (not quicksand pool) he is currently sinking into. In this encounter, like all the others, Indy gets through without a scratch. But all the snake encounters provoke a rare cowardly panic-stricken reaction in him indicating that he has not internalized some basic theoretical knowledge about snakes.

There are at least two moments that serve as examples of Indy's intemperance. During *Temple*, he plays a playful waiting game with Willie Scott in Pankot Palace. After 5 minutes is up and before he gets strangled by an assassin, he says to himself “She's not coming ... I can't believe I'm not going.” Though this comment seems innocuous, it reveals an internal conflict regarding what he should desire. In other words, it's a subtle sign of intemperance. Another, better-known, example occurs at the end of *Crusade*. Indy's brief flash of greed when he comes within reach of the Holy Grail seems to expose a rare

shortcoming concerning his temperance toward artifacts. Perhaps he has not fully internalized the lesson that Krishnamurti taught him as a child—“everybody has to die. You cannot live forever”—or perhaps he has some false beliefs about how the Grail can help the relationship with his father. Regardless, that lapse in judgment is another sign of an irrational intemperance that wouldn’t be found in a true sage.

Lastly, like many action heroes, Indy has some dysfunctions in his personal relationships that are inconsistent with the virtue of justice. It wasn’t until the events of *Crusade* that he made amends with his father and it wasn’t until *Crystal Skull* that he made amends with Marion. A sage strives for harmony with all people and though the term “stoic” brings images of a cold, unsympathetic, insensitive type, the ancient Stoics insisted that the sage is receptive to the concerns of others and exercises compassion whenever possible. In fact, the sage is especially effective at attending to the suffering of others because of his clarity of thought and lack of irrational biases. Indiana Jones is certainly responsive to the suffering of others, but he has needed work addressing the hang-ups in his relationships.

Overall, Indiana Jones is doing very well by the Stoics’ standards. He might not be a sage, but he seems to be getting closer to sagehood after every adventure. Perhaps he has become a sage at the very end of *Crystal Skull*. We can’t know for sure until we observe him in the fifth installment.

Our analysis here allows us to better appreciate Indy’s off-the-cuff remarks about “making things up.” Indy has earned the right to “make things up as he goes along.” He has developed his intuitive know-how when it comes to being courageous, temperate, just, and prudent. He can appeal to that most of the time because he is very close to attaining the level of sagehood. And though he is not a sage, he is a hero in every sense of the word.

Our Hero

Because we can’t yet label Indiana Jones as a “sage” in the ways that the ancient virtue ethicists used the term, I think “hero” is an acceptable term for someone who displays sage-like qualities. This is not a radical idea; the term hero is often used to describe someone in real-life who displays the qualities we have already highlighted in Indy: confidence, spontaneity, and a lack of deliberation when it comes to doing the right thing. As we’ve seen, this is a sign of good character and moral excellence similar to that of the sage.

The Carnegie Hero Fund awards a medal and monetary benefits to those who perform extraordinary acts of heroism. According to Carnegie, a hero is a person “who knowingly and voluntarily risks his

or her own life to an extraordinary degree.”⁹ This definition emphasizes the external aspect of the hero—his or her heroic act. This makes sense because the Carnegie Hero Fund can only reward people when there are witnesses to their heroism and no one can witness a person’s character directly. This is why we examined Indy’s actions through this chapter—as a way to get at his character. But the Carnegie definition can be supplemented with our own common-sense beliefs and with empirical research on people who are considered heroes.

Research shows that those recognized as heroes by the Carnegie Hero Fund perform acts of extreme altruism *intuitively*, without thinking, and as a matter of habit: as the researchers put it, “the cognitive processes they describe are overwhelmingly intuitive, automatic and fast.”¹⁰ If this intuitive, thought-free behavior is the product of a thoughtful education, we can discuss the Carnegie heroes in the same manner as we discuss Indy and other heroes with similar qualities. They may have cultivated good character to the point that courageous actions can “flow” effortlessly from them in high-pressure situations.

Lastly, it’s important to emphasize that this all aligns with our common-sense view of “heroes.” The most vivid and common examples of heroes include firefighters who run into burning buildings and police officers or soldiers who run toward danger rather than away from it. At the time this chapter is being written, the COVID-19 pandemic has placed other occupations firmly in this group: in particular, doctors and nurses who often undertake the right actions quickly and intuitively despite knowing they are at risk of contracting the disease.

Though Indy is fictional, he is a model we can look at to better understand what it means to be a good person. Indy is good not because of the consequences he produces, but because of his character. He has oriented himself well through years of self-examination. He has strengthened his convictions and character through years of practice. Indy isn’t perfect—he’s not a sage—but he’s close. He acts in accordance with what he knows is right, with courage and moderation and justice, and he acts without much if any deliberation. This is a mark of sagacity and sage-like heroism cultivated through a theoretical and practical education. Yes, Indiana Jones often acts without thinking and without planning far ahead. And that’s admirable.

Notes

- 1 *The Big Bang Theory*, “The Raiders Minimization” (S07E04). *The Big Bang Theory* characters, who love *Raiders*, seem befuddled by Amy’s theory, but they never suggest how Indy manages to save Marion’s life; it’s unlikely she survives Toht’s interrogation.

- 2 See Plato, *Republic* 353a and Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1097b.
- 3 Epictetus, *Discourse*, trans. Robert Dobbin (London: Penguin Books, 2008), 1.2.32.
- 4 Musonius Rufus, *Lectures & Sayings*, trans. Cynthia King (London: CreateSpace, 2011), 6.
- 5 *Adventures of Young Indiana Jones*, “Journey of Radiance”.
- 6 *Adventures of Young Indiana Jones*, “Young Indiana Jones and the Mystery of the Blues”.
- 7 For example, see Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 7.88 (Text 101.88), in B. Inwood and L. Gerson, eds. and trans., *The Stoic Reader* (London: Hackett Publishing, 2008), 114.
- 8 Seneca, *Letters to Lucilius*, trans. Margaret Graver (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 120.10–11.
- 9 Find examples of real heroes at: www.carnegiehero.org.
- 10 David G. Rand and Ziv G. Epstein, “Risking Your Life without a Second Thought: Intuitive Decision-Making and Extreme Altruism,” *PLoS ONE* 9, no. 10 (2014).