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Moral courage and manager-regret

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Abstract

It has been suggested that moral courage in the workplace supports more robust application of regulatory principles. A workforce with the courage to act on moral imperative, it is argued, can bolster corporate governance and promote both more stable business organisations and greater economic stability at large. Research in the area investigates the bases of moral courage, a central implication being that businesses should invest in ethical training as a matter of public policy. It is standard to present moral courage as the strength of will to do the morally right thing. From a managerial perspective, however, this distorts the normative character of the kind of issues managers typically face. Doing the morally right thing commonly entails inflicting permissible harms. Such harms, though permissible, can be a source of moral concern to the conscientious manager. A difficulty for the standard account, then, is that moral courage may be expected in scenarios in which the moral implications of the manager's action have not been fully assessed. In this paper, an alternative account of moral evaluation is presented that incorporates the concern around permissible harms. The basis of such concern is found to be *manager-regret*. Building on this foundation, we can establish a new definition of moral courage, that understands the right action to be that which entails *defensible* harms, and requires courage because those harms will likely have to be defended. It should be recognised in the academic literature that moral courage has this intellectual dimension. Furthermore, managerial training and practice should reflect this understanding of moral courage if its benefits to public policy, in particular corporate governance, are to be realised. The thesis takes a novel approach to the topic that draws, centrally, on the work of Bernard Williams, Martha Nussbaum and Søren Kierkegaard.

KEYWORDS
Bernard Williams, dirty hands, management ethics, Martha Nussbaum, moral courage, Søren Kierkegaard

1 | INTRODUCTION

The notion of moral courage in managerial practice has gained considerable attention over the last two decades. In an influential paper, Sekerka et al. (2009), drawing principally on ideas in positive organisational psychology (POS) (Cameron et al., 2003) and *appreciative enquiry* (AE) (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2000), focus on moral courage as a central aspect of 'managerial competency' (Sekerka et al., 2009, p. 5). Whereas POS and AE emphasise the capacity of the virtues to energise organisations, Sekerka et al. (2009) single

out moral courage as a key determinant of organisational performance. Understood, essentially, as the strength to act ethically in spite of threat of harmful repercussion, or 'the willingness to take tough stands for right in the face of danger' (Kidder, 2005, p. vii), moral courage is viewed in the business ethics literature as a way to encourage moral conduct – in particular, where there is managerial discretion and reason to fear the consequences of the morally right choice (May et al., 2003, p. 255, 2014, p. 70; Paniccia et al., 2020, p. 550). An important value of moral courage is that it has the potential to provide the missing link between regulatory requirement and voluntary compliance (Comer & Vega, 2015; Kennedy, 2006; Khelil et al., 2016; Menzel, 2005, pp. 152, 155; Sekerka et al., 2009, p. 2; cf. Hodges & Steinholtz, 2017); and once a widespread characteristic of business organisations it has the capacity to strengthen corporate governance and contribute to the overall stability of market economies (Acemoglu & Johnson, 2003; Pollard et al., 2011). The idea that moral courage and social order are interrelated has deep roots. Plato (e.g., *The Republic*, 1987, pp. 139–140), Aristotle (*Politics*, 1964, p. 229), and Kant (1784), for example, offer alternative accounts that share structural similarities with recent writing. Researchers have considered, for example, the seminal, organisational effects of courageous leadership (Bauman, 2018; Furnham, 2002; Hannah et al., 2011; Klein, 1989; Palanski et al., 2015), and the mediating role of a responsive managerial hierarchy and organisational democracy (Pajakoski et al., 2021, p. 581). It is common to see the idea of moral courage as closely aligned with the virtue paradigm in business ethics, and there is much in canonical texts to support this *origin story* (Paniccia et al., 2020; Tillich, 1952 provide reviews). But even a convinced Kantian deontologist or classic, Benthamite utilitarian ought arguably to recognise that timidity may prevent a person doing what is morally right, and that this might be corrosive in a business context (cf. Mellema, 1994, p. 152). Moral courage draws on a rich tradition and has important implications for managerial conduct, corporate stability and economic order; and current research that explores how it might be engineered is of great practical and policy importance.

I want in this paper, however, to question the orthodox understanding of moral courage in a business setting. I contend that standing accounts fail to conceptualise adequately the nature of moral courage, and so miss an important normative dimension of specifically morally courageous action in the context of managerial choice. The central idea is that correctly circumscribed, moral courage, in an organisational context, imposes challenging intellectual demands on the manager that are not adequately recognised in extant literature.

In Section 2 I argue that current orthodoxy fails to pay due attention to the normative status of *permissible harm*. Doing the right thing often involves a harm that, while permitted, is a source of moral disquiet for the manager. Unless this is resolved, a manager may be encouraged to be courageous when the reason for their hesitancy is not merely volitional but also normative. I note that traditional moral theory does not offer a ready remedy for this weakness in standing accounts of moral courage, and note the need to develop an alternative approach. In Section 3, I show how harms that the agent is permitted to cause may nonetheless be a source of moral concern. I do this by drawing on the work of Bernard Williams on agent-regret, and develop from this the idea of *manager-regret*. Section 4 locates the moral concern for permissible harms within a broader theory of moral judgement, one that takes inspiration from Søren Kierkegaard. While canonical moral theory suggests the concern associated with permissible harm ought to be assuaged in the process of moral judgement, Kierkegaard's approach offers a way to see such harm as both primitive and abiding. The interpretation of Kierkegaard is effected, in part, via a contrast with Martha Nussbaum's arguably more traditional theoretical position. Section 5 contains discussion and draws out implications. The paper identifies an intellectual component of moral courage that the academic literature currently lacks. Because it misses the moral disquiet that permissible harms can cause, extant literature offers more narrow advice for managers and policymakers than is suggested here. Moral courage does require a supporting ethos, ethical leadership and explicit expectations, for example, but permissible harms can constitute a significant psychological hurdle for the manager. Because the current literature does not acknowledge this source of anxiety it can require courage where there are residual moral concerns. This paper presents a theory of moral courage in an organisational context that incorporates that type of concern. The revised conception of moral courage presented here is of benefit to managers and policymakers. It provides a richer account of moral thinking that will give the manager greater confidence when addressing normatively complex decisional scenarios. The fuller understanding of the role of courage in moral decision offers policymakers a way to make corporate regulation a more effective behavioural lever in the workplace. Section 6 concludes.

2 | MORAL COURAGE AND PERMISSIBLE HARM

A common trait of standing accounts of moral courage in a business context is a distinction between the normative justification for a managerial act – i.e., the reason it is considered morally right, and the taking of the action – between judgement and volition. Oswald et al. (2010), for example, view the defining characteristic of moral courage as prosocial conduct that carries personal risk of harm (Oswald et al., 2010, pp. 3–6). Drawing on empirical studies (Oswald et al., 2010: passim), the authors suggest that this understanding chimes with common intuition as to the dividing line between moral courage and, say, helping behaviour. Similarly, in Hannah et al. (2011) a distinction is drawn between 'moral judgements and actual ethical behaviours' (Hannah et al., 2011, p. 555), moral courage being the volitional connection between the two, in fraught scenarios. Indeed, there is broad agreement that moral courage is to be identified with strength of will in a situation in which the action taken is pro bono and is likely to harm the agent. Ogunfowora et al. (2021) note a distinction in the literature between moral courage as a behaviour and as 'a cognitive state, attribute, or character strength' (Ogunfowora et al., 2021, p. 484).

In each case, however, moral courage is action-oriented. It relates either to actual conduct or a disposition to do that which is morally right. The characterisation in Sekerka et al. (2009, cf. May et al., 2014, p. 5) is, perhaps, more nuanced. According to Sekerka, 'the features of PMC (professional moral courage) are manifest in a range of behaviours driven by personal character traits…As a competency, PMC is an applied protracted effort – a dynamic and unfolding event – involving a continued application of moral strength.' (May et al., 2014, p. 5). This encourages a holistic conception of agential development but nonetheless presumes a contrast between moral judgement and execution that grounds moral courage in the latter. There is evident agreement that whether one is morally courageous depends on one's capacity to enact what is acknowledged to be right.

The distinction between judgement and action is a natural one to make. In the age-old debate, the Socratic conception of courage identifies it with wise action. Courageous, as opposed to foolhardy or risky, acts reflect considered evaluation of the likelihood of success. As Pangle puts it, 'in calling courage wisdom (Socrates) suggests that courage may be nothing other than the ability to keep one's wits about one and conduct oneself intelligently in the face of…dangers.' (Pangle, 2018, p. 573). Whereas, for Aristotle, the reduction of courage to knowledge traduces its nobility (Pangle, 2018; Aristotle, 1962, *Nichomachean Ethics*, 3.6–9). It is not only wisdom for which the courageous are lauded, but their bravery. Thus Aristotle distinguishes more sharply between the cognitive and volitional aspects of courage, seeing it as ultimately dispositional (McDowell, 1979). These distinctions carry over into contemporary debate. But when an act is of the kind that requires specifically *moral* courage, I suggest, a simple distinction between the cognitive dimension (knowledge of what is right) and the volitional (the strength of will to do what is right) can lead us awry.

For an act to qualify as courageous, it must carry risk of personally harmful consequence. The act must be potentially costly to the person making the choice (the agent) and to an extent that is sufficient to make the agent wary of the consequences. It is in this sense, perhaps, 'a morally neutral virtue' (Sontag, 2001). However, acts that require *moral* courage typically also risk harming people other than the agent. In a business context, the distinction is between, say, the typically (amoral) courage it takes to deliver a sales forecast presentation and the moral courage required of the whistleblower, whose actions may damage the livelihoods of innocent parties within the organisation (Avakian & Roberts, 2012).

The agent faced with a morally courageous choice faces two types of consideration with regard to the potential harm the chosen act may inflict on others. First, there is the actual harm (the harm per se) that might be experienced by others, loss of livelihood, anxiety of a now uncertain future, and so on. Second, it is an inherent characteristic of this type of harm that it is avoidable.

The manager does not, in a material or a psychological sense, *have to* perform the act that imposes the harm. On the face of it this is unproblematic. When an act is morally justified, the harm it inflicts is permissible. Being morally clean, in this sense, the harm entailed ought not to be of concern to the agent. However, the conscientious manager is someone whose concern naturally extends to the impact of the (permissible) action on those affected by it (cf. Sen, 1979, p. 474). Consider, for illustration, a scenario in which a company is deciding whether to shut down a factory in an area of high unemployment. It is possible to present a classic, Benthamite (indeed welfare economic) defence of the closure, where the action will with some certainty save many more jobs. The normative justification suggests that the harm that the closure entails is permissible. But its permissibility does not remove what for the conscientious manager will be a lived aspect of the factory closure – the harm it will inflict on the affected factory workers.

In this type of scenario, where the act implements what is morally justified, the manager will, on the standard approach to moral courage, be encouraged to have *the metal* to do the right thing. But it is unreasonable to suppose that the manager in this kind of situation will have only visceral doubts – emotional, normatively neutral reactions. It is natural for the conscientious manager in this type of situation to have *moral* concerns about the harmful consequences of their actions – concerns that are moral precisely because the act *itself* is impactful. What is problematic, for the standard account of moral courage, is that this kind of disquiet has no normative status. Such concerns are practically neutral, without implication for managerial choice. This is because they are permissible consequences of doing the right thing.

Permissible harms are ubiquitous in the professional life of the manager. The wide-ranging reviews of, for example, Lemoine et al. (2019), Vallaster et al. (2019), Ciulla et al. (2018a, 2018b), Bowie and Werhane (2005), and Ciulla (1995) neglect the topic. Yet from less severe cases (e.g., the disappointment experienced by an unsuccessful candidate for a minor promotion) to the serious (e.g., the impact on staff numbers of a radical restructure), the idea of permissible harms is, arguably, central to an understanding of the ethics of managerial practice. Indeed, in the context of moral courage, neglect of the notion of permissible harm can be detrimental to the mental health of the manager. The standard view encourages the manager to act despite concerns that it views as merely visceral, but that are, from the perspective of the manager, felt (in some cases serious) *moral* considerations. Moreover, the standard view provides no way to accommodate the normative status of such concerns, leaving managers rudderless in the face of what for them is morally concerning.

It will be helpful to note that many of the decisions a manager makes are permissible in two respects. They are permissible because of the institutional context of the decision (they fall within the boundaries of professional discretion) and, second, because they are morally permitted. Some decisions may be permitted in the first sense but not the second. A decision to relocate a firm on which a community has long depended for its livelihood may be morally wrong if there are insufficient cost or risk-based reasons for the move; but the choice may be in accordance with regulatory requirement and so discretionary from a professional

or institutional point of view. It is essential for the argument put forward in this paper that the kind of decision in the spotlight is consistent with both organisational authority *and* moral considerations. A close-run appointment or promotion where, for example, the consequence for the unsuccessful candidate is a potentially demotivating stay in their career, a restructure that upsets staff routine and disturbs settled relationships, a wholly cost-based closure of a small division, and so on, are all examples of this type of decision. They are typically permissible from both institutional and moral perspectives, yet are optional – and in choosing to do them a manager effects harm. As noted, while permissible, such decisions may (typically will) cause the conscientious manager moral concern, even though they are not proscribed. While there appear to be no grounds in these types of cases to override managerial discretion for moral reasons, the manager will, nonetheless, feel the normative charge of such situations.

Where the ethics of a managerial choice scenario are not such as to override institutional permission, standard moral theories are unable to provide an account of the moral concern that such choices can cause. According to the moral canon, permissible acts are without blame (McNamara & Van De Putte, 2022). Any associated concern is without moral status, irrational or superfluous, and so traditional moral theory does not offer a ready resolution of the issue. Note also that Chisholm (1963) identifies a type of permissible harm that he calls 'offence'. It is the kind of harm that one is not expected to cause, but may if one wishes. Being able to withstand minor offence can be a mark of character and arguably underpins free speech. So it is possible to see why causing minor offence might be a permissible harm. Permissible harms in Chisholm's sense are, however, not what is in play in this essay. Chisholm's permissible harms are clearly a species of the *suberogatory* acts that are considered by Driver (1992): acts that "are not impermissible…but still strike us as troubling or bad, and are therefore worse than morally neutral" (Liberto, 2012, p. 395). What Chisholm and Driver are responding to (see also Kamm, 1989, 2008) is the need to construct a moral category that accounts for an action that has a negative outcome but is not impermissible. But the permissible harms that are being considered in this essay are not a species of the impermissible – wrong but acceptable. They are permitted because of institutional and moral sanction. And that kind of morally sanctioned permission is, according to the canon, without blame and so any *moral* qualm associated with them is without rationale. Kant's absolute prohibition on lying permits the harm that truth telling might cause (Kant, 1785), the classical utilitarian permits torture where the net benefit is positive (Spino & Cummins, 2014), the doctrine of double effect permits unintended harm (Quinn, 1989). None carries a normative rationale for the moral concern that those inflicted harms might evoke in the agent whose permissible choices inflict them. Thus, the permissible harms under consideration here are indubitably not morally wrong. In the following section I attempt to uncover why permissible harms may nonetheless cause moral disquiet.

3 | BERNARD WILLIAMS & *MANAGER-REGRET*

I draw, in this section, on the moral philosophy of Bernard Williams. As will be seen, an adaptation of his notion of agent-regret plays a central role in this part of my argument. I begin with Williams' well-known thought experiment (Smart & Williams, 1973) in which a hapless tourist (Jim) faces a harrowing choice (Smart & Williams, 1973, p. 98). He can shoot one captive rebel, enabling a large number to go free, or he can refuse to pull the trigger, in which case all of the rebels will die (at the hands of the political authorities). The classical utilitarian judgement is that Ted ought to kill the one, given the resulting surplus of welfare. However, Williams notes, the utilitarian calculus is insensitive to the consideration that "each of us is specially responsible for what *he* does" (Smart & Williams, 1973, p. 99). This Williams says is closely related to the idea of integrity (Smart & Williams, 1973, p. 99) and it is the value of Jim's integrity that many see as central to the thought experiment. But arguably primitive here is Jim's *anticipation of what he will have done* if he pulls the trigger. On this reading, what causes Jim to query the authority of utilitarian principle is not recognition of dissonance between the act of killing and his own values. His anguish arises from the anticipation of what he will have done, the provenance of that thought and its attendant feeling being, on this view, secondary considerations.

Looked at from Jim's perspective, *what he will have done* can possess no weight in a utilitarian assessment. It is a consideration that can only feature as a qualitative description of an aspect of what happened, a description that articulates its phenomenal features. This gives it a place in Jim's reasoning that (cf. Nussbaum, 1990) makes it incommensurable with the welfare information associated with the deaths per se.

At the centre of this case, then, on this reading, is Jim's sense of what he will have done if he acts in a particular way (if he pulls the trigger). Later, in Moral Luck (1981), Williams associates this sense with what he calls *agent-regret*. Williams' focus in Moral Luck is not on a person's *anticipation* of his or her agent-regret, but on past events. However, what he says has application to the anticipatory case – a scenario in which a person anticipates what they will have done if a particular course of action is followed. Williams says (1981, p. 27):

> The constitutive thought of regret in general is something like 'how much better if it had been otherwise', and the feeling can in principle apply to anything of which one can form some conception of how it might have been otherwise, together with consciousness of how things would then have been better…But there is a particularly important species of regret, which I shall call 'agent-regret', which a person can feel only towards his own past actions (or, at most, actions in which he regards himself as a participant). In this case, the supposed possible difference is that one might have acted otherwise, and the focus of the regret is on that possibility, the thought being formed in part by first-personal conceptions of how one might have acted otherwise.

It is easy to see from this quote how an anticipatory form of agent-regret might feature in first personal reasoning. As in Jim's case, it is a hypothetical concern for what one will have done if a particular course of action is followed.

A defining characteristic of agent-regret, as Williams presents it, is its connection to what has happened, per se, what in a descriptive sense has taken place. In a much-discussed example, Williams points to the regret expected of a lorry driver whose vehicle was instrumental in a purely accidental, fatal collision (Williams, 1981, p. 28). What is definitive here of agent-regret, in Williams' example, is not the accidental nature of the incident, but the morally neutral character of the agent-regret the driver is expected to feel (Sussman, 2018). Relevantly, being (doubly – both institutionally and morally) permissible, the harms that cause the manager moral concern in the business context that is the arena of this paper do not do so *because* they are morally wrong. They are, as has been noted, strictly permissible. This does not preclude, however, there being (anticipated) agent-regret, in such cases, for what one will have done, what one will have made the case if one chooses to do A rather than B. That kind of regret, Williams rightly points out, can be the source of moral concern while apparently beyond the province of established moral theory.

In what follows let us call anticipated agent-regret, *manager-regret* to reflect the context of the kind of choice that is under consideration. Manager-regret, then, secures for us a way to explain why morally permissible acts may have normative status from the perspective of the manager. Being permissible such harms are not morally wrong and so ought not to be seen as reason to go against a decision. Nonetheless, they give rise to felt concern that is moral in the sense that it relates to the harm that the decision potentially inflicts. Indeed, manager-regret may weigh sufficiently heavily in a manager's mind to prevent their making a decision. It might be that they are so reluctant to commit the (permissible) harm that they are unable to make a decision that is in all normative respects allowed, and the soundest choice from an instrumental perspective. They may, that is, lose their nerve given the anticipated impact of their choice.

We can see from this how the standard conception of the morally courageous manager is problematic. On the standard view the manager is encouraged to have the moral courage to do that which is morally right. But this gives too little attention to the possibility of manager-regret. It may not only be an issue of volition that makes the manager hesitant. It may also be a moral concern, and so an intellectual as well as emotionally charged response to the decision at hand.

Thus far it has been shown how permissible harm may justifiably possess normative relevance for the manager. What a person does, what they effect, when they act is given too little attention in ethics, according to Williams. The idea helps us here to articulate why moral concern might attach to morally permissible acts. However, this does not tell the manager how to build such concerns into their reasoning. As has been noted, traditional moral theory tends to view permissible harms as the outcome of moral evaluation rather than an input. Moreover, many would argue that the concern identified here as anticipated moral regret may be symptomatic of a manager's good nature but indicate nothing of practical concern. In the literature on *dirty hands*, for example, a prevalent view is that concerns of this type are mere emotive residue; for example, Hare (1972, 1981), Foot (1983), de Wijze (2005), Coady (2018), Gaus (2003), Kramer (2018). It might be thought that ethical paradigms more amenable to emotive sensitivity can accommodate anticipated regret but this route is circular. Werhane's emphasis on *moral imagination*, for example (Werhane, 1998, 1999, 2004; see also Bevan et al., 2019), suggests that, '(i)n management decision-making, moral imagination entails perceiving norms, social roles, and relationships entwined in any situation.' (Werhane, 1999, p. 93, italics added). Though sensitive to context, Werhane's approach, nonetheless, à la moral tradition, provides an evaluative basis for permissible actions, *including those that entail harm*; and it is the latter that we want to incorporate.

A broader spectrum of approaches to managerial ethics may, of course, be considered: a neo-Aristotelian appeal to mature moral sensitivities, or the practical wisdom of the manager as *phronimos* (Bachmann et al., 2018; Caulfield et al., 2021; Nayak, 2016; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 2011; Provis, 2010; Roca, 2008; Shotter & Tsoukas, 2014; Tsoukas, 2018); literary approaches (Macksey, 1998; Michaelson, 2005), particularism (Arnold et al., 2010; Dancy, 1983), Arendtian critical consciousness (Holt, 2020), moral awareness (Friedland & Jain, 2020), and Deweyan dramatic rehearsal (Caspary, 2006) are candidate theses. But in each case moral reasoning is structured so as to identify as output what is permissible, and it is qualms about the latter that we are attempting to address.

In the next section I draw on contrasting approaches to moral judgement and action in the work of Martha Nussbaum and Søren Kierkegaard. The contrast is intended to bring into view the way in which Kierkegaard's conception of moral choice enables us to integrate manager-regret with wider moral considerations. The outcome is a framework for moral judgement in which manager-regret features as a primitive and abiding concern. How this provides the basis for a rich conception of moral courage is explored in discussion, in section four.

4 | NUSSBAUM, KIERKEGAARD AND THE PRIMACY OF ANTICIPATED HARM

The anticipated agent-regret that Jim feels in the example considered above was seen to lie beyond the type of information that classical utilitarianism can take into account. Descriptive or phenomenal information cannot be assimilated into an evaluation in which the only morally relevant data is welfare (Sen, 1979). The difficulty is, however, more general. Extant theoretical positions in moral philosophy, as Williams notes (1973), find it difficult to accommodate concern for what one will have done, as such. There is a tendency in moral theory to view successful normative evaluation as assuaging the concern involved in making a normatively challenging choice. Indeed, the dirty hands literature referred to in the previous section, stems from a concern that

residual regret or a feeling that one has not done the right thing even while doing good is somehow an oddity. If a moral choice is the correct one then how might regret possess normative status? This is an unhelpful understanding of the nature of morality in the context of managerial decision. Managerial choices, as we have seen, are typically (doubly) permissible yet in many cases accompanied by moral disquiet. How can even successful moral reasoning assuage that type of felt concern when there is (according to that very reasoning) no *moral* problem to solve? So we need an alternative way of accommodating this form of felt, agential concern. Without an alternative way of accounting for this kind of choice the manager is left with an unease that has no intellectual resolution - only reassurance that what they did was permissible and that any anxiety, while perhaps understandable, will hopefully recede. This leaves the manager uncomfortably torn between a professional self whose (permissible) actions are insulated from moral concern and a private self who feels the weight of the harms their decisions (though permissible) may inflict. A sociopath may be comfortable with such a personal/professional schism, but the concerned manager will experience this as an abiding, and challenging dissonance.

What we require is an account of the normative character of the manager's permissible but morally disquieting choices that recognises and accommodates the felt concern, but does not presume that the purpose of moral reasoning is to assuage it. I attempt, in this section, to provide the basis for such an account in a comparison of an aspect of the work of Martha Nussbaum and Søren Kierkegaard. In particular I consider Nussbaum and Kierkegaard's rather different responses to the classic example of an anguished choice in Aeschylus' Agamemnon (Aeschylus, 2002).

In Aeschylus' version of the Agamemnon myth, Artemis, for an unspecified reason (Aeschylus, 2002, p. 8; Nussbaum, 2001, p. 34), will prevent the Achaean military assault on Troy unless Agamemnon sacrifices his daughter, Iphigenia. If he does not he will fail to honour his duty to Zeus to carry out the expedition, and everyone, including Iphigenia, will perish (Nussbaum, 2001). On Martha Nussbaum's influential reading, Agamemnon's reasoning – as represented by Aeschylus – is misshapen in its limited appreciation of (as we might put it) anticipated agent-regret. To fully weigh the significance of the sacrifice of his daughter, Nussbaum says (2001, p. 42):

> Agamemnon would have to allow himself really to *see* his daughter…the trailing yellow robes, the prayers, the cries of 'Father', the look of accusation in the silent eyes. He would have to let himself remember… her sweet voice, her dutiful and loving presence at his table.

In this way, Agamemnon can make vivid to himself the implications of his actions. Only then, Nussbaum suggests, can he assess the true weight of the dreadful act of filicide. However, making vivid in deliberation the significance of the consequences of one's actions is arguably insufficient to incorporate the fact of *what one will have done* in moral reasoning, and this makes Nussbaum's account a weak candidate as a theory of permissible harms. Consider Kierkegaard's's alternative take on Agamemnon's choice in Fear and Trembling (1843).

Kierkegaard distinguishes Agamemnon's deliberation from his decision to act. When deliberation is done Agamemnon has 'only the outward deed to perform' (Kierkegaard, 1843, p. 68), but the act follows from reasoning which (in accounts such as Nussbaum's) 'reduces the ethical relation between…daughter and father, to a sentiment that has its dialectic in its relation to the ethical life' (Kierkegaard, 1843). In other words, however vivid the representation of the profound personal significance of his daughter, Iphigenia, her significance is present to Agamemnon's mind only in such a way as to enable him to assimilate it (i.e., his daughter's significance to him) with other morally relevant information (such as the implications of failure to assault Troy). Nussbaum, her text suggests, would want to deny this. The vividness of the articulation of Iphigenia's meaning for Agamemnon is intended in Nussbaum's account to capture the incommensurability of considerations in properly textured moral thinking. This resonates with her wider thesis on the emotional determinants of the moral landscape (Nussbaum, 2003). But Kierkegaard perceives a gap between the *source* of Agamemnon's anguish – what he will have done were he to carry out the execution – and how it features in his deliberation.

Contrast Kierkegaard's treatment of the similarly disturbing choice faced by Abraham when ordered by God to kill his son Isaac (Kierkegaard, 1843: Problemata). Kierkegaard notes that according to standard readings of Abraham's choice (Kierkegaard, 1843, p. 28), '(Abraham's) greatness was that he so loved God that he was willing to offer him the best he had.' And adds (Kierkegaard, 1843, pp. 28–29):

> That is very true, but 'best' is a vague expression… What is left out of the Abraham story is the anguish… anguish is a dangerous affair for the squeamish, so people forget it…so they…interchange the words 'Isaac' and 'best'.

The descriptive mode in which we attempt to consider the situation reduces the actual source of the anguish (Abraham's anticipation of the destruction of his son) to a simulacrum, a pale imitation of the actual thing, the true source of the (in this case) profound anxiety. And this distorts the nature of the choice. It is in the lived engagement with *the love he feels for his son*, as such, that Abraham's act is, he says, sacrificial: 'Only in the moment when his act is in absolute contradiction with his feeling, only then does he sacrifice Isaac' (Kierkegaard, 1843, p. 88); and this is in the moment of actual killing. Abraham's anguish is not assuaged in the discovery of the morally right thing to do. It is in acting *despite* his deep anguish that his act has moral character. Note that while God replaces Isaac with a ram and Abraham does not actually carry out the act, the substitution of the ram is instantaneous – there is no suggestion, in Kierkegaard's reading, that Abraham anticipates the substitution. He momentarily believes he is killing his son.

Kierkegaard is happy for there to be a contrast between the way we conceptualise Agamemnon's choice and that of Abraham.

The former is the 'tragic hero' while Abraham is the 'knight of faith' (Kierkegaard, 1843, p. 90). The contrast is intended to communicate the way in which Kierkegaard's telling of Abraham isolates a personal space for choice that is independent of the social sphere – a move that effects, Kierkegaard thinks, a distinction between his view and the irreducibly social nature of Hegel's ethics (Stern, 2011, Ch. 6). But Kierkegaard's account has broader implications for how we understand the role of anticipated agent-regret in moral reasoning. The secular, structural point that follows from his consideration of Abraham and Isaac is that any attempt to integrate anticipated agent regret, as such, in our moral thinking must neutralise its emotive charge. Moreover, we need not see assuaging moral anxiety as the objective of normative reasoning. This helps us to see how such anxiety might be the distinguishing mark of moral choice. Of course this resonates with broader existentialist conceptions. Sartre, for example, in Existentialism is a Humanism (1946) presents the much discussed example of the student who is uncertain whether to pursue a political path that will take him away from France or remain in Paris to tend to his ailing mother. Sartre gives no advice other than that the student must discover his personal ethic through the process of deliberation itself. This carries Kierkegaard's influence but in Sartre the raw confrontation with the source of the anguish is not brought out with equal intensity.

In her reflections on Agamemnon's choice, Nussbaum emphasises the role that appreciation of the source of his moral anguish ought to play in his deliberation. Vivid description makes integral the awfulness of the deed. However, the decision itself (to kill his daughter) brackets the anguish per se. This is, for Kierkegaard, a misshapen account of the nature of the choice facing Agamemnon. The anguish that is fundamental to his deliberation is not anguish over the moral considerations as such. *It is anticipation of the awfulness of the act he will carry out if he does what morality appears to require*. It is anticipation, that is, of what he will have done that is the basis of his deeply felt concern.

Kierkegaard is more explicit that the source of Abraham's anguish is the act of executing his son and its consequence. But Kierkegaard's intention is, through that emphasis, to undermine the notion that it is possible to go from deliberation to action without a determinative tussle with that which is the basis of the anguish – without, in the kind of examples he considers, a forcing of the self to confront the horror of the act. This is interesting for us because Kierkegaard's thesis supports the view that anguished concern over *what the agent will have done*, as such, need not be expected to dissolve in moral deliberation, but can be an abiding presence, indeed the very source of what makes a choice moral.

5 | DISCUSSION

The interpretation of Kierkegaard in the previous section suggests an unorthodox approach to moral evaluation. It is an approach that may enable the manager to make the unease associated with permissible harm an essential rather than adjunct part of normative assessment. It is traditional in moral theory, where the scenario is decisional, to focus on the act. The primary issue is the rightness of the act. But the reading of Kierkegaard in section three suggests that the primary focus should be, rather, the harms that the act may inflict. Further, the harms should be presented descriptively, to capture the phenomenal, lived character of the manager's perspective. What may cause the manager regret is not harm per se, but a specific harm in a specific scenario. Normative problems for the manager are rarely disembodied conundrums. Given this informational focus, the aim of moral evaluation should be the defensibility of the inflicted harms (rather than, directly, the rightness of the act). In this framework, where the harms that are a potential source of manager-regret can be justified, they will not be merely permissible, but *defensible*. Moral courage, on this evaluative framework, requires the strength of will to do that which will likely court (in some cases, serious) controversy because of the harms it inflicts; but in a way that incorporates, rather than brackets, manager-regret.

To take an everyday example, when interviewing an internal candidate for a post a manager knows when conducting the interview that the interviewee will be negatively affected by failure to be appointed. This is a typical managerial concern but in actual circumstances it is a concern experienced by the manager in relation to an actual individual – it is a lived, felt disquiet. To the extent that it requires courage to conduct the interview in the knowledge that there may be, for the interviewee, consequential harm, the standard account of moral courage would suggest that the disquiet is simply to be overcome. It is a visceral residue, without practical note, given that the interview is (we can presume) legitimate and fairly conducted. This leaves the manager with a felt concern that is, on this account, a potential weakness that they ought to have the courage to overcome.

The alternative model that emerges from the consideration of Williams and Kierkegaard, above, integrates the felt concern, makes it part of the moral evaluation of, in the example, the interview scenario. The question, on this account, is not, 'what are the permissible harms in this scenario?' but, 'is this specific (anticipated) harm – this source of potential manager-regret - permissible?'. That the harm the interviewee may be caused is permissible can, as in the standard approach, be established with reference to the legitimacy and fairness of the interview. But because the anticipated harm has been given a primitive role in the formation of the moral judgement, the manager's concern – though not assuaged – has been taken into account. Actually conducting the interview will take (in this case limited) courage but this does not consist in overcoming a presumed irrational concern for the impact of a permissible harm. *It consists in acting despite the anticipated harm but in the knowledge that such harm is morally defensible*. It is possible to distil a purely volitional dimension to the courage displayed in this context, but what makes it a display of specifically *moral* courage is its accompanying normative justification. Normative justifications are, of their nature, challengeable. Moral courage is the strength of will to act despite the awareness that one's normative position is open to challenge. Such courage is not, however, the bravery to act without normative armour; and it is the latter that the standard conception expects.

Anxiety associated with permissible harms is, as has been noted, a ubiquitous aspect of managerial experience. It is important, then, that it is recognised in the academic literature on moral courage in an organisational context. An expectation that managers be courageous that pays limited attention to that source of residual moral disquiet fails to fully address the psychological hurdles that managers face when making decisions. The knowledge that a harm is permissible is often insufficient to make it morally neutral from the perspective of the manager. Existing academic literature provides no remedy for the many circumstances in which this consideration runs up against a requirement to choose the courageous act. Inclusion of this consideration in academic discourse would lay the foundations for a more coherent conception of moral courage than that currently in play. There are concomitant implications for managers. The application of traditional ethical theory to management standardly aims to help the manager identify what is morally permissible, or obligatory. But as we have seen, this can entail a permission to cause a harm that the manager feels it may be morally impermissible to inflict. The inability to address this everyday anxiety is a significant flaw in the application of traditional moral theory to management practice. Widespread understanding of the alternative decisional model presented in this paper would, I suggest, help managers to make better sense of the normative conflicts that they face in their decision making.

The paper's central argument is also of consequence for policy-makers. A distinctive benefit of the discourse around moral courage in management is the contribution it makes to public policy as it relates to corporate governance. As was noted in the introductory section, an important strand in governance debate concerns what constitutes a productive balance between regulation and ethical conduct within the business organisation. Recognising the limitations of both regulation and self-imposed, ethical restraint, Hodges and Steinholtz (2017), for example, proposed an approach that consolidates the influence of both. Their combinatory conception of the corporate governance framework offers a via media between a Friedmanite suspicion of moral requirement at managerial level and a view that moral responsibility should permeate the firm. However, while the combination of regulatory requirement and ethical expectation may create a platform for moral conduct it does not, of course, ensure it. Greater guarantee of moral conduct can be secured if the conditions that promote moral courage can be put in place. This, on the standard view, provides reason to understand the environmental and sociological foundations of morally courageous behaviour so as to engender it. But, as we have seen, a function of institutionally and morally legitimate acts is that they justify collateral harms. If the latter are not taken into account then the stabilising effects of moral courage may not be forthcoming.

Moral courage requires an act of volition, a steely will, not because what is being done is simply right. What makes an act *morally* courageous is that it is done despite its consequent harm(s) being no more than normatively defensible. However, this seemingly weaker characteristic is actually a source of greater strength. Managerial actions that are courageous in this sense can bring greater normative surety and stability to business organisations.

Figures 1 and 2, below, present a schematic representation of the ideas in this paper. From this can be seen the way that the theory of manager-regret changes the ordinary conception of how the manager should approach the normative dimension of practical issues. On the standard account the basis on which a manager is expected to show courage is that the status of the action is 'morally right'. In Figure 1 this is associated with act-oriented evaluation, and is, on the standard account, thought sufficient basis for a requirement to be courageous. Act-oriented evaluation, however, ignores the concerns that a manager has for those harms that while morally permissible are nonetheless disquieting. This concern is captured, in Figure 1, by the inclusion of harm-centric evaluation. It has been a central concern of this paper that identifying the morally right action forms an inadequate basis for an expectation of moral courage. What must

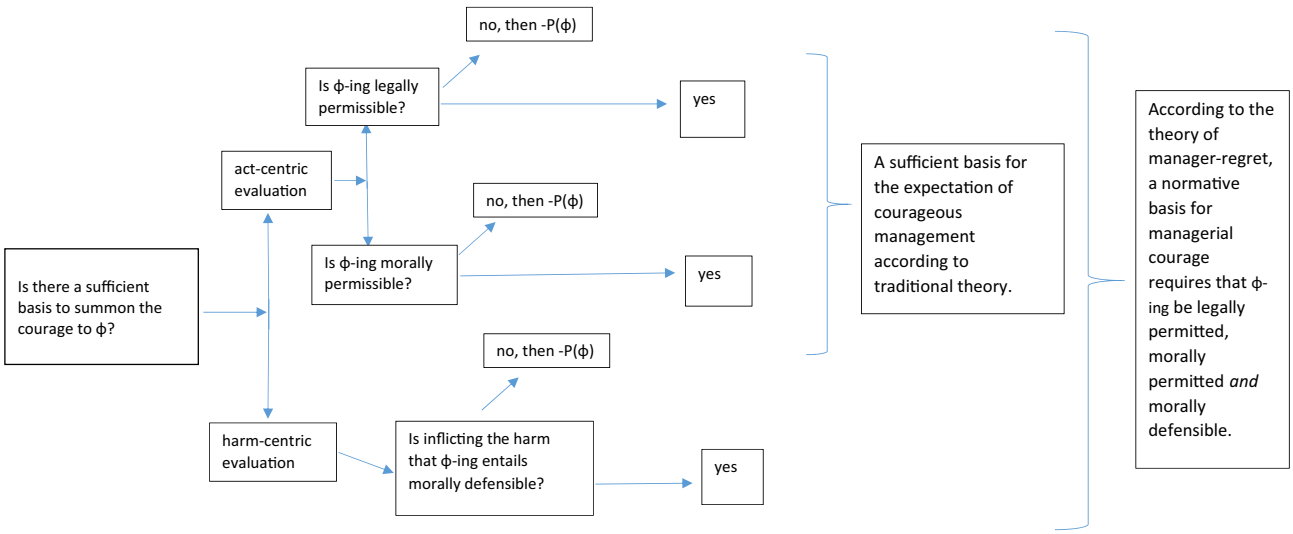

FIGURE 1 Moral-regret and moral defensibility. −P(φ) denotes 'φ is morally impermissible'.

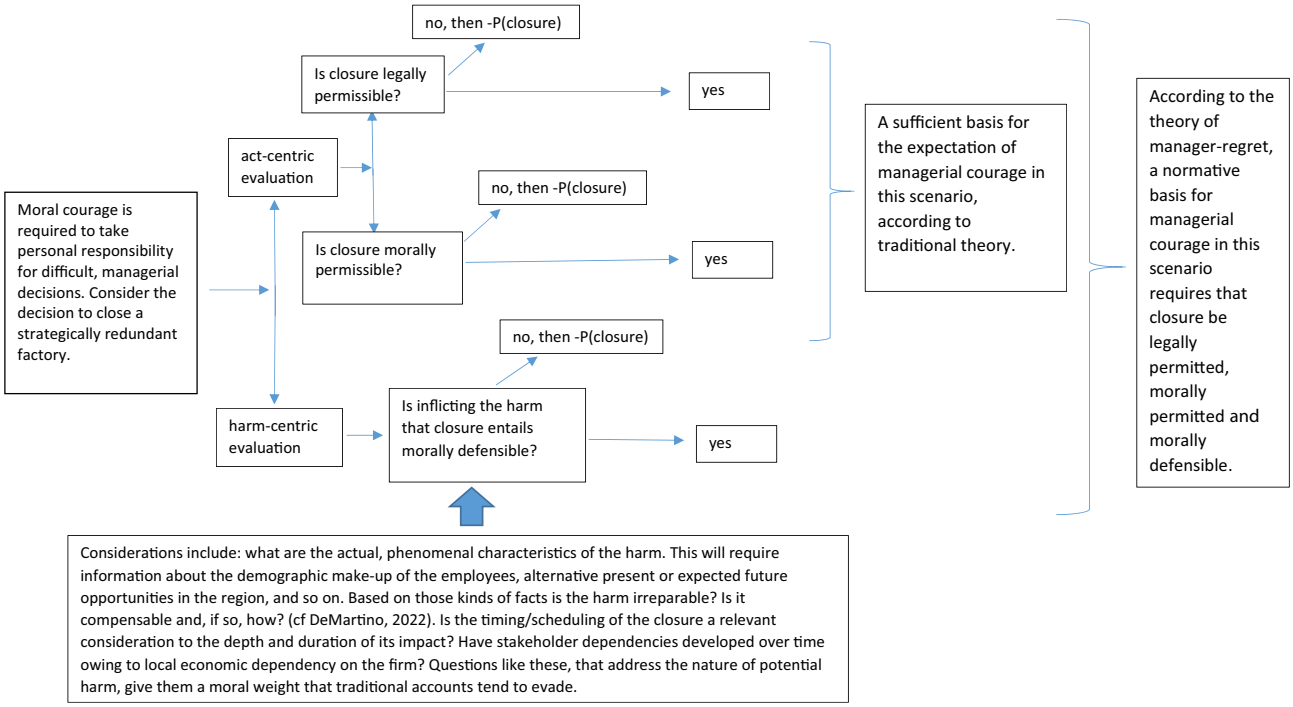

FIGURE 2 Moral-regret and moral defensibility, a scenario.

also be embraced in moral evaluation is the manager's concern regarding permissible harms. This is captured by the final bracket in Figure 1. This indicates that harm-centric evaluation is necessary if there is to be an adequate basis for courageous management. Note also in Figure 1 that the concern of harm-centric evaluation is not only for harm per se, but for the permissibility of *inflicting* it. And inflicting harm is, in the model of normative managerial reasoning presented here, at most defensible, i.e., supported by reasoned argument.

In Figure 2 below an example is presented that relates to what might be called the courage of ownership. To own or acknowledge responsibility for a decision requires a manager to be courageous, where the decision will likely be met with hostility. There are occasions, however, where a controversial decision is necessary, and this is illustrated in Figure 2. In this figure, the types of harm are included, which harm-centric reasoning might include. A detailed account would require lengthy digression (cf DeMartino, 2022) but an important consideration is the phenomenal character of the potential harm. Recall that manager-regret relates to specific harms that are not reducible to the generic categories often employed in mainstream ethical theory (for example, welfare or utility loss, or, in deontic argument, indignity). This allows harm-centric evaluation to resonate with the felt concern of the manager and, indeed, those who may demand a moral defence of the decision that has been made. The schematic presentation in Figures 1 and 2 helps to show how the idea of manager-regret effects a departure from a traditional mode of moral thinking, and incorporates a harm-centric dimension. This, I suggest, offers a more sturdy platform for managerial courage, and so the broader, economy-wide benefits that accrue from morally courageous management.

6 | CONCLUSION

The conception of moral courage that standing theories use tends not to accommodate the moral qualm that managers may feel when confronted with permissible but harmful choices. Failure to do this entails that managers may be expected to show courage to do the morally right thing where the action causes them moral disquiet. Given, as has been suggested in the paper, that permissible harms are a ubiquitous feature of a manager's professional life, this is a significant weakness. The approach mistakenly identifies as purely volitional what are in fact instances of *moral* hesitance. To address this deficiency, an alternative account of moral evaluation has been put forward. The morally courageous manager anticipates the need to provide a normative defence for any inflicted harm. To be courageous in this sense is not merely to do that which is antecedently right, but that which, while knowingly harmful, is morally defensible. The promotion of moral courage in the workplace, then, requires not only volitional reinforcement, in order to perform courageous acts, but the intellectual means to defend them.

It is a limitation of the argument of this paper that it has not been shown how it dovetails with traditional theoretical positions. It might be argued, for instance, that moral courage is a virtue-theoretic category and that its association with the seemingly Consequentialist notion of permissible harm is at best dubious. This and arguments like it, that point to the doctrinal incommensurability of the component parts of my thesis, would be a profound challenge to the argument presented in this paper. I think that such objections can be withstood. Virtue ethics, for example, may make character a foundational evaluative factor of moral evaluation, but it, nonetheless, identifies permissible harms. The ingredients are

here for the approach I am recommending, but a full defence is for further research.

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There are no conflicts of interest.

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Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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