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Duty versus desire: The duality of what it takes to fuel a burning passion

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Abstract: The fire station loomed before me, a fortress of bold red and blue. This was not built of stone, but by flesh and will, built by those who defy the instinct to flee. The very air surrounding it was thick, laced with the acrid bite of smoke. I could hear the soft whispers from the embers, curling in the air, calling for those who would dare to answer. A puddle sat still amidst the brittle grass field; a glistening mirage situated amongst the yellow grasslands. It reflected the station's bold colours, painting a pool of illusory purity. But as I stepped closer, the illusion shattered. As the ripples broke the water's surface, its true form was revealed – clouded, ashy, tainted by what it had consumed. Some things, once touched by fire, can never really be the same again.

Keywords: fire, dualism, heroism, passion, desire



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I looked up to see a firefighter waiting at the bus stop, his neon orange uniform sticking out like a sore thumb as he hurriedly tried to scrape off the ashy dirt caked onto his boots, a futile attempt to shed the remnants of his battles. As he stepped into the vehicle, the sunset caught his uniform, wrapping him in gold and crimson. For a moment, he glowed, just like a phoenix. But the fire was watching, waiting. It will call him back, just like it always did.

Sometimes I think about how we think they are indestructible, rising from the ashes as they carry our loved ones out of the bellowing fire. I was told by some that they chose to be a phoenix, and by others that these are the people who are born naturally courageous. But how do you naturally overcome the innate biological instinct that shrieks at you to run? More importantly, why would you run straight into the fire without any hesitation, even when you know that you will never rise from the ashes, you are not a phoenix, and you cannot ever be reborn from your ashes?

Firmin et al. (2018) identified three key reasons for entering the profession of firefighting: the thrill of the job, flexible work schedules, and – most importantly – altruism. They used the Self-Determination Theory (SDT) to explain why firefighters remain committed to such a high-risk profession to date. SDT states that human motivation is driven by three psychological needs: competence, autonomy, and relatedness. Altruism, within the framework of SDT is not merely just a moral choice but a psychological drive that fulfils a firefighter's need for the mastery of life-saving skills in high-risk situations (competence), the voluntary commitment to protect others (autonomy) and the deep bonds or "brotherhood" formed with colleagues and the people they serve (relatedness).

This perspective mainly sheds light on the noble and self-sacrificing aspects of firefighting, painting a largely simplistic and optimistic view. The emphasis on altruism is attractive, but it does not fully explain why some individuals are prepared to face life-threatening risks. After all, many professions involve helping others. Doctors, nurses, teachers, all engage in altruistic service – yet they do not sprint headfirst into burning buildings.

Clearly, there is something more.

Rosca et al. (2021) introduce a more unsettling reality: some firefighters are not just running into the fire to save others. They do it because they want to. They explored the Dark Triad Personality Traits (DTPT), namely Machiavellianism, Psychopathy, and Narcissism, and how they then influence risk-taking behaviour. Their findings surprisingly suggest that most firefighters have high psychopathy scores, due to their active liking or inclination to seek out danger. No, they are not apathetic, but something in them craves the intensity and high-stakes moments where everything is on the line. This challenges the traditional notion of heroism stemming from purely altruistic means, introducing a more psychologically complex construct – where heroism may emerge not only from a desire to help, but also from a craving for risk and recognition. Perhaps it is not only the fire they run to, but the fire that calls out to them, conversing with them, enticing them with its ruthless, all-consuming hunger. This creates another undeniable tension: is firefighting an act of self-sacrifice, or an act of self-fulfilment?

It is easy and tempting to believe that courage and selflessness are the same. But are they really? If a firefighter rushes into the flames just because they feel a deep personal calling, is their bravery for others or for themselves? Does heroism require the purity of intent, or simply extraordinary commitment in the face of risk? We are forced to confront the duality of courage: that it can stem from both selflessness and self-interest, from both duty and ego.

Still yet, I think that this complexity does not, and should not, diminish their bravery – it humanises it. It reminds us that heroism is not an abstract ideal, but a deep human experience, fuelled by layered and sometimes conflicting motivations.

Consider why we cling to the myth of the phoenix – because it allows us to see them as being indestructible, being able to be reborn from every fire unscathed. It really is a convenient illusion, one that spares us from confronting the duality of their existence: that they are both saviours and survivors, that they bear the weight of their choices long after the flames have died. We glorify them not just for their willingness to face the fire, but because we know we would never do the same.

Firefighters are not purely selfless heroes nor reckless thrill-seekers. They exist at the intersection of duty and danger, of both sacrifice and calculated risk. A manipulative firefighter might just be the furthest vocabulary you had in mind if I told you to pick an adjective right now to describe them. What could possibly be a good reason to explain the high score for Machiavellianism in the study? Often overlooked, firefighters must also master the art of persuasion. After all, how do you convince someone standing on the edge that their life is worth saving? The ability to navigate life-or-death negotiations, to skilfully manipulate fear into compliance, is an often-overlooked aspect of this profession. The fire is not always literal. Sometimes, it is the fire of despair, of hopelessness. Sometimes the firefighter's job is not just to save lives, but to convince someone that their life is worth saving.

Perhaps this is the real paradox of firefighting: self-sacrifice versus self-preservation. They are asked to sacrifice themselves, and yet they must remain whole enough to pull others back from destruction, both physical and emotional. They must risk their own lives but never lose sight of why. They must be willing to charge into danger but also know when not to.

So, why do firefighters run towards the fire? Is it for them or for others? Is it a calling or an addiction? A duty or a need?

Well, first, I think that we should definitely rethink how we define heroism.

Firefighters do not simply rise from ashes like mythical phoenixes, untouched and indestructible. They carry the weight of every rescue. Because fire is never silent. For most, it lingers, it whispers, and it always calls them back. But the fire always takes something from them, no matter how small, no matter how invincible it may seem.

And yet, they return to the flames, again and again.

Because someone has to.

And in that choice—in that willingness to bear the burden of saving others, no matter the cost—I think lies the closest definition we have to true heroism.

Because in the end, while they may not be phoenixes, they are the reason others get to rise again.

Declaration of Conflict of Interest

There are no conflicts of interest to declare.

Bionote

Gan Yu Xuan Charissa is a psychology undergraduate at Nanyang Technological University Singapore, with a deep interest in counselling and trauma psychology. Her respect for first responders stems from her time being in a uniform group, where she witnessed the toll of toxic hierarchies and rigorous expectations. Moved by the quiet sacrifices of those who serve, she hopes to one day support individuals, especially first responders, through their darkest moments, reminding them they are more than their mistakes. She is dedicated to making mental health more compassionate and accessible for those around her, driven by her Faith and a desire to see others succeed.

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