

Courage: A Modern Look at an Ancient Virtue

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The paper starts with some classical interpretations of the virtue of courage, taking Plato and Aristotle as the representative primary texts. The historical analysis will yield the two general tendencies in the conceptualization of a courageous action: the tendency to widen the scope of courageous behavior to include instances of mental and physical resistance to pressure (roughly, the Platonic conception), and the tendency to restrict the proper application of the term 'courageous' to a narrowly described set of conditions (the Aristotelian approach). It will be argued that the *prima facie* exclusivist, Aristotelian conception of courage seems overly demanding, making the real-life instantiation of the virtue highly problematic. Our second ongoing concern is to enrich the purely theoretical discussion of the virtue of courage by modern empirical data coming from social psychology and related fields, citing the results of the studies into the complex relation between the emotion of fear and courageous behavior. We will point toward the direction of further empirical studies which would allow identifying the psychological and cognitive resources needed for overcoming the fear of death as a precondition for a courageous action.

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Fear of death is instinctive and biologically useful... But our human and subhuman ancestors have fought and exterminated their enemies and have profited by courage; it is therefore an advantage to the victors in the struggle for life to be able, on occasion, to overcome the natural fear of death.

Bertrand Russell, *Do We Survive Death?*

Do we know today what it means to be courageous, or have we somehow lost the meaning of this cardinal virtue in the busy rhythm of contemporary life? There are two extreme approaches to courage that are prevalent in the present cultural mainstream. On one approach, the virtue of courage is seen as a somewhat mysterious vestige of the mythic past, whose proper place is in the epic poems of the ancients, or, perhaps, in the movies featuring the daring superheroes. Yet the other extreme position sees the courageous people filling every police department, fire brigade, or professional union, sometimes expanding the attribute to cover the whole cities, or even countries. Both views, we submit, are misguided.

Our discussion of courage will incorporate both the classical interpretations of this trait of character and the empirical studies into the complex relation between the emotion of fear and behavior. The basic thesis that *courage consists in overcoming the fear of death for a worthy cause* will be further developed by exploring the implications of such “overcoming,” as well as the psychological and cognitive resources which would allow one to counter this powerful primordial instinct. The normative aspect of our study aims at making sense of what could qualify as a worthy or noble goal of a fearless action in the world thoroughly permeated with value relativism. We are motivated by practical concern of being able to apply the concept of courage in a meaningful and non-arbitrary way, resisting the inflationary

tendencies of the current media and popular culture to issue the certificates of courage in bulk quantities. Courageous character is rare, but not fictional; hard to develop, but not beyond the human reach.

It will be apparent from the start that our analysis of courage is largely inspired by Aristotle, and yet this article does not seek to defend the orthodox Aristotelian view (in case there is such), nor are we promising to resolve all the well-known tensions of the classical Aristotelian account.¹ Our primary focus is neither purely historical nor exegetical, although both aspects will be present. Even though we wholeheartedly accept that general methodological constraint formulated so elegantly by Martha Nussbaum - “the fact that Aristotle believes something does not make it true”² - we are nonetheless convinced that Aristotle has captured something essential about this virtue and his core intuitions are still relevant for our world.

1. Aristotle and Plato in Dialogue

We would be mistaken to suppose that disagreements about the nature of true courage is a sign of a pluralistic modern society, but that they did not exist in the relatively monolithic social structures, like that of Ancient Greece. The indirect debate on the issue of courage between Plato and Aristotle shows that the ancient Athenians were far from reaching a universal consensus on this cardinal virtue. The primary purpose of this section is to highlight the main differences between the Platonic and Aristotelian takes on courage, on the assumption that the two views likely represent two popular attitudes towards courage among the ancients. Our secondary purpose is to sharpen some aspects of the Aristotelian position by contrasting it with other alternative approaches mentioned by Plato.

¹ Curzer gives a list of five traditional problems of the Aristotelian account of courage (2012, p. 19), but more issues could easily be identified.

² (Nussbaum, 1988, p. 38)

For the sake of this brief comparative analysis we will take Plato's Laches and Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics as the representative primary texts.³ Admittedly, any attempt at direct comparison between Plato's and Aristotle's views on courage is complicated by the fact that we do not have any explicit and systematic exposition of Plato's views on the subject. The Laches, the dialogue dedicated almost exclusively to courage, is one of the *aporetic* dialogues, which means that discussion between Socrates and the two renowned generals, Laches and Nicias, ends inconclusively, without endorsing any positive doctrine on the issue under consideration. Still, we may safely generalize about the overall direction in the search for the definition of courage, favored by Socrates in the dialogue, and perhaps identify the conceptual schemes which would clearly be rejected.

In course of the dialogue Socrates challenges several definitions of courage, proposed first by Laches, and then by Nicias. It will be helpful to list three of these attempts below (ignoring modifications of each considered along the way), given that each definition partly reflects what ordinary Athenians thought about courage in Plato's time.

1. Laches: A man of courage is the one "who does not run away, but remains at his post and fights against the enemy" (190e4-6).
2. Laches: "Courage is the sort of endurance of the soul" (192c1).
3. Nicias: Courage is "the knowledge of that which inspires fear or confidence in war, or in anything" (195a2).

Predictably, the attempts to understand courage start by Laches' specific description of a courageous person, and only after Socrates' insistence, move in the direction of a more general definition of the idea of courage itself. There is no need to go into details of Socrates' objections to each of these three definitions, but, in general, he shows them to be either too

³ There are brief additional discussions of courage in Plato's Laws, the Protagoras and the Republic, as well as in Aristotle's Politics and the Eudemian Ethics.

narrow, or too broad, or implying an inconsistency with some other beliefs held by the proponent of the definition.⁴ What is more interesting for our purpose are those remarks made by Socrates in the process of refuting Laches and Nicias, which suggest his own attitude towards this virtue. Socrates' famous profession of ignorance when it comes to moral matters need not be doubted in this case; and yet we can still gather enough information from his negative knowledge claims (knowing what X is *not*) to set up a meaningful contrast with Aristotle's take on courage, even if no positive definition was agreed upon.⁵

The most conspicuous difference between Plato's Socrates and Aristotle concerns the scope of actions which should properly fall under the category "courageous." There is a clear tendency in the Laches towards the widening of the scope of courageous actions, with Socrates suggesting, contrary to the initial opinion of his interlocutors, that not only soldiers in battle are the ones who can manifest courage, but also those suffering the perils of the sea, resisting the fear of pain, fighting a disease, coping with poverty or confronting a politically precarious situation. All these people are potentially exhibiting essentially the same virtue too (191d1-e1). Moreover, Socrates is apparently willing to include in the category even those who "are mighty to contend against desires and pleasures" (191e1), i.e., the individuals showing unusual level of self-control when faced by strong temptations, and, perhaps, even some wild animals (196e).

We may assume that Socrates' list of the courageous agents was not meant to be exhaustive, but rather instrumental in switching Laches' attention from the external circumstances which might prompt a courageous response to the internal aspects of such

⁴ For a superb detailed discussion of each turn in the argument between Socrates and his interlocutors in the Laches see (Santas, 1971).

⁵ It seems that Laches' second definition of courage (i.e., courage as endurance or steadfastness [καρτερία] of the soul), when modified to include wisdom in it, raised the least number of serious objections from Socrates, which might suggest that he would be willing to accept a definition along these lines. For a comparative study of Socrates' view of courage in the Laches with the corresponding discussion of this virtue in the Republic and the Protagoras see (Rabieh, 2006).

reaction. Indeed, as in many other cases, here, too, the internal state of the agent is of primary importance in Socratic investigation. As Gerasimos Santas rightly observes, for Socrates “whether a man is courageous depends not only on the objective situation, but also on his estimate of the situation, what we might call the psychological or intentional aspects of courage” (1971, p. 191). On this view, a young sailor might be acting truly courageously during his first storm at sea, if he is convinced that the storm presents a real danger to the ship; and yet his more experienced comrade, while behaving in a similar manner, would not be properly called brave as long as he knows (say, from past occasions) that the danger is merely apparent. One’s sincere beliefs about the situation (even if false), as well as one’s behavior in response to those beliefs, are both constitutive of the virtue of courage for Socrates.

Plato’s overly inclusive and internalized conception of courage was unacceptable to Aristotle, who sought to significantly narrow down the scope of the truly courageous actions. As a first step, Aristotle switches the focus from the characteristically Socratic type of question, “What is courage?” back to the more practical one, “Who is a courageous person?” (thus rehabilitating Laches’ initial ‘naïve’ attempt). The latter question, though, should not be seen as a question about the specific names of brave individuals, but rather as an inquiry into behavioral, emotive and situational conditions necessary for courageous behavior. Skipping a painful process of *elenchus*, Aristotle’s gives birth to a first definition of a courageous agent, which will prove to be more intricate than it initially appears:

1. “Properly, then, he will be called brave who is fearless in face of a noble death (καλόν θάνατον ἀδείης), and of all emergencies that involve death; and the emergencies of war are in the highest degree of this kind” (1115a32-35).

The focus, we might note, is set from the beginning on the military valor as the highest, or, perhaps, the only type of courage. Aristotle apparently picks up here the position defended by Laches, one of the generals, in Plato's dialogue, who, we recall, also identified courage with military valor (190c-d). Thus the dialogue with Socrates continues on a new level. Much of what follows in subsequent chapters of the Nicomachean Ethics deals with the discussion of the spurious types of courage – those cases which might appear as instances of courageous behavior, but which are not truly so. As one might expect, most of the scenarios and characters which were approved by Socrates in the Laches, will be ruled out by Aristotle. The broad category of those who *fail* to qualify as truly brave individuals, according to Aristotle, include: those who fearlessly face poverty or a disease, those experiencing perils at sea, those citizen-soldiers defending their city for the fear of penalties or the desire for honors, those professional mercenaries who are fearless in war because of their superior military skills, those rushing into battle because they are driven by strong passions, and those who stand their ground on the battlefield because of their underestimation of the strength of the opponent. In all these cases, a character trait manifested is either “similar to” or “appears like” or is “most like” courage, and yet still does not measure up to genuine virtue.⁶

One of the effects of the Aristotelian description of courage is that it now becomes extremely difficult to find a suitable example of a single courageous person, whether from the rich ancient literary heritage or the real historical figures. Neither Homeric heroes, nor the proverbially intrepid Spartans would be recognized by Aristotle as truly courageous people for various reasons.⁷ Whereas there is little doubt that a paradigmatic example of a courageous person for Plato would be Socrates himself, who exhibited military, intellectual

⁶ It is beyond the scope of this paper to inquire into Aristotle's disqualifying reasons in each specific case. For a more detailed discussion of these specious forms of courage see (Ward, 2001, pp. 75-77).

⁷ Hector is mentioned as an example of a citizen-soldier, whose courage is “most like true courage” (1116a15-30); and Spartans are disqualified for an even more ambiguous reason. The demanding and allegedly lop-sided training system of the Spartans (“they brutalize their children by laborious exercises which they think will make them courageous”), according to Aristotle, creates beastlike creatures who lack the element of nobility (The Politics, 1338b9-19).

and political courage on a number of occasions,⁸ it is much harder to determine whether any real person in the context of war has ever showed true courage on Aristotle's standards. All the specific examples that Aristotle mentions are there to illustrate the instances of the "less-than-truly-courageous" behavior, but not a single positive case is identified. The situation hardly improves when Aristotle formulates his second definition of a brave person in the following way:

2. "The man, then who faces and who fears [φοβούμενος] the right things from the right motive, in the right way and at the right time, and who feels confidence⁹ under the corresponding conditions, is brave" (1115b16-18).

What seems to be an overly demanding level of control over one's feelings,¹⁰ the equivocal use of the qualification "right," when applied to a motive, a time, a manner, and a scope of fear, the apparent tension with the previous description of a courageous person as "fearless" are all likely to add to the puzzlement of his readers at this point.

The definitional restrictions that Aristotle places on the virtue of courage are further aggravated by the distinction between a self-controlled and a truly virtuous person, which is central to Aristotelian ethics (e.g., 1102b26-28; 1152a1-3). The second definition suggests that a courageous person must have a medial level of fear, which he is able to control and thus to resist the desire to flee to safety. Yet contrary to our modern intuitions, rooted both in

⁸ Alcibiades testifies to Socrates' military prowess in the *Symposium* (220d-220e), and Laches bestows a similar praise (181b). Socrates' autobiographical story from the *Apology*, about his refusal to obey the order of the Thirty tyrants, while facing the real risk of execution (32d), is an example of political and moral courage.

⁹ Fear is not the only feeling with respect to which Aristotle delineates courage – confidence is the other one. But Aristotle is clear that fear is the more important of the two (1117a29-30). The somewhat uneasy relationship between these two emotions on the Aristotelian model of this virtue is analyzed by Daniel Putnam (2001). For the claim that fear and confidence actually yield two different virtues see (Urmson, 1980).

¹⁰ The requirement initially strikes as unrealistic especially in light of Aristotle's own admission that "we feel anger and fear without choice (ἀπροαιρέτως)" (1106a3). The claim about the purely passive occurrences of emotions is qualified elsewhere where Aristotle describes an appetitive aspect of the soul as an irrational element, which nonetheless "shares in a rational principle" (1102b13). Even though we have no choice when a natural emotive reaction occurs, we are still capable of subduing these feelings to the requirements of reason. But, as Pears observes, this might not happen as a result of a single effort of the will, but rather gradually, as "the eventual result of many choices" (1978, p. 274).

the Kantian ideal of an agent who fulfills his moral duty despite contrary inclinations, and the Christian image of a saint overcoming strong temptations, Aristotle considers a self-controlled person to be a morally inferior character when compared to a virtuous one. Whereas the former is able to control and subdue his deviant desires, a virtuous agent acts from a character which *excludes* the possibility of a temptation to act otherwise. Every inclination and every passion of a virtuous agent is brought into line with his unwavering commitment to a rationally justifiable end, and that is clearly seen by Aristotle as a preferable state. Now, in the context of Aristotle's discussion of courage, fear (e.g., fear of death) is one of the relevant feelings that must be subdued by a courageous person alongside with other wayward desires (e.g., a desire to run away from the battlefield). Moreover, it should be subdued not merely in a sense of "successful resistance" but in a much stronger sense of eliminating it altogether. A person with the genuine virtue of courage, on this model, must be completely fearless when faced with the danger of death in battle, and must have not the slightest inclination to give up his position. The initial claim that courage involves overcoming the fear of death would then be interpreted as requirement for a practice of habituation combined with the process of intense philosophical education resulting in a fearless, dispassionate and singularly committed warrior.

Does a person then, who possesses the virtue of courage in its entirety,¹¹ feel any fear at all when confronted with the life-threatening situation in a battle? Aristotle's general requirement for the "purity" of virtue seems to suggest that a courageous agent will simply have no deviant passions to control. Indeed, on a number of occasions a brave man is described by Aristotle as *fearless* (ἄφοβος, ἀδείης, ἀνέκκλητος, ἀτάραχον).¹² Some scholars,

¹¹ Aristotle's language implies that there might be degrees of perfection here (e.g., 1117b9).

¹² All four terms are used by Aristotle in his description of a courageous man. But whereas ἄφοβος is the least ambivalent term, the other three are more nuanced in their semantic content. Some of the common English renderings include: ἀδείης – "fearless" (Rackham), "fearless" (W. D. Ross), "intrepid" (Irwin); ἀνέκκλητος –

such as Michelle Brady, insist on taking this description seriously, arguing that viewing courage as fearlessness in the literal sense has the theoretical advantage “of making this particular virtue compatible with the rest of Aristotelian virtue” (2005, p. 193), for it now seems to fit at least one part of the original model nicely. Furthermore, Brady’s interpretation accords well with Aristotle’s insistence that virtues are concerned not only with actions, but also with passions (1104b14), and counters the real threat of reducing genuine virtue to self-control. We may call this a *strong* or internal interpretation of fearlessness.

The complication, of course, arises when we also take into account the corresponding vices, where one of the vices is defined as “excess in fearlessness” (1115b25).¹³ The strong interpretation of fearlessness has a further practical disadvantage of making the virtue of courage out of reach of the absolute majority of human beings, something that many (including ourselves) would take to be much more troublesome than any theoretical incongruities. As an alternative, one may prefer a *weak* or behavioral interpretation of fearlessness – a courageous agent only acts *as if* he feels no fear, even if fear is present as a real subjective experience.¹⁴ On this reading, qualification “fearless” should properly apply to external behavior rather than to internal state of the one who boldly faces the dangers of war. The weak interpretation is more in accord with modern intuitions and empirical studies

“being proof against fear” (Rackham), “dauntless” (W. D. Ross), “unperturbed” (Irwin); ἀτάραχον – “undismayed” (Rackham), “undisturbed” (W. D. Ross), “unperturbed” (Irwin).

¹³ There is a way of harmonizing the existence of the vice of excessive fearlessness with the claim that a courageous person feels no fear in battle if we interpret the fearlessness involved in a non-virtuous state of character as referring to the *scope of fearful objects*, rather than to the intensity of the feeling itself. Aristotle grants that “to fear some things is even right and noble, i.e., disgrace” (1115a13-14), and the one who exceeds in fearlessness fails to react adequately to events that *should* properly inspire fear even in a courageous person (e.g., the earthquakes or the waves, 1115b27). On this reading, a courageous person would not be fearless on all occasions, but only, say, in the circumstances of a military conflict for a noble cause.

¹⁴ E.g., (Pears D. F., 1980), (Urmson, 1988). Pears suggests that Aristotle probably had in mind the “behavioral use” of the word fearless in this context, “which comments only on the manner of the agent’s conduct,” rather than on his subjective experience (1980, pp. 178-179).

(which will be discussed below), but, besides the textual difficulties, makes the distinction between a virtuous and a self-controlled person problematic at least in the case of courage.¹⁵

With the weak interpretation of fearlessness as a constitutive element of courage we make a full circle and return to the purely behavioral definition of courage advanced by Laches in the beginning: a courageous man is the one “who does not run away, but remains at his post and fights against the enemy” (190e4-6). We have observed earlier that Aristotle clearly favors Laches’ suggestion to limit the occasions for a courageous action to a military context, but it is less likely that he would also be content with limiting the definition of the virtue itself to a description of agent’s external behavior, without considering the relevant “passions” as well as the motivating reasons for one’s action. A soldier who “does not run away” because he underestimated the force of the enemy, or because his desire for glory is more intense than his fear of death, would exhibit a merely spurious form of courage, according to Aristotle. And reference to behavior alone would not allow him to make these distinctions.

Later on we will have to take a closer look at the proper motive for a courageous action. But as a preliminary step it is important to inform our intuitions by considering the empirical results of studies done on the nature of fear and the psychological conditions of fearlessness, as well as on the nature of emotions in general.

2. Fear as an Emotion

While it is hard to ignore the fact that Aristotle so often uses the word “fearless” (ἄφοβος), or its close semantic equivalents, in his description of a courageous person, we have seen that, if taken literally, it creates a *prima facie* tension with Aristotle’s other claims that a man

¹⁵ Not everyone would be necessarily unhappy if virtue would be reduced to continence or self-control. Ross, for instance, insists that all virtue is really self-control, and blames Aristotle for failing to see this clearly (Ross, 2004).

of courage “will *fear* [φοβήσεται] even the things that are not beyond human strength” (1115b8-9), and, further, that he “*fears* [φοβούμενος] the right things and from the right motive, in the right way and at the right time” (1115b16-18). Does Aristotle mean, then, that the one who possesses the virtue of courage in its entirety has no fear of death whatsoever, or should we read him as saying that a courageous person has only *medial* fear of death, which, while subjectively real, is not intense enough to make him abandon his position? Corresponding to these two readings, we have identified earlier the internal (or strong) and the behavioral (or weak) interpretations. We are fairly skeptical that the strong interpretation of fearlessness of the type that Michelle Brady (2005) offers should be the correct one. Our main reasons for skepticism are doubts about a psychological feasibility of a state of complete fearlessness, but we also believe that the evidence against it should go beyond the textual analysis.

If courage essentially involves overcoming the fear of death, a particularly strong instinctive emotion, it would be opportune to highlight some basic features of the emotive states, as well as to inquire into the extent of the direct control one might have over emotive reactions, as opposed to cognitive processes. This could further clarify the sense in which fear is said to be “overcome” by a courageous person.

Our vernacular use of the concept of emotion somewhat indiscriminately covers a range of psychological phenomena that, on a closer look, exhibit significant idiosyncrasy within this folk-psychological category, and thus warrant a more sensitive classification. Many researchers believe that certain emotions are more fundamental or basic than others, and should be treated differently.¹⁶ The standard list of the ‘basic emotions’ includes anger,

¹⁶See (Ekman, 1992), (Griffiths, 1997), (Evans, 2001). The six basic emotions admit of degrees, i.e., may vary in intensity, which is reflected in a rich emotion-concept vocabulary that exist in all languages.

fear, disgust, surprise, happiness (joy) and sadness.¹⁷ All six emotive reactions have well-documented cross-cultural facial expressions associated with each emotion, musculoskeletal responses such as flinching, and a series of other coordinated physiological changes (e.g., expressive vocal changes, changes in endocrine and nervous systems). They have undisputed neural basis in the limbic system of the brain, the phylogenetically ancient portion of the cortex which surrounds the brain stem,¹⁸ and their cross-cultural similarity is usually explained (with greater or lesser success) by the various evolutionary advantages they give to an animal who can experience an emotion in question. The descendants of the habitually *fearless* proto-humans, or those with indiscriminate eating habits (due to lack of feeling of *disgust*) are not among us today for obvious reasons.

The six or seven basic emotions are contrasted with the more complex, cognitively mediated emotive responses, such as jealousy, guilt, love, sympathy, envy and shame. These non-basic emotions are much more culturally dependent than the basic affects, both in terms of the manner of manifestation and the antecedent causes, and, admittedly, are not yet adequately understood. Fortunately, the emotion we are primarily interested in, namely, fear, belongs to the category of the basic emotions,¹⁹ which have been thoroughly studied both in humans and in some higher mammals.²⁰

It seems obvious that our emotions, feelings and moods appear to be quite different phenomenologically from the various cognitive processes, such as contemplating, memorizing and reasoning. One notable difference is that many basic emotive states are often forced upon us by the outside world, whereas we are usually in control of our cognitive

¹⁷ With the possible addition of *contempt* as a distinct basic emotive reaction (Ekman & Friesen, 1986).

¹⁸ (Zajonc, 1980), (Damasio, 1994).

¹⁹ The feeling of confidence, on the other hand, (Aristotle's other emotion with respect to which courage can be defined) would be an instance of a non-basic emotive state, which complicates even more an already tense relation that exists between these two feelings in Aristotle's account. This incongruity may add support to Urmson's claim (cited above) that fear and confidence define two different virtues.

²⁰ For the analysis of emotions in animals see (Dawkins, 2000).

processes (e.g., one can actively *recall* a poem, concentrate *attention* on the matter at hand, etc.). On the other hand, these two mental capacities are not altogether independent. Especially with the more complex emotive states (e.g., guilt, pride, envy) some conscious cognitive processing becomes necessary for experiencing the emotion in question.²¹ One would not feel guilty, for instance, unless there is an understanding of what is expected from the point of view of some normative system, and the recognition that one falls short from this expectation. Likewise, it is common knowledge that the various cognitive functions, such as practical reasoning that leads to intentional actions, are frequently affected by the emotive states of the agent – in many cases, without our conscious awareness of such an influence.²²

By contrast with the higher emotions, the basic emotive states require the bare minimum of cognitive involvement on the part of the agent. Their instances are largely immediate reflexive reactions to the perceived stimuli of the environment. Whatever cognitive processing is needed to appropriate the data of the senses, most of it occurs unconsciously. The basic emotive responses controlled by the limbic system of the brain are largely independent of the conscious cognitive processes – they bypass the neural circuits of the outer (phylogenetically more recent) cortex responsible for the higher cognitive functions.²³ This recognized relative autonomy of basic emotions, such as fear, from conscious cognitive activity has an important implication, directly relevant for our topic.

It appears that fear cannot be reliably correlated with making a judgment about the world in the conventional sense, nor can it be always controlled or subdued by an appropriate belief. We have developed an instinctive fear of certain objects, animals or situations, which have proven useful in the evolutionary process, and which does not rely on such a slow and

²¹ See (Ekman, 1992).

²² A fact that gives rise to a popular speculation that an *emotionless* creature would exhibit superior intellectual qualities as compared with the emotional, passionate creatures like ourselves. This picture is challenged by Dylan Evans, who argues for the thesis that “a creature who lacked emotions would not just be less *intelligent* than we are; it would be less *rational* too” (Evans, 2001, p. 180).

²³ (Zajonc, 1980).

unreliable process as cognition. For instance, there are well-documented cases where the reflexive fear of spiders or snakes co-occurs with the (sincere) conviction that these creatures are harmless. Certain immediate emotive reactions seem to be (in Paul Griffith's words) "informationally encapsulated,"²⁴ and take place despite and independently of all the relevant judgments. This, among other things, would warrant a more skeptical attitude towards Socrates' claim in the Apology that one will cease fearing death once he realizes that death is one of two things, the permanent state of unconsciousness or the philosophically active afterlife, both of which are pleasant in their own right (29b; 40d). Common experience suggests, however, that fear of death is largely independent of one's beliefs about the postmortem state.²⁵

To summarize the above discussion, the denotation of the term emotion, the way it is used by the competent members of a language community, subsumes two different kinds of psychological states: the basic and non-basic emotions. The distinction is not arbitrary, but corresponds to real distinction in human psychology. The qualification "non-cognitive" would most fittingly apply to the basic emotive states, such as fear or joy, involving little or no references to consciously accessible beliefs and desires. They appear to be essentially passive occurrences that a person undergoes or suffers, rather than intentionally produces. These findings, of course, generally confirm Aristotle's intuition in the Nicomachean Ethics, mentioned earlier, that "we feel anger and fear without choice (*ἀπροαιρέτως*)" (1106a3), and

²⁴ (Griffiths, 1997, p. 28).

²⁵ There is a certain equivocation involved in the common talk of a universal fear of death. Aristotle rightly observes in the Rhetoric that in fact few people fear death, despite its acknowledged certainty, as long as it is seen as an event in a distant future (1382a25-28). It is only when danger is great or death seems imminent that the fear of death becomes a powerful motive, largely unsusceptible to rational admonitions.

further justify his placement of courage in the category of virtues of character, rather than intellectual virtues.²⁶

The involuntary, immediate nature of basic emotive experiences excludes them from the category of the morally relevant ‘passions’ that an agent can be properly blamed or praised for. They are in most cases rapid, reflex-like reactions, unresponsive to our rational admonitions. By contrast, the higher emotive responses (e.g., love, jealousy, envy) involve *both* the basic affects and the distinctive cognitive activity (e.g., beliefs, judgments), thus occupying a strategic middle point between the involuntary emotive arousals and pure cognitive processes, and requiring the coordinated working of both functions.²⁷ The cognitive element in these higher emotions makes them in principle more amendable to direct control, which supports our intuitive tendency to pass appropriate moral judgments on the individuals persisting, say, in bitter envy or in selfless loving devotion.

Two caveats are in order at the end of this discussion. First, our claim that the onset of basic emotions is mostly beyond our direct control, and thus exempt from moral evaluations, does not imply that one cannot or should not control the behavioral manifestation of those inner states. One should not be blamed for feeling angry in suitable circumstances (indeed, one can be faulted for *not* getting angry on certain occasions), but one can reasonably be held responsible for harmful actions, provoked by one’s anger. Secondly, the above description of universal emotive sensitivity applies only what we might call “normal” individuals, and does not rule out the existence of the emotively deficient agents, who, due to genetic peculiarity, fail to exhibit an emotive reaction in the presence of the appropriate stimulus.²⁸ Nor does it

²⁶ On the other hand, Aristotle’s own definition of fear in the *Rhetoric* as “pain or disturbance due to a mental picture of some destructive or painful evil in the future” (1382a20-23) would sound way too intellectualistic for modern ears.

²⁷ This analysis of the non-basic emotions is defended, among others, by A. R. Damasio (1994).

²⁸ Psychopaths and autistic individuals are the primary examples here. Recent studies in neuropsychology suggest that both psychopaths and individuals with autism, who exhibit severe emotive deficiency, may have

rule out the possibility of “taming” the basic emotive responses through some process of specialized training, as can perhaps be illustrated by a perfect Stoic or an advanced Buddhist devotee, who reaches the state of complete emotional imperturbability through years of intense meditational practice. But we can safely suggest that neither character would gain much respect from Aristotle.²⁹

3. Aristotle and the Moderns: *Andreia* vs. Courage

At the end of the first section we stated our worry that making fearlessness into a prerequisite for courage would drastically reduce the number of courageous individuals, since true fearlessness, even if not outright pathological, appears to be a rare phenomenon. A brief excursion into the contemporary studies of emotions in the previous section has only aggravated the concern: if fear is a nearly universal reflex-like emotive reaction to environmental stimuli, which resists direct control by the higher cognitive faculties, then any account of the virtue of courage which incorporates fearlessness as one of the conditions, would seem to be overly demanding. A fearless person is clearly an exception, but this claim requires a qualification. At one point in the *Laches*, Nicias, while disagreeing with Socrates, observes that in fact the opposite is true – the number of fearless agents is quite large:

There is a difference, to my way of thinking, between fearlessness and courage. I am of opinion that thoughtful courage is a quality possessed by very few, but that rashness and boldness, and fearlessness which has no forethought, are very common qualities possessed by many men, many women, many children, many animals (197b1-4).

similar genetic anomalies at the anatomical level – both conditions have been linked to impairments in amygdala functioning (Frith, 1989).

²⁹ Aristotle calls a person who exceeds in fearlessness “a sort of madman or insensible person,” and himself mentions as an example “the Celts”, who, according to his sources, fear neither earthquakes nor the waves (1115b24-27). The context and the tone of his narrative certainly do not allow us to conclude that Aristotle in any way admires these fearless people.

The type of fearlessness that Nicias has in mind in this passage is fearlessness due to ignorance of danger. But, surely, whatever else our main thesis implies (namely, that courage consists in overcoming the fear of death), it does not imply that one may become courageous by undergoing a process of brainwashing, where false beliefs about the level of oncoming danger substitute the true estimates. Further, Nicias, being a soldier himself, is concerned to preserve the exclusive status of the virtue of courage, and he rightly contends that “thoughtful courage” is different from fearlessness, rashness and boldness. It is also different, we may suggest, from “thoughtful” fearlessness, i.e., the absence of fear when a mature human being is adequately informed about the significant lethal risks that a situation presents. Such thoughtful or informed fearlessness (Nicias would agree) is a much less common occurrence, than “fearlessness which has no forethought.”³⁰

Whether Nicias is right in his reductionist interpretation of Socrates’ position on courage is hard to tell, but it is reasonably clear that fearlessness (in whatever sense we understand it) is not identical with courage for Aristotle, nor is it a sufficient condition for it.³¹ A noble goal which is freely chosen and is indeed a motivating reason of one’s action would also be part of a complete description of a courageous act (e.g., 1115b23; 1117a4), as well as, perhaps, a certain degree of awareness about the relative strength of one’s opponent on the battlefield (e.g., 1117a22-25). We have highlighted already in the earlier section how Aristotle’s view of courage compares to conceptions favored by Socrates and his interlocutors in the Laches. It is now the right time to take a second look at Aristotle’s theory of courage vis-à-vis some modern interpretations of this virtue.

³⁰ Nancy Schwartz argues that in many respects the best example of a fearless person (whether in the context of war or elsewhere) would be Socrates himself (Schwartz, 2004). Indeed, we might recall that the early Stoics looked up to Socrates as their model for behavior in adverse circumstances.

³¹ Even though identifying fearlessness with courage is perhaps not that common among the philosophers, it occurs more often among psychologists and other experts in behavioral sciences. Thus, Orval Mowrer, a notable 20th century psychologist, finds it highly plausible “that courage is simply the absence of fear in situations where it might be expected to be present” (1960, p. 435).

Rich data from the experimental studies has been assembled on the relation between fear, as a subjective avoidance tendency, and the courageous behavior in various subjects, ranging from psychiatric patients suffering from panic disorders, to combat soldiers, members of the bomb-disposal units and the astronauts. Stanley Rachman has recently brought together in a single article (2004) the most important results of these experiments, which he and his colleagues have been performing for the last two decades. We will list the central theses of his article below, followed by a comparison of these contemporary studies on fear and courage with the Aristotelian picture of this virtue, under the assumption that Rachman's results are not only empirically sound but mostly in accord with of our common intuitions on courage. Some of these results are as follows:

1. The evidence suggests that frightened people (e.g., patients suffering from phobic disorders) can perform courageous actions (p. 151).
2. Courage is an acquired characteristic; people can learn to persevere when under significant threat (p. 152).
3. The occurrence of perseverance despite fear is a pure form of courage (p. 155).
4. Natural fearlessness is a real but rare condition; there are a small number of people who are relatively impervious to fear (p. 154).
5. The successful practice of courageous behavior (e.g., a successful dealing with the explosives by the members of the bomb-disposal unit) leads to a decrease in subjective fear and finally to a state of fearlessness. Courage grows into fearlessness (p. 173).

Even a cursory overview of the Aristotelian discussion of *andreia*, which we presented in the earlier part of this paper, shows important differences between the ancient and the contemporary use of the concept. These differences must be highlighted at this point. First, the contemporary use seemingly favors the Platonic tendency by widening the scope of those

who can properly be called courageous, including the psychiatric patients (Rachman, 2004), recovering alcoholics (Putnam, 2001), and even those who boldly propose and defend new ideas, thus manifesting intellectual courage (Ryan, 2004). The increase in number of courageous agents is accomplished by widening the category of the fearsome objects, i.e., situations or conditions which can be properly confronted by an agent, and by lowering a threshold of seriousness of harm, which is likely to occur to an agent in case of failure. Aristotle, on the other hand, restricts the situations where courage can be exhibited to the context of a battle, where the threat of utmost harm or death is obvious and imminent. But even such a committed defender of Aristotle as Howard Curzer admits that “limiting courage to life-threatening situations flies in the face of common sense” (2012, p. 25).

Secondly, modern intuitions generally do not consider professionalism at a given dangerous task as a disqualifying characteristic for the proper attribution of bravery. Indeed, the opposite is true. Rachman cites evidence on the performance of combat soldiers, parachutists and the bomb-disposal operators, suggesting that “the appropriate skill required for dealing with a dangerous situation serves to increase courage” (2004, p. 171). Aristotle, we recall, would instead include professional soldiers in the category of those who exhibit a merely specious form of bravery (1116b3-6), even admitting that the well-trained mercenaries might be more effective on the battlefield by comparison with courageous but amateur fighters (1116b13-15).³²

Thirdly, there is very little, if any, discussion of the *noble goal* of an allegedly courageous action by the contemporary authors, whereas it is one of the constitutive features for the

³² “It is not the bravest men that fight best, but those who are strongest and have their bodies in the best condition” (1116b13-15). Cf. also 1117b17-19. Aristotle qualifies this claim by suggesting that professional troops are unreliable in unfavorable circumstances, when they can no longer rely on their superior skills. At the end, the difference between the courage of expertise and the true courage comes to the difference in priorities, for while the former “fear death more than disgrace”, for the truly courageous “flight is disgraceful and death is preferable to safety” (1116b19-23). But, as Lee Ward aptly observed, it is not clear how a courageous person can *fail* to acquire expertise in fighting if courage, as all virtues, is inculcated by repeated performance of certain acts (Ward, 2001, p. 76).

Aristotelian holistic account of this virtue.³³ The behavioral manifestation is typically divorced from the goal it strives to achieve, and is then evaluated on its own terms. George Kateb, for instance, argues that the terrorists, who destroyed the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, have shown genuine courage “that is close to that shown by martyrs”, and that “bad causes do not usually stand in the way of admitting, despite Bush’s propaganda, that courage is often shown in them” (2004, p. 39). Needless to say, that last quote would make little sense within the Aristotelian frame of reference.³⁴

Finally, there is a particularly strong modern intuition which counts subjective fear of an agent as either irrelevant for evaluation of behavior or even being a point in favor, as long as the agent puts up a struggle and performs a fearsome act properly. In fact, perseverance despite strong fear is what Rachman calls “a pure form of courage,”³⁵ where “purity” connotes an evaluative preference. We have observed that for Aristotle, by contrast, the courageous agent is expected either to subdue his fear to a certain medial level, or else, (on the alternative and less convincing reading) act fearlessly altogether. A person exhibiting Rachman’s pure form of courage would at best be a self-controlled person for Aristotle, but hardly a truly virtuous one.

These and a number of similar points are what likely prompted David Pears to suggest that “Aristotle’s concept of *andreia* does not map onto our concept of courage” (2004, p. 12). It is hard to disagree with Pear’s evaluation even if we are able to find the occasional overlaps between the two concepts,³⁶ but what exactly follows from it? We cannot easily dismiss these differences by pointing to the incommensurable cultural and historical contexts of the two conceptions of courage, that of the Greek *polis* of the 4th century B.C.E. and of the

³³ *NE* 1115b23. The question of a noble goal of courage will be taken up in the next section.

³⁴ Kateb further qualifies his ascription of courage to terrorists, by arguing that they possess “an unvirtuous courage” (2004, p. 39). At this point he and Aristotle are talking about two different human qualities.

³⁵ See also (Rachman, 1982).

³⁶ One of such overlaps is the belief that courage can be acquired through practice, supported both by Aristotle and by results of the modern studies (e.g., Rachman).

globalized post-industrial world that we are living in today. Aristotle's theory of courage is not simply an anthropological record of what most male Greeks thought of courage at a certain time in history; he presents it rather as a *normative* account, how courage *ought* to be conceived, and intentionally juxtaposes his view to other popular (or, perhaps, even prevalent) opinions (e.g., the Platonic view³⁷). In this sense, Aristotle's central ethical concepts are not essentially dependent on the local customs, beliefs and practices, and a purely cultural criticism of Aristotle would be misguided.³⁸ Nor are we justified, however, in accepting the Aristotelian theory of courage uncritically, by forcibly suppressing our strongest commonsensical beliefs about the subject matter. But if the concept of courage is to be of any practical use in our time, we must develop a balanced position which would integrate the key elements of the ancient philosophical heritage with the informed intuitions of our contemporaries.

Perhaps, there are some disagreements from the above list which can be settled easier than others. For example, there is no need to embrace the view that courage is exclusively exhibited in the circumstances of war, especially given the fact that "war" is hardly a clear-cut notion in the modern world. We should rather say that the paradigmatic instances of a courageous behavior occur in a situation of a risky confrontation, be it a traditional warfare or a local street-fight. All other forms of courage (e.g., political or social) should be seen as analogical forms vis-à-vis the primary cases. The confrontation is risky in the sense that it might result in serious negative outcome for the agent who, being aware of the risks involved, yet freely chooses to face the danger. Death is mentioned by Aristotle as a limiting case of harm that might be suffered by an agent, but there are no good reasons for restricting the

³⁷ Indeed, Curzer argues that Socrates in the *Laches* expresses "the common-sense view" (presumably, what passed for the common sense in Plato's time) when he offers an inclusive definition of courage, suggesting that it can be displayed toward many sorts of fearful objects (2012, p. 21).

³⁸ Alasdair MacIntyre is one of the most prominent advocates of the universal significance of Aristotelian ethics in the 20th century: "Aristotle's ethics, in its central account of the virtues, of goods as the ends of human practices, of the human good as that end to which all other goods are ordered, [...] captures essential features not only of human practice within Greek city-states but of human practice as such" (2007, p. xviii).

manifestation of courage to circumstances with *lethal* risks only, as long as we stipulate that the risks involved are *significant* for the welfare of the agent. We would hesitate to call a person courageous, however imposing his posture might be, if he merely risks a minor scratch as the result of an encounter with the enemy.

But yet other aspects of the Aristotelian account cannot be so easily accommodated to the present-day situation. In what follows, we focus on the second half of Aristotle's original definition of courage which stipulates that a death-defying behavior is not yet fully virtuous unless it is undertaken for the sake of a noble goal.³⁹ This normative provision, we believe, is the most challenging aspect of the Aristotelian view, but the correct understanding of what type of noble goals can properly 'ground' a courageous action holds the key to preserving the meaningfulness of this cardinal virtue for us today.

4. A Noble Death and a Noble End

A number of philosophers make a useful distinction between the so-called 'thin' moral terms (e.g., "good," "right," "ought"), which say little or nothing specific about the agent, action or the state of affairs that is being so appraised, and the 'thick' moral terms like "kind," "generous," "merciful," "cruel," and "just," which, in addition to being evaluative, contain substantive criteria for the term's application.⁴⁰ Thus, these latter 'thick' terms essentially consist of two elements, the normative and the factual or descriptive. Knowledge of the normative aspect of a term (e.g., whether cruelty is a good or a bad thing) is derived from the knowledge of normative rules and awareness of the relevant values. Grasping the purely descriptive criteria of the term's application, on the other hand, requires nothing more than being a competent member of the language community.

³⁹ "Properly, then, he will be called brave who is fearless in face of a noble death" (1115a32-34).

⁴⁰ E.g., (Williams, 1985, pp. 143-145) and (McGinn, 1997, pp. 92-93).

The term “courageous” belongs to the second category – it is strongly evaluative in addition to being descriptive. A courageous person is praiseworthy, admirable and commendable. The inherent normative element of courage would preclude the attempts to reduce courage to mere fearlessness, since the latter term lacks any obvious evaluative features when divorced from the contextual clues. As Curzer rightly observes, “the mere mastery over fear in the face of the fearsome is not a valuable accomplishment, in itself” (2012, p. 31). But similarly, as Aristotle saw clearly, omitting from the definition of a courageous action the specification of the proper goal of that action threatens to eliminate the normative aspect of courage. Unless courage leads to some substantive good, it is not clear what makes it a virtue, and why it is desirable to acquire this character trait. The substantive good which a courageous agent seeks to achieve is what Aristotle means by the “noble end” (τέλος καλόν) of courage.

The nobility aspect of Aristotle’s discussion of courage remains one of the most difficult for understanding. The qualification “noble” (καλόν) is applied by Aristotle in the context of his analysis of this virtue to circumstances of war (1115a27-30), to death (1115a32-35; 1115b5-7), to danger (1115a30), to courage itself (1115b20-22), to the deeds of war (1117b14), and, most importantly, to the intended end of one’s courageous action (1115b22-24). Some of these attributions are more obvious than others. We can interpret Aristotle’s contention that courage is καλόν (noble, fine, good, beautiful) as analytic truth, which simply follows from his conception of a virtue – a trait of character which positively contributes to fulfilling the specifically human purpose or function (ἔργον) (1099a20-21). The nobility of death, on the other hand, must be seen as derivative from nobility of the circumstances in which death occurs (we may say that nobility is a “transitive” property in this case). But the paradigmatic example of the circumstances in which a noble death could occur or in which one could face a noble danger are, for Aristotle, the circumstances of war. But what is it that

makes a war or a battle noble? Surely, it cannot be the case that the war is noble and desirable for its own sake. As Aristotle observes elsewhere, “no one chooses to be at war for the sake of being at war” (1177b9-10). Hence, it must be some further goal of the war, which alone bears the attribute “noble” non-derivatively.

There are a number of benefits one can achieve by waging a successful war, but one such benefit is more obvious than others - “we make war that we may live in peace” (1177b6). Still, peace, we may agree, is not the ultimate goal of the war either, but merely the instrumental one. We value peace primarily because it creates suitable conditions for pursuing our final end - εὐδαιμονία (happiness, well-being, flourishing). Indeed, Aristotle, when speaking of happiness, uses a number of superlatives, emphasizing its unique status as a final goal of all intentional actions, calling it “the best, noblest (κάλλιστον), and the most pleasant thing in the world” (1099a24-25). He also acknowledges that “the more [the brave man] is possessed of virtue in its entirety, the happier he is” (1117b7). A similar characteristic would be applicable to all other virtues as well.

This reading should partly alleviate the common worry that the term “noble” connotes for Aristotle some esoteric, mysterious property, which cannot be easily transported to a different cultural milieu. Courage is noble in the same sense in which friendship is noble (Cf. 1155a29), and the deeds of courage, which might often involve fighting in a battle, are also noble, since they aim at achieving the noblest goal of happiness. Noble, in this context, simply qualifies a highly desirable state of affairs, something one is willing to risk his life for. Yet, as always, there is a complication hiding behind the obvious. Courage stands out from all the other virtues in one crucial respect. Unlike the case with, say, temperance, friendship or generosity, a consistent and repeated exercise of courage actually greatly diminishes one’s chances of achieving happiness, since it now becomes less likely that the courageous fighter

lives long enough to enjoy the benefits of a lasting peace.⁴¹ Paradoxically, then, a coward, who “throws away one’s shield and takes to flight,” and thus survives the battle, has an advantage over the courageous warrior, who perishes while fighting, when it comes to his chances of achieving happiness.⁴² Being alive, after all, is a basic precondition for being happy.⁴³

If a courageous person is willing to die in a battle, and if such death is nonetheless noble and praiseworthy, we should say that the nobility of such a death derives *not* from the opportunity to achieve a person’s *own* happiness, but from some other worthy goal, which is somehow furthered by one’s perishing on the battlefield.⁴⁴ But what could that *other* goal be? Surprisingly, Aristotle does not give us as much as a hint of the possible options here. Michelle Brady believes that Aristotle’s silence on this subject can be explained by its obviousness to his likely audience. It was a universally shared assumption in Aristotle’s Athens and elsewhere in Greece, according to Brady, that the soldier’s sacrifice was done for the preservation of the *polis*,⁴⁵ and Aristotle simply did not feel the need to reiterate that point (2005, p. 199). Curzer, on the other hand, argues that Brady limits the possible legitimate goals of a courageous action too severely, and would himself include such examples of the praiseworthy goals of fighting as saving one’s comrades (even if doing so is detrimental to one’s *polis*), rescuing someone in need, maintaining one’s honor and freeing one’s city from tyranny (2012, pp. 28-29).

⁴¹ A point made stronger by Aristotle’s admission that a courageous citizen is not necessarily the best soldier, as far as the art of fighting goes (1116b13-15; 1117b17-19).

⁴² Aristotle seems to be hinting on this peculiarity of courage when he writes that “it is not the case, then, with all the virtues that the exercises of them is pleasant, except in so far as it reaches its end” (1117b15-16).

⁴³ It does not seem that Aristotle, unlike Socrates in the *Apology* or in the *Phaedo*, seriously entertained a possibility of some form of postmortem happiness. At least in the *Ethics* he is very straightforward: “death is the most terrible of all things; for it is the end, and nothing is thought to be any longer either good or bad for the dead” (1115b 25-27).

⁴⁴ Otherwise we would have to attribute “nobility” to the good *effort* to achieve one’s goal, but not to death itself, which signifies the ultimate failure of one’s efforts.

⁴⁵ A sentiment expressed, for instance, by the Spartan poet Tyrtaeus (c. 650 B.C.E.) who writes: “This is the common good, for the *polis* and the whole *demos*, when a man stands firm in the front ranks without flinching and puts disgraceful flight completely from his mind” (Diels, Fr. 9.15-17); quoted in (Pomeroy & Burstein, 2004, p. 74).

Provided we can establish what constituted the “noble deeds of war” for the citizens of Athens in the 4th century B.C.E. (through historical studies, perhaps), we must still make a decision whether those ancient goals have any relevance for us today. If we wish to preserve courage on the list of our modern virtues, we have three options to choose from. First, we may try to transport the Aristotelian system of values into our time and dogmatically endorse those goals of a courageous action which are most likely to resonate with ancient intuitions. Secondly, we may present our own criteria for goals which are worth fighting and dying for today. And, thirdly, we may try to redefine courage without any references to goals whatsoever. But neither option seems particularly pleasant. It may be reasonably argued that the first option is the most unrealistic one, the second – the most ideologically charged one, and the third option leads to elimination of courage as a *virtue* altogether, by reducing it to a morally-neutral description of behavior.

Is there a way out of this impasse? We believe that any acceptable solution, short of eliminating the virtue of courage altogether, would have to operate at a significant level of generality and vagueness. Simply providing an exhaustive list of goals that are worth dying for is clearly not an option here, as any such list would be inevitably rooted in some political, religious or cultural ideology of the day. Furthermore, trying to extract an ideologically-neutral list of goals merely results in creating a new normative background, or a new ideology (however implicit), which alone can infuse those goals with existential worth. As a first step, then, we must recognize the irreducible plurality of goals which might properly ‘ground’ a courageous action. The plurality, however, does not imply unrestrictedness – not *any* goal can be taken as worth facing a deadly risk or significant harm for. Hence, we should formulate some general constraints, which would delineate the range of the possible noble ends of courage in our time. We propose at least two such restrictions.

The risk of a significant loss, as we already emphasized, should be taken for the proper reason. Someone playing a Russian roulette in order to experience the rush of adrenaline or to show off in front of the audience, surely risks his life, but, we submit, not for worthy reasons. Our initial constraint on the scope of the acceptable goals may be then formulated as follows: a courageous action should *also* aim at achieving some significant good or preventing some significant harm for a person or persons other than the agent himself. Let us call it the Altruism requirement.

One may reasonably ask for two further clarifications: what counts as “significant” good or evil, and who are those “others” that a courageous agent should care about. The second of these two concerns is easier to deal with as long as we keep in mind the supererogatory status of the virtue of courage. Courageous character is praiseworthy, but it would be absurd to make it into everyone’s moral duty to always act courageously in all life-threatening circumstances. Hence, we are spared from the need to formulate a general principle which would specify the range of people who *should* necessarily benefit from a courageous agent. A person *may* risk his life for his spouse, his family members, his close friends, members of his clan, his compatriots or for the benefit of the entire human race, but neither option cannot reasonably be part of a binding moral obligation.⁴⁶ The Altruism requirement, in other words, sets the lower limit of the number of people who might expect to benefit from one’s courage, but leaves the upper limit open and at the discretion of a particular agent in a particular situation. The qualification “significant” when applied to harms and benefits, on the other hand, must remain intentionally vague. We may perhaps agree on some paradigm examples of losses that are not significant enough for getting

⁴⁶ Our account of courage, in other words, avoids the traditional problem which many of the rule-based consequentialist theories have to face. A normative theory which prescribes acting in such a way as to bring the greatest net-benefit to others, must make a decision as to who will be included in the category of “others.” The universalistic approach as in Mill (for whom the scope of the legitimate recipients of produced good includes “all sentient creatures”) seems overly demanding; while all attempts to draw a line elsewhere seem arbitrary at best.

involved in a life-threatening conflict. When an armed street-robber demands a wallet from a person's companion, risking one's life in order to save a hundred dollars for your friend would be truly reckless. Beyond this we would resist any further specification, as the variety of real-life circumstances would always defy any general rule of this type. Finally, we should note that the Altruism constraint excludes from the set of all courageous behaviors those risky actions which exclusively seek the benefit for the agent himself or aim at causing harm to another person as their *final* goal, even though it has no objection to those cases when the agent has his own benefit as *one* of the motivating causes of action.⁴⁷

Our second constraint for the range of proper goals of a courageous behavior is likely to be more controversial: one's expectation to bring some significant good to others or to spare them some significant harm as the result of one's actions must be *realistic*. We will call it the Realism constraint. The Realism constraint brings a healthy dose of objectivity into the otherwise purely subjective account of justification of behavior. Endeavoring on a risky enterprise for the benefit of others where the chances of success are close to zero should not be seen as a courageous behavior regardless of how sincerely the agent himself believes in his abilities. The Realism constraint does not preclude yet an engagement with the enemy where the chances of victory *per se* or even survival are minimal, as long as such sacrifice can be reasonably seen as advancing some worthwhile goal. Thus, the 300 Spartans at Thermopylae could not realistically expect a victory over the Persians, but they judged correctly that the battle would slow down the Persian advance, would prevent them from attacking the main Greek army from the rear, and would thus be instrumental in saving the *polis*. But the proposed constraint is meant to exclude the don quixotic type of behavior in situations where no real altruistic benefit can be reasonably expected as a result of one's

⁴⁷ The proposed Altruism constraint is meant in part to flesh out the Aristotelian contention that a courageous person acts from "the right motive" (1115b16-17).

daring actions.⁴⁸ We are fully in agreement with Curzer's estimation when he argues that we simply "should not admire fortitude when the harm is unavoidable and the good is unachievable, for fortitude in such situations is not courageous" (2012, p. 31).

As a final observation, we should point to a relation that exists between the Altruism requirement and the Realism constraint, which underscores their mutual dependence on our model. The relation can be formulated as follows: the increase in the number of the intended benefit-recipients of a risky action on part of a courageous agent *typically* decreases the probability of the envisioned effect. A person who is willing to face life-threatening dangers for alleged benefits of distant strangers or for the hypothetical welfare of a large community is often presented as a more admirable character by comparison with the one who would risk his life for the next of kin only. Yet, barring some convoluted scenarios, my willingness to fight with the house intruder in order to protect my family has greater chances of satisfying the Realism constraint than my willingness to die on a battlefield for the ideal of universal justice for all. Needless to say, there are legitimate exceptions to this generalization, but it seems reasonable to conclude that in most real-life situations a higher score on an imagined altruism index would be inversely correlated with a score on a probability scale. Acting courageously, among other things, involves identifying that optimal balance between a desire to maximize the effect of one's action and a sober estimate of one's capacities.

5. Concluding Remarks

At one point in the Nicomachean Ethics Aristotle warns the readers against the excessive idealism in moral theory (which he naturally associates with Plato), reminding us that the good we are now seeking must be "something attainable" (1096b34). The proposed analysis

⁴⁸ This line of reasoning is what likely explains Aristotle's reluctance to include in the category of the truly courageous those who fearlessly counter the overwhelming forces of nature ("the earthquakes and the waves") or patiently endure a terminal disease (1115a35-1115b5; 1115b26-27).

of courage in this paper was guided by an assumption that the central virtues of character are no less relevant in our days, than they were two and a half thousand years ago. But their relevance can be sustained by demystifying some of the old-fashioned connotations of the virtue-terms, and by offering a straightforward set of evaluative and descriptive criteria, which would make a practice of attribution of virtues (or corresponding vices) to actions and agents both practical and non-arbitrary.

A courageous person is willing to do something that goes beyond the ordinary: he is willing to face real danger and risk his life for the benefit of another person, while estimating correctly that his action has reasonable chances for success. We have suggested that both conditions are Aristotelian in spirit, if not in letter, and have an immediate effect of reducing the number courageous agents to reasonable levels. A virtue-derived moral rule, which requires risking one's life for the benefit of another, cannot be a universal moral obligation, and in this sense true courage, unlike recklessness, rashness, pointless bravado or plain cowardice, is a relatively rare phenomenon. "Most men tend to be bad," frankly observes Aristotle speaking about his contemporaries, "[they are] slaves to greed, and cowards in danger" (Rhetoric 1382b4-5). Unless human nature has radically improved in the last two and a half millennia,⁴⁹ Aristotle's observation would hold true for our generation as well - a courageous character is an exception, and the modern tendency of indiscriminate attribution of the virtue terms simply feeds the moral inflation.

And yet aiming at a courageous character is not the same as aiming at sainthood. As both Aristotle and the modern psychologists remind us, courage can be acquired even by those who show little aptitude for this peculiar trait of character in the beginning. We are capable of educating our natural selves in such a way that we may successfully resist the primordial

⁴⁹ We are seriously skeptical about that being the case, despite some optimistic voices to the contrary, e.g., of Steven Pinker (*The Better Angels of Our Nature*, 2012).

instincts, act contrary to the immediate urges, or even eliminate the deviant desires altogether through the extended process of habituation. Courage, after all, is a thoroughly human virtue, both because it is within our reach, and because it captures the essential aspect of our nature – a capacity to put the good of another person above one’s own.

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