Courage: A Modern Look at an Ancient Virtue

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COURAGE: A MODERN LOOK AT AN ANCIENT VIRTUE

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The purpose of this article is twofold: to demystify the ancient concept of courage, making it more palpable for the modern reader, and to suggest the reasonably specific constraints that would restrict the contemporary tendency of indiscriminate attribution of this virtue. The 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 Aristotelian thesis that courage consists in overcoming the fear of significant harm for a worthy cause will be further developed by exploring its relevance for military professionals today. Specific criteria will be offered in order to restrict the application of the term 'courageous' to a certain type of action, as well as to demarcate this virtue from the related vices, such as recklessness. The normative aspect of our study aims to make sense of what could qualify as a worthy goal of a fearless action in the modern world. It will be argued that a courageous agent aims at alleviating or preventing harm for others in a situation of potential risk for the agent himself, while respecting the factual conditions that determine the probability of success.

KEY WORDS: Courage, Aristotle, Plato, fearlessness, military virtues, noble goal of courage

Introduction

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 movies featuring daring superheroes. The other position sees courageous people filling every police department, fire brigade or professional union, sometimes expanding the attribute to cover whole cities, or even countries. The inflationary tendency of the current media and popular culture, which issues the certificates of courage in bulk quantities, is quite obvious. 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, thereby throwing light on important questions and debates within military ethics. The basic thesis that *courage consists in overcoming the fear of significant harm for a worthy cause* will be further developed by exploring the implications of such 'overcoming', as well as the psychological and cognitive resources that 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 a world thoroughly permeated with value relativism. We are motivated by a practical concern of applying the concept of courage, a military virtue *par excellence*, in a meaningful

and non-arbitrary way, thus providing some specific guidance for the solution of the moral dilemmas faced by military practitioners today.

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 a view), 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 (1988: 244) – 'the fact that Aristotle believes something does not make it true' – we are nonetheless convinced that Aristotle has captured something essential about this virtue and his core intuitions are still relevant for our world.

The Ancient Background

Plato's *Laches* and Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* are two primary references for the classical views on courage. 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 the 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 that would clearly be rejected.

In the 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 the fact 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 a 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 narrow, or too broad, or implying an inconsistency with some other beliefs held by the proponent of the definition. More interesting for our purpose are those remarks made by Socrates in the process of refuting Laches and Nicias, which suggest his own attitude toward 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 to set up a meaningful contrast with Aristotle's take on courage, even if no positive definition was agreed upon.

The most conspicuous difference between Plato's, Socrates', and Aristotle's, concerns the scope of actions that should properly fall under the category 'courageous'. There is a

clear tendency in the *Laches* toward 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 (191d1–e1). Moreover, Socrates is willing to include in the category even those who 'are mighty to contend against desires and pleasures' (191e1), that is the individuals showing an unusual level of self-control when faced with strong temptations.

We may assume that Socrates' list of courageous agents was not meant to be exhaustive, but rather instrumental in switching Laches' attention from the external circumstances that might prompt a courageous response to the internal aspects of such a reaction. Indeed, as in many other cases, here, too, the internal state of the agent is of primary importance in the Socratic investigation. As Gerasimos Santas (1971: 191) 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'. 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 narrow down significantly the scope of truly courageous actions.[2] 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?' The latter question, however, 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 (καλόνθάνατον ἀδεής), 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 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 achievement (190c–d). Thus, the dialogue with Socrates continues on a new level. Much of what follows in the subsequent chapters of the *Nicomachean Ethics* deals with the discussion of the spurious types of courage – those cases that might appear as instances of courageous behavior, but which are not truly so. As one might expect, most of the scenarios and characters that 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.

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 from real historical figures. Neither Homeric heroes, nor the proverbially intrepid Spartans would be recognized by Aristotle as truly courageous people for various reasons.[3] Whereas there is little doubt that a paradigmatic example of a courageous person for Plato would be Socrates himself, who exhibited military, intellectual and political courage on a number of occasions,[4] it is much harder to determine whether any real person in the context of war has ever shown true courage living up to Aristotle's standards. All the specific examples that Aristotle mentions are there to illustrate 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 confidence[5] under the corresponding conditions, is brave' (1115b16–18).

What seems to be an overly demanding level of control over one's feelings,[6] the equivocal use of the qualification 'right', when applied to a motive, a time, a manner and a scope of fear, and 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. He can thus resist the desire to flee to safety. Yet, contrary to our modern intuitions, rooted both in the Kantian ideal of an agent who fulfills his moral duty despite contrary inclinations, and in 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 that *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 other wayward desires (e.g. a desire to run away from the battlefield). Moreover, it should be subdued not merely in the 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 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 a 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,[7] feel any fear at all when confronted with life-threatening situations 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, ἀδεής, ἀνέκπληκτος, ἀτάραχον).[8] Some scholars, such as Michelle Brady (2005: 193), 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', 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). 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.[9] On this reading, the qualification 'fearless' should properly apply to external behavior rather than to the 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 (discussed below), but, besides the textual difficulties, it makes the distinction between a virtuous and a self-controlled person problematic, at least in the case of courage.[10]

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' (*Laches* 190e4–6). We have already observed that Aristotle clearly favors Laches' suggestion to the extent that it limits 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 the 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. But reference to a behavior alone would not allow him to make these distinctions.

Aristotle and the Moderns: *Andreia* vs. Courage

We have 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 fearless person is truly an exception, 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.[11] A noble goal that 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 how Aristotle's view of courage compares to the conceptions favored by Socrates and his interlocutors in the *Laches*. It is now time to take a second look at Aristotle's theory of courage vis-à-vis some modern interpretations of this virtue.

Rich data from experimental studies has been assembled on the relation between fear, as a subjective avoidance tendency, and courageous behavior in various subjects, ranging from psychiatric patients suffering from panic disorders, to combat soldiers, members of bomb disposal units and astronauts. Stanley Rachman (2004) has recently brought together in a single article the most important results of these experiments, which he and his colleagues have been performing for the last two decades. The central theses of his article are summarized below, followed by a comparison of these contemporary studies on fear and courage with the Aristotelian image of this virtue, under the assumption that Rachman's results are not only empirically sound but mostly in accord with 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.
2. Courage is an acquired characteristic; people can learn to persevere when under significant threat.
3. The occurrence of perseverance despite fear is a *pure* form of courage.
4. Natural fearlessness is a real but rare condition; there are a small number of people who are relatively impervious to fear.
5. The successful practice of courageous behavior (e.g. a successful dealing with explosives by members of a bomb disposal unit) leads to a decrease in subjective fear and finally to a state of fearlessness (Rachman 2004: 151–173).

Even a cursory overview of the Aristotelian discussion of *andreia* (his term for 'courage'), 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 Socratic tendency by widening the scope of those who can properly be called courageous, including psychiatric patients (Rachman 2004), recovering alcoholics (Putnam 2001), and those who boldly propose and defend new ideas, thus manifesting intellectual courage (Ryan 2004). The increase in the number of courageous agents is accomplished by widening the category of fear-instilling objects, situations and conditions that can be properly confronted by an agent, and by lowering the threshold of the seriousness of harm that 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. Interestingly, even such a committed defender of Aristotle as Howard Curzer (2012: 25) concedes that 'limiting courage to life-threatening situations flies in the face of common sense'.

Second, 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 (2004: 171) cites evidence of the performance of

combat soldiers, parachutists and bomb disposal operators, suggesting that 'the appropri-
ate skill required for dealing with a dangerous situation serves to increase courage'.
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 well-
trained mercenaries might be more efficient on the battlefield by comparison with
courageous but amateur fighters (1116b13–15).[12]

Third, there is very little, if any, discussion of the *noble goal* of an allegedly courage-
ous action by the contemporary authors, whereas it is one of the constitutive features for
the Aristotelian holistic account of this virtue.[13] In the former, the behavioral manifestation
is typically divorced from the goal that it strives to achieve, and is then evaluated on its
own terms. A daredevil's feat of, say, crossing the railroad in front a moving train and
barely escaping a collision, or one's willingness to suffer injuries and even death in order to
satisfy one's thirst for revenge, would both qualify as courageous actions insofar as we are
concerned with external behavior only. George Kateb (2004: 39), for instance, argues that
the terrorists who destroyed the World Trade Center on 9/11 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'.
Needless to say, that last quote would make little sense within the Aristotelian frame of
reference.

Finally, there is a particularly strong modern intuition that counts subjective fear of
an agent as either irrelevant for the 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',[14] 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 moderate 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 is what likely prompted David Pears (2004: 12)
to suggest that 'Aristotle's concept of *andreia* does not map onto our concept of courage'.
It is hard to disagree with Pears' evaluation even if we are able to find the occasional
overlaps between the two concepts, but what exactly follows from it? We cannot, in our
view, 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 fourth
century BCE and of the globalized postindustrial 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 view). If the concept
of courage is to be of any practical use in our time, we should develop a balanced position
that would integrate the key elements of the ancient philosophical heritage with the
informed intuitions of our contemporaries.

Arguably, some disagreements from the list above can be settled more easily 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
courageous behavior occur in situations of risky confrontation, be it traditional warfare or a

local street fight. All other forms of courage (e.g. political) 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 outcomes for the agent who, being aware of the risks involved, 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 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.

Yet other aspects of the Aristotelian account cannot be so easily accommodated to the present-day situation. The second half of Aristotle's original definition of courage stipulates that a death-defying behavior is not yet fully virtuous unless it is undertaken for the sake of a noble goal. This normative provision, we believe, constitutes 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.

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 (2012: 31) rightly observes, 'mere mastery over fear in the face of the fearsome is not a valuable accomplishment, in itself'. 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 that 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 to understand. 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 (1115 a32–35; 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 that 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 the nobility of the circumstances in which death occurs (we might 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, there must be some further goal of the war, which alone bears the attribute 'noble' non-derivatively.

There are a number of benefits that 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 that 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.[15] 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. Being alive, after all, is a basic precondition for being happy.[16]

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. But what could that *other* goal be? Surprisingly, Aristotle does not give us as much as a hint of the possible options here. 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 (2005: 199), that the soldier's sacrifice was done for the preservation of the *polis*,[17] and Aristotle simply did not feel the need to reiterate that point. Curzer (2012: 28–29), 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 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.

Provided that we can establish what constituted the 'noble deeds of war' for the citizens of Athens in the fourth century BCE, we must still make a decision about whether those ancient goals have any relevance for military practitioners 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 that are most likely to resonate with the ancient intuitions. Second, we may present our own criteria for goals that are worth fighting and dying for today. And, third, 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, the second is the most

ideologically charged, and the third leads to the elimination of courage as a *virtue* altogether by reducing it to a morally neutral description of behavior.

Courage Reconsidered

Is there a way out of the impasse described above? 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, 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 that might properly 'ground' a courageous action. The plurality, however, does not imply un-restrictedness – not *any* goal can be taken as worth facing a risk of death or significant harm. Hence, we should formulate some general constraints, which would delineate the range of possible noble ends of courage in our time. We propose at least two such restrictions.

The risk of a significant loss, as already emphasized, should be taken for a proper reason. Someone playing 'Russian roulette' in order to experience the rush of adrenaline or to show off in front of an audience surely risks his life, but, we submit, not for worthy reasons. Since an act of courage is always a trade-off between our innate desire for safety and a desire to achieve a certain goal, the goal in question should be at least comparable in its objective worth to the value that one is willing to give up should an action fail to succeed. Furthermore, courage acquires its historical significance as a virtue that has social rather than purely individual benefits, which implies that the goal of a courageous behavior should go beyond the personal interests of an agent. Our initial constraint on the scope of the acceptable goals may then be 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 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 that 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. 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 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 $100 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 courageous behaviors those risky actions that exclusively seek a benefit for the agent himself (including self-defense) 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.

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 significant harm as the result of one's actions must be *realistic*. We submit that a sincere desire and resolute willingness to engage in a battle for the benefit of another is not yet sufficient for the qualification of an action as truly courageous unless the agent may reasonably hope for success of the endeavor, *objectively speaking*. This limitation partly captures an Aristotelian point about the common vice of rashness or recklessness, when a soldier's confidence in victory significantly exceeds his actual abilities. We will call it the *Realism constraint*.

The Realism constraint brings a healthy dose of objectivity into the otherwise purely subjective account of the 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 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 reasonably be expected as a result of one's daring actions.[18] We are fully in agreement with Curzer's (2012: 31) 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'.

A case from medieval Spanish military history may further illustrate this point. In 1391, while the official peace agreement between the Christian Kingdom of Castile and the Muslim Kingdom of Granada was carefully observed, a certain restless Spanish cavalier, Martin Yanez de Barbudo, the grand master of Alcantra, decided to initiate his own personal crusade against the Moors. To start with, he sent a provocative letter to the king of Granada, Yusuf bin Mohammed, where, according to the chronicle:

> he affirmed that the faith of Jesus Christ was holy and good, and that the faith of Muhammad was false and deceitful, and if the king of Granada objected, the master would have him know that he would fight against him and anyone he liked to name, giving him the advantage of one half more, so that if the Moors were two hundred, he would take one hundred, and so on. (Harvey 1990: 224)

When the Muslim king failed to heed the challenge, Martin Yanez wasted no further time, gathered a small army of about 300 mounted knights and about 5000 foot soldiers, and quickly proceeded toward the border with Granada. Despite the numerous attempts to dissuade the overly zealous crusader from his reckless enterprise, including the

straightforward prohibition on any military action issued by the king of Castile, Martin persisted in his plan. He remained unabashed even when it was pointed out to him that the king of Granada had an army of 200,000 foot soldiers and about 5000 horse riders, and that the Christians warriors would be outnumbered 1 to 38. Shortly after Martin's soldiers crossed into Granada's territory, they were attacked by an overwhelming Muslim force. Most invaders were captured prisoners or killed on the battlefield, including the leader himself. Washington Irving (2010: 234), travelling through southern Spain more than 400 years after the event, recorded that the following words could still be seen engraved on the sepulcher of Martin Yanez: 'Here lies one whose heart never knew fear'.

That hotheaded Spanish knight might indeed have been fearless, but we would strongly resist describing his behavior as courageous. Even if it could be established that the welfare of others was the primary motive for the military enterprise (rather than, say, personal gain or glory), no sober analysis of the situation could have justified the hopes of Martin Yanez to defeat the Muslim army given such impressive disproportion in manpower. One might object, however, that Martin's sacrificing himself and his fellow crusaders did achieve some public good in the long run, even if indirectly. His fearlessness in a battle against a much stronger enemy earned him a reputation of a martyr, a popular hero of folk legends, who inspired several subsequent generations of the *Reconquista* fighters, which in turn, in some circuitous way perhaps, contributed to the victory over the kingdom of Granada and the final 'liberation' of the Iberian Peninsula about 100 years later.

One obvious problem with this *ad hoc* rationalization of a failed endeavor is that any reckless decision could be given a similar twist. No matter how poor the military planning and how disastrous the outcome of the campaign, someone else can always learn the lesson from the failure, be motivated by the fortitude of the doomed army, or even discover an inspiration to write the greatest novel about the fallen heroes. These positive side effects, however, cannot justify the recklessness itself and do not turn it into genuine courage. In certain circumstances, we might indeed admire the spirit of those who rush into the heat of battle with little or no hope for success, but we would not normally encourage others to repeat those desperate acts on a mass scale. A courageous action that respects the objective limitations of a situation, on the other hand, is an action that we want others to emulate. An ideal army is an army consisting of professionals who are capable of discriminating between a justified risk and straightforward foolishness, but it is not an army of obstinate fighters with the psychology of martyrs.

As a final observation, we should point to a relation that exists between the Altruism requirement and the Realism constraint that 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 the 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 than the one who would risk his life for his next of kin only. Yet, barring some convoluted scenarios, my willingness to fight with the house intruder in order to protect my family has a greater chance 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.

Concluding Remarks

At one point in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle warns his readers against excessive idealism in moral theory (which he associates with Plato), reminding us that the good we are now seeking must be 'something attainable' (1096b34). The proposed analysis of courage in this paper was guided by an assumption that the central virtues of character are no less relevant in our day than they were 2500 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 (as well as the corresponding vices) to actions and agents both practical and non-arbitrary.

A courageous person, whether a professional soldier or a noncombatant, 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 intended 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 of 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,' observes Aristotle quite frankly, 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, 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 terms of virtue 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 primordial instincts, act contrary to immediate urges, or even eliminate 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.

NOTES

1. Curzer (2012: 19) lists five traditional problems of the Aristotelian account of courage, but more issues could easily be identified.
2. Plato's account of courage in the *Republic* (especially Book IV) offers a positive, rather than *aporetic* discussion of this virtue, and the one that seems closer to Aristotle's insofar as civic courage is located specifically in the soldier class (429b1ff). The discrepancy might be partly explained if we assume that the *Laches*, an early dialogue, presents the point of view of historical Socrates rather than Plato himself.

3. 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 lopsided 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 (*Politics* 1338b9–19).

4. 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.

5. 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 emotions on the Aristotelian model of this virtue is analyzed by Daniel Putnam (2001). For the claim that fear and confidence yield two different virtues, see Urmson (1980).

6. 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 (1978: 274) 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'.

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

8. 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: ἀδεής – 'fearless' (Rackham 1997), 'fearless' (Ross 2004), 'intrepid' (Irwin 1999); ἀνέκπληκτος – 'being proof against fear' (Rackham 1997), 'dauntless' (Ross 2004), 'unperturbed' (Irwin 1999); ἀτάραχον – 'undismayed' (Rackham 1997), 'undisturbed' (Ross 2004), 'unperturbed' (Irwin 1999).

9. For example, Pears (1980), Urmson (1988). Pears (1980: 178–179) 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.

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

11. Even though identifying fearlessness with courage is perhaps not that common among philosophers, it occurs more often among psychologists and other experts in behavioral sciences. Thus, Orwal Mowrer (1960: 435), a notable twentieth-century psychologist, finds it highly plausible 'that courage is simply the absence of fear in situations where it might be expected to be present'.

12. 'It is not the bravest men that fight best, but those who are strongest and have their bodies in the best condition' (1116b13–15). 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 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 (2001: 76) has 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.

13. Cf. *Nicomachean Ethics* (1115b23).

14. See also Rachman (1982).

15. 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).

16. 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' (1115b25–27).

17. A sentiment expressed, for instance, by the Spartan poet Tyrtaeus (c. 650 BCE) 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: 74).

18. 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).

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