

What Are We Fighting For?: The Noble Goal of Courage in Aristotle's Ethics

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ABSTRACT

Aristotle's analysis of the virtue of courage presents a number of interpretative difficulties. The initial thesis that courage consists in overcoming the fear of death in the context of war for a worthy or noble cause will be analysed against several other, seemingly inconsistent, definitions of this virtue in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. The normative aspect of the present study aims at making sense of what could qualify as a noble goal of a fearless action for the Aristotelian model, given that one's personal *eudaimonia* cannot be the goal of a warrior willing to sacrifice his life in battle. Reference to the intended proper end of courageous behaviour is one of the constitutive features of the Aristotelian holistic account of this virtue and this normative provision remains unexplained in the text. Two options are considered: (1) the noble goal of courage is an altruistic concern for the good of the *polis*; (2) the goal of courage is personal honour (including postmortem glorification). It is argued that the second option is a better fit with the Aristotelian model of virtue ethics, which should be seen as a form of enlightened egoism.

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1. PREFACE: INTRODUCING THE TENSION

As careful readers of the *Nicomachean Ethics* are well aware, Aristotle presents a teleological account of ethical virtues by stipulating personal *eudaimonia* (happiness or human flourishing) as the final goal, the *telos*, of moral development.¹ Being a morally virtuous person,

for Aristotle, is a necessary (albeit not sufficient) condition for reaching the ultimate goal of all human activities, and that view provides both a normative and a strong motivational reason for developing those praiseworthy traits of character that he calls virtues of character and intellectual virtues. The list of Aristotelian virtues in the *Nicomachean Ethics* is a fascinating historical document of how the Athenian intellectuals conceived of an exemplary gentleman and an ideal citizen during the fourth century BCE. At the same time, many elements of Aristotle's analysis of the

1 A teleological account of ethical virtues is contrasted here with a deontological account, according to which a virtuous character should be acquired for its own sake, as something intrinsically valuable, regardless of any further benefits. Admittedly, Aristotle agrees that virtues have intrinsic value when he writes that "every virtue we certainly choose because of themselves, because we would choose each of them even if it had no further result" (*Eth. Nic.* 1097b3-4). At the same time, he adds, "we also choose them for the sake of happiness, supposing that

through them we shall be happy" (*Ibid.*, my emphasis). In that sense, happiness retains its unique status as "an end that is complete without qualification" and virtues are still seen as instrumental for reaching the chief good of happiness.

essential human excellences retain their cross-cultural and cross-temporal significance even to the present day. Both the ancients and the moderns would agree on the praiseworthiness of a courageous character, and both would disdain cowardly behaviour. Although the substantive content of the concept of courage has changed considerably in the contemporary world, it still remains one of the most paradigmatic virtues of a morally mature character.²

Together with the virtues of friendship and justice, courage (*ἀνδρεία*) receives the most elaborate treatment in Aristotle's ethics. It is also an *arête* that stands out from all the other virtues in one crucial respect. Unlike the case with, for example, temperance, friendship, or generosity, a consistent and repeated exercise of martial courage greatly diminishes one's chances of achieving happiness in this life, since it now becomes less likely that the courageous fighter will live long enough to enjoy the benefits of a lasting peace. Paradoxically, a coward who "throws away his shield and takes to flight"³ 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.⁴

2 On the difference between the Aristotelian conception of courage and the modern approaches to this virtue see Zavaliy and Aristidou (2014).

3 *Rhetoric* 1383b21.

4 It does not seem that Aristotle, unlike Socrates in the *Apology* or in the *Phaedo*, seriously entertained the possibility

of some form of postmortem existence of a conscious self. In the *Eth. Nic.* he is 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). The speculations about the indestructible nature of the human mind (*vóoc*) in *De Anima* (408b17-30) do not imply the possibility of personal immortality either.

What is it, then, according to Aristotle, for the sake of which one should become and remain courageous even in the most desperate circumstances? What should properly motivate a courageous warrior to stay put in the front line of a phalanx when the chances of survival are negligible? How is the motivation of a truly courageous person different from the motivation of a self-controlled person, or one who merely approaches the state of genuine *arête*? Before we tackle these theoretical questions, we should begin with an overview of the several definitions of courage provided by Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

2. ARISTOTLE'S DEFINITIONS OF COURAGE

Aristotle's "Doctrine of the Mean" is arguably the best-known part of his ethical doctrine, and in it he famously postulates that each moral virtue can be defined as a mean state between two vices: the vice of excess and the vice of deficiency. Thus, a temperate man, for example, is positioned at some midpoint between two characters: a self-indulgent character ("the man who indulges in every pleasure and abstains from none"), and an insensible character ("the man who shuns every pleasure")

of some form of postmortem existence of a conscious self. In the *Eth. Nic.* he is 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). The speculations about the indestructible nature of the human mind (*vóoc*) in *De Anima* (408b17-30) do not imply the possibility of personal immortality either.

(1104a23-26). In a similar manner, Aristotle first introduces the virtue of courage as a state of character that is positioned between the vices of cowardice on the one hand and rashness on the other (11104a22). He further defines this virtue by referencing not one but two relevant feelings or 'passions' which ought to be properly controlled by a morally mature agent. The original definition runs as follows:

With regard to feelings of fear and confidence (φόβος καὶ θάρσος) courage is the mean; of the people who exceed, he who exceeds in fearlessness has no name, while the man who exceeds in confidence is rash, and he who exceeds in fear and falls short in confidence is a coward (1107a31-b3).

This initial introduction of courage in Book II of the *Eth. Nic.* sets the general context for his understanding of this virtue, but it does not go far enough in specifying the proper objects of fear and confidence, and neither does it clarify how to discover the ideal balance between these basic passions of fear and confidence.⁵ A special and more detailed discussion of courage and cowardice is reserved for Book III, Chapters 6-9 of the

Eth. Nic. This is where we should turn our attention to now.

The detailed analysis of the virtue of courage in Book III is intriguing and puzzling for a number of reasons. Elsewhere, I argue that Aristotle's take on courage in those chapters should be interpreted as pursuing two main objectives: first, to counter the overly inclusive conception of this virtue advocated by Plato (especially in the *Laches*), and, secondly, to return to the Homeric roots of genuine courage by radically limiting the scope of the truly courageous agents and restricting its manifestation to the martial context (Zavaliy 2017). Plato's take on courage may serve as a helpful background for our discussion of Aristotle. 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, Laches and Nicias, that soldiers in battle are not the only ones who can manifest courage, but so can 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 was willing to include in the category of the courageous agents even those who "are mighty to contend against desires and pleasures" (191e1), i.e. individuals showing an unusual

5 Aristotle makes it clear that fear is the more important of the two emotions (1117a29-30). The somewhat uneasy relationship between these emotions on the Aristotelian model of this virtue is analysed by Daniel Putnam (2001). For the claim that fear and confidence actually yield two different virtues see Urmson (1980).

level of self-control when faced with strong temptations, and, perhaps, even some wild animals (196e).⁶

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 which 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 Socratic investigation. As 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, 191). According to 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) and one's behaviour in response

to those beliefs are both constitutive of the virtue of courage for Socrates.

Plato's overly inclusive and internalised conception of courage was unacceptable to Aristotle, who, in the spirit of Homer, sought to limit the scope of truly courageous feats to those performed on a battlefield. 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, though, should not be seen as a question about the specific names of brave individuals, but rather as an inquiry into the behavioural, emotive, and situational conditions necessary for courageous behaviour. Skipping a painful Socratic process of *elenchus*, Aristotle gives birth to his second definition of a courageous agent, which will prove to be more intricate than it initially appears to be:

Legitimately speaking (κυρίως δὴ λέγοιτ'), then, he will be called brave who is fearless in the face of a noble death (καλόν θάνατον ἀδεής), and of all emergencies that involve death; and the emergencies of war are in the highest degree of this kind (1115a32-35).

The opening phrase here – "legitimately (or properly) speaking" – suggests that Aristotle is not going to use the term 'courageous' loosely or simply by analogy (the way Socrates presumably did in the *Laches*) but instead will seek to define it as a technical term with a set of rather stringent conditions for

6 The other Platonic dialogue in which courage gets detailed treatment is the *Republic*. Surprisingly, Plato's take on the role of this virtue in the ideal city is much closer to Aristotle's *Eth. Nic.* than to the views of Socrates in the *Laches*. Nonetheless, in his discussion Aristotle seems to be objecting specifically to the earlier dialogue and disregards the much-modified position presented in the *Republic*. For an overview of the evolution of Plato's views on courage see Zavaliy (2000, 180-197).

application. The next thing to notice is that Aristotle's focus from the beginning is on military valour as the highest or, perhaps, the only type of true courage. Here Aristotle picks up the position preferred by both Laches and Protagoras from Plato's early dialogues, both of whom connected courage with battlefield endurance, but he adds several important qualifying details. Much of what follows in the subsequent chapters of the *Eth., Nic.* deals with the discussion of the spurious types of courage – those cases that might appear as instances of courageous behaviour but are not truly so. As one might expect, most of the scenarios and characters that were explicitly endorsed by Socrates in the *Laches* are ruled out by Aristotle. The long list of those who *fail* to qualify as truly brave individuals, according to Aristotle, includes those who fearlessly face poverty or disease, those experiencing perils at sea, those citizen-soldiers defending their city because of their fear of penalties or desire for honours, those professional mercenaries who are fearless in war because of their superior military skills, those who rush into battle because they are driven by strong passions, and those who stand their ground on the battlefield because they underestimated the strength of the opponent (1116a15-1117a27). In all these cases, the 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 Aristotle's initial description of courage and its counterfeit varieties is that it now becomes

extremely problematic to find a suitable example of a single courageous person, whether taken from the rich ancient literary heritage or from real historical episodes. Surprisingly, neither the Homeric heroes nor the proverbial Spartans are recognised as truly courageous people by Aristotle, albeit for different reasons. While there is little doubt that Socrates himself would be a paradigmatic example of a courageous person for Plato, a person who exhibited military, intellectual, and political courage, it is much harder to determine whether any real person in the context of war has ever shown true courage according to Aristotle's demanding standards.⁷ All of the specific historical and literary examples mentioned by Aristotle are brought up to illustrate examples of ‘less-than-truly-courageous’ behaviour, while not a single positive case of “true” courage has been identified in the text. For an author who was, without a doubt, brought up on the stories of the great battles and great heroes of the Persian Wars, and who was also a contemporary of Alexander's remarkable military achievements in Asia, such an omission is baffling.

The third point about the definition that deserves our attention is Aristotle's mentioning of fearlessness in the face of “a noble death”. We will reserve

7 Alcibiades testifies to Socrates' military prowess in the *Symposium* (220d-220e), and Laches bestows similar praise (*Laches* 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.

the discussion of the nobility of death for the end, but a few comments should be made about the notion of ‘fearlessness’. There is a familiar objection that contrasts the apparent demand for fearlessness in this definition with the description of a courageous agent given just a few pages later in the *Eth. Nic.* The description in question (which is also the third definition of a courageous agent) runs as follows:

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 under the corresponding conditions, is brave (1115b16-18).

The quote suggests that a courageous person must have a medial level of fear which he is able to control and thus be able to resist the desire to flee to safety. What counts as a medial level of fear and confidence in the circumstances is determined in each case by one’s practical wisdom (φρόνησις) – an indispensable rational capacity for all virtuous choices. Nevertheless, contrary to our modern intuitions, which are rooted both in the Kantian ideal of an agent who fulfils his moral duty despite contrary inclinations and the Christian image of a saint who overcomes strong temptations, Aristotle considers a self-controlled person to be a morally inferior character when compared to a virtuous one. Whereas a self-controlled person is able to control and subdue his deviant desires, a truly virtuous agent acts from a character

that excludes the possibility of 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 this is clearly recognised by Aristotle as a preferable state.⁸

Does a soldier, who has the virtue of courage in its entirety, feel any fear at all? Does that person, when confronted with a life-threatening situation in battle, experience a corresponding desire to flee even in the slightest degree? Aristotle’s general requirement for the ‘purity’ of virtues seems to suggest that a courageous agent would simply have no deviant passions to control. Indeed, on a number of occasions in the *Eth. Nic.* a brave man is univocally described by Aristotle as fearless.⁹ But how exactly should we understand this attribution of fearlessness to a courageous agent?

- 8 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.
- 9 Aristotle uses four different terms in the *Eth. Nic.* in his description of a courageous man, all of which can be understood as indicating the absence of fear: ἄφοβος (1115a16; 1117a18), ἀδεής (1115a32), ἀνέκπληκτος (1115b9-10), ἀτάραχον (1117a18). But whereas ἄφοβος (‘without fear’) is the least ambivalent term, the other three are more nuanced in their semantic content, and might suggest both an internal “state of the soul” and an external manifestation. Some of the common English renderings include: ἀδεής – “fearless” (Rackham), “fearless” (W. D. Ross), “intrepid” (Irwin); ἀνέκπληκτος – “being proof against fear” (Rackham), “dauntless” (W. D. Ross), “unperturbed” (Irwin); ἀτάραχον – “undismayed” (Rackham), “undisturbed” (W. D. Ross), “unperturbed” (Irwin).

Some modern scholars insist on taking Aristotle's terminology seriously and prefer to take the claim of fearlessness at face value. For example, it has been argued by Michelle Brady that viewing courage as involving fearlessness in the literal sense has the theoretical advantage "of making this particular virtue compatible with the rest of Aristotelian virtue", because it now seems to nicely fit at least one part of the original ethical model (2005, 193). Furthermore, Brady's interpretation of courage as implying complete fearlessness accords well with Aristotle's claim that the virtues are not only concerned with directing actions, but also with controlling passions (e.g. 1104b14), and, in addition, it counters the real threat of reducing Aristotelian virtue to mere self-control or continence. After all, a frightened hoplite who has successfully managed to control his passion of fear and remained standing in the phalanx is not morally different from someone who struggled against the temptation to indulge in an illicit or excessive pleasure and came out victorious in the end. If the latter person would *not* be recognised as truly temperate by the philosopher (but merely as a continent or a self-controlled person), neither should the former soldier be seen as courageous. On this reading, true courage is incompatible with any degree of fear. We may call this a *strong* or *internal* interpretation of fearlessness.

A complication arises when we consider the corresponding vices from the traditional list, where one of the vices is defined by Aristotle as "excess in

fearlessness" (1115b25), and when we also recall the third definition of a courageous person as one who *fears* but does so "in the right way" (1115b16-18). The strong or internal interpretation of fearlessness has a further practical disadvantage of placing the virtue of courage out of reach for the overwhelming majority of ordinary human beings, which many readers would take to be much more troublesome than any potential theoretical incongruities with other parts of Aristotle's virtue ethics. Ultimately, experiencing no fear whatsoever in the face of a likely death in war is hardly human.¹⁰

Faced with these objections, one may prefer instead a *weak* or *behavioural* interpretation of fearlessness as a more plausible alternative. A courageous agent only acts *as if* he feels no fear of death, even if the feeling of fear is present as a real subjective experience. One of the defenders of this approach, David Pears, writes that Aristotle most probably had in mind the "behavioural use" of the word "fearless" in this context, "which comments only on the manner of the agent's conduct," rather than on his mental experience (1980, 178-79).¹¹ On this sensible reading, the qualification "fearless" should properly apply to one's external behaviour rather than to the internal state of someone who boldly faces the dangers of war. An inexperienced

10 Aristotle cites anecdotal evidence of the Celts, who "fear nothing", but implies their pathological deviation from the 'normal' human condition (1115b27).

11 See also (Urmson 1988) for a similar position on the meaning of fearlessness in Aristotle.

warrior may tremble greatly “in his soul” at the prospect of death or injury, but what ultimately matters is his “fearless” performance during military action.¹² The weak interpretation is more in accord with our common intuitions. But, in addition to the tensions with the textual evidence that were cited earlier, it makes the distinction between a virtuous and a self-controlled person problematic, at least in the case of courage. Nonetheless, it appears to be the only acceptable reading unless we are willing to limit the category of courageous agents to pathological characters only. After all, as Aristotle observes, “he would be a sort of madman or insensible person if he feared nothing” (1115b26).¹³

12 There exists textual support for such an interpretation. Aristotle, at one point, claims that “the courageous man is proof against fear (ἀνέκπληκτος) so far as a human may be (ὡς ἄνθρωπος)” (1115b10) (my emphasis). The qualifying final clause probably takes the limits of human psychology into consideration, requiring fearlessness as a relative rather than absolute condition. Likewise, a line from 1115a16, which Rackham and Ross render as a straightforward affirmation of fearlessness: “the courageous man is also a fearless person (ἄφοβος γὰρ τις καὶ ὁ ἀνδρεῖος)” should rather be translated in a more qualified sense: “a courageous person is a sort of (a type of) fearless person” (together with Irwin and Crisp). I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer of the earlier draft of this paper for this observation.

13 Stanley Rachman, for instance, cites modern empirical studies which suggest that natural fearlessness is a real but extremely rare condition; there are a small number of people who are relatively impervious to fear, but this condition, if not manifested in immature children, is often correlated with psychological pathologies (2004, 151-73).

With the weak interpretation of fearlessness as a constitutive element of courage, we have come full circle and have returned to the purely behavioural definition of courage as advanced by Laches in Plato’s dialogue: a courageous man is someone “who does not run away, but remains at his post and fights against the enemy” (190e4-6). We observed earlier that Aristotle favoured Laches’ suggestion to limit the occasions for courageous action to a military context. However, 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 behaviour, without considering the relevant “passions” and, most importantly, the normative reasons for action. According to Aristotle, a soldier who “does not run away” simply because he underestimated the force of the enemy, or because his appetite for future spoils is more intense than his fear of death, would exhibit a merely spurious form of courage. But reference to an observable behaviour alone would not allow him to make these distinctions. In other words, courage cannot be reduced to a formal description of one’s actions in a risky setting. There must be something *for the sake of which* a courageous action is undertaken and that goal must be of a certain quality.

— 3. THE KALON OF A COURAGEOUS ACTION

We have observed that making fearlessness, when literally understood, into a prerequisite for courage would drastically reduce the number of courageous

individuals, since true fearlessness, even if not downright 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 this virtue. A courageous person is praiseworthy, admirable, and commendable. The inherently 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 contextual clues. After all, mere mastery over the emotion of fear in the face of the fearsome is not a *moral* accomplishment in itself.¹⁴ Similarly, as Aristotle would surely have realised, omitting the specification of the proper goal of a courageous action from the definition of courage threatens to eliminate the normative or teleological aspect of courage. Unless courage leads to some substantive good or the action is undertaken with the intention of reaching that good, it is not clear what makes it into a virtue and why it is at all desirable to acquire this character trait. The substantive good that a courageous agent ought to consider as the final goal of his behaviour is captured by Aristotle in his notion of the “noble end (τέλος καλόν)” of courage.

Admittedly, Aristotle never uses the exact phrase τέλος καλόν (‘noble end’)

in the extant text, but the notion is a natural derivation from these three affirmations: “The brave man... will face [dangers] for the sake of the noble (τοῦ καλοῦ ἔνεκα)” (1115b11-13); “To the brave man bravery is noble; hence the end it aims at is also such [i.e. noble] (τῷ ἀνδρείῳ δὲ ἡ ἀνδρεία καλόν. τοιοῦτον δὲ καὶ τὸ τέλος)” (1115b21-22), and “The real motive of courageous men is the noble (τὸ καλόν)” (1116b30). It seems obvious from these quotes that Aristotle has a particular goal in mind which he thinks should be the main motivating reason for a truly courageous warrior.

The notion of nobility in Aristotle’s discussion of courage remains one of its most elusive elements. The initial complication arises from the notorious semantic ambiguity of the adjective ‘καλόν,’ which, depending on the context, can be translated as ‘virtuous,’ ‘beautiful,’ ‘morally good,’ ‘noble,’ or simply ‘fine.’ In the text, the qualification “noble” (καλόν) is applied by Aristotle in the context of his analysis of this virtue to the 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 result of a courageous action (1115b22-24; 1116b30). Some of these attributions are more obvious than others. We can interpret Aristotle’s contention that courage is καλόν as analytic truth, which simply follows from his conception of a virtue – a trait of character that contributes positively to fulfilling the specifically human purpose or

14 Notably, a person who overcomes fear of pain and death and commits suicide would be considered a coward by Aristotle (1116a11-15).

function (ἔργον) (1099a20-21).¹⁵ Indeed, in many cases Aristotle uses the term καλόν (noble) as a close synonym of ‘virtuous’ (Lannstrom 2006, 12-13). But, as Curzer justly observes, this cannot be the correct sense of καλόν, at least as it is used in connection with the final goal of courage, a constitutive element of this virtue: “Since Aristotle is using the notion of nobility to specify what counts as courageous, he cannot define nobility in terms of courage, and then define courage in terms of nobility” (2012, 27).¹⁶ The goal of a courageous action, in other words, cannot be καλόν by default, simply because the virtue of courage, just like all other virtues, has this property.

Other attributions of καλόν cannot be easily understood as being derived from the nobility of virtue itself but must refer to some further, external value. Thus, the nobility of death must be seen as being derived from the nobility of the circumstances in which death occurs (we may say that nobility is a “transitive” property in this context). But the paradigmatic example of the circumstances

in which a noble death could occur or in which one could face a noble danger is, for Aristotle, the circumstances of war.¹⁷ But what is it that makes a war or a battle noble? It surely cannot be the case that 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 war that alone bears the attribute “noble” non-derivatively.

There are a number of benefits one can gain by waging a successful war. However, as Aristotle observes, one such important 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 war either, but is merely an 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, emphasising 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

15 The obviousness of the attribution of ‘nobility’ to virtue is emphatically affirmed, for example, by Protagoras in the eponymous dialogue: “Unless I am quite mad, [virtue] is the most honourable (κάλλιστον) of all things” (349e5-7). In another dialogue, Laches makes a similar affirmation with regard to courage (*Laches* 192c5).

16 Curzer, likewise, rules out the translation of καλόν as ‘beautiful’ (a common Homeric meaning) when used in the phrase “καλόν death” on the grounds that “it is quite possible to die aesthetically from disease or at sea, and unaesthetically on the battlefield” (*ibid.*).

17 This, of course, is the source of one of the traditional charges against the Aristotelian conception of courage. Curzer, among many others, observes that “limiting courage to life-threatening situations [in war] flies in the face of common sense” (2012, 25). Elsewhere I argue that such a narrow conception of the circumstances in which courage can be manifested should be explained by Aristotle’s desire to conform to the Homeric paradigms of courage (Zavaliy 2017).

that “the more [the brave man] is possessed of virtue in its entirety, the happier he is” (1117b7), which reiterates an earlier remark (1104b6-9) about a peculiar kind of delight (το χαίρον) that a courageous agent experiences even at the moment of the greatest danger. This point about the joy that accompanies military engagement will not be lost on careful readers of Homer either, as in his works many a hero shows real bloodlust and eagerness for close encounters with the enemy.¹⁸

This reading should partly alleviate the common worry that for Aristotle the term “noble” connotes some esoteric, mysterious property that cannot easily be transported to a different cultural milieu. Courage is noble in the same sense as that in which friendship is noble (cf. 1155a29), and deeds of courage, which might often involve fighting in a battle, are also noble, because they aim to achieve the noblest goal of happiness. Noble, in this context, simply qualifies a highly desirable state of affairs, something that one is willing to risk one’s life for. Yet, as always, there

is a complication hiding behind the obvious.

While the goal of war is peace, which is a natural precondition of happiness, which, in turn, is the noblest goal overall, it does not follow that the same goal may ‘ground’ a virtuous action of a particular warrior fighting in a war. If a courageous person is willing to die in battle, and if his death is nonetheless noble and praiseworthy, the nobility of such a death evidently derives not from the person’s achieving his own pleasure and happiness, but from some other worthy goal that is somehow furthered by the person’s perishing on the battlefield. As we observed earlier, one must be alive (at the very least) in order to achieve personal *eudaimonia*. But what could that *other* goal be? What should be the motive of a warrior to act courageously even in those drastic circumstances where one’s perishing is nearly assured? Surprisingly, Aristotle does not give us as much as a single hint of the possible options here. A short remark in the *Politics*, where Aristotle *seems* to be commenting on the proper goal of courage, is not very helpful either. We learn from that text that courage should *not* be practised for the sake of wealth (χρήματα), but when it comes to a more positive formulation, Aristotle’s words remain cryptic: “For [...] the function of courage is to produce daring (ποιεῖν θάρσος)” (1258a11-12). The short line is not illuminating at all as it fails to specify the desirable goal of that ‘daring’ and thus borders on being an empty platitude.¹⁹ I suggest, then,

18 “He who stands his ground against things that are terrible and delights (χαίρων) in this or at least is not pained is brave, while the man who is pained is a coward” (1104b6-9). In Homer, a desire to prove oneself worthy of one’s martial *aretê* goes beyond mere readiness to fight when forced to by the attacking enemy; eagerness and even a strong yearning (μέμνα) for fighting are also qualities that distinguish the courageous leader. A real bloodlust is felt, for instance, in the words of Achilles, who encourages Agamemnon: “Now let us remember our joy (χάρμης) in warcraft” (*Il.*19.148 and esp. 213-14; cf. also *Il.* 4.304; 5.569).

19 The word θάρσος is a term that was also translated in a different context as

that we should attempt to identify a plausible candidate for the noble goal of courage by a method of exclusion.

— 4. A SELF-REGARDING VIRTUE

The answer to the question that we formulated earlier – What should motivate sacrificial behaviour in war? – may appear to be too self-evident to require much elaboration. Michelle Brady, for one, believes that Aristotle’s silence on this subject of the noble goal can be explained by its obviousness to his immediate audience. According to Brady, it was a universally shared assumption in Aristotle’s Athens and elsewhere in Greece that the soldier’s sacrifice was made for the preservation and well-being of the *polis*, a point that Aristotle simply felt no need to reiterate (Brady 2005, 199). Brady’s suggestion does not lack initial plausibility and may be illustrated by a historical episode. In a famous scene, related by Herodotus, King Leonidas and his 300 Spartans stood at the Thermopylae Pass and observed the massive onset of the Persian army. As he deliberated, he had to consider the options for action. While other Greek troops lost their spirit and preferred to withdraw, Leonidas, according to the historian, remained and cited two main reasons for his decision to stand his ground despite the tremendous odds: “For himself [for King Leonidas], however, it was not good to

leave; if he remained, he would leave a name of great fame (κλέος μέγα), and the prosperity (εὐδαιμονίη) of Sparta would not be blotted out” (*Hist.* 7.220). Besides the traditional Homeric value of great glory (κλέος), *eudaimonia* was apparently among the motivating reasons for King Leonidas’ actions as well. But, to be sure, it was not his own happiness; it was rather the city of Sparta that stood to benefit from his sacrifice on the battlefield.²⁰ *Eudaimonia*, as the final goal of any intentional action, according to Aristotle’s original assumption, is being transferred here from an individual to a collective entity – but it is still perceived by the individual agent (namely, Leonidas) as something extremely valuable, something that is worth fighting and dying for. The happiness of King Leonidas, in other words, is closely connected with the happiness of his native *polis* and is simply inconceivable apart from it.

By choosing a nearly certain death over withdrawal, King Leonidas was acting in accordance with the injunctions of the Spartan poet Tyrtaeus, whose inspiring martial elegies he had surely memorised from early childhood. In one of the fragments, Tyrtaeus seems to explicitly identify the goal of courageous behaviour with communal prosperity:

‘confidence’ – one of the two emotions with respect to which courage was initially defined (*Eth. Nic.* 1107a31-b3). Outside of philosophical parlance, θάρσος is a common synonym for courage itself.

20 A straightforward connection between happiness and courage was affirmed earlier by Pericles, where *freedom* was the natural link between the two: “Happiness (εὐδαιμονία) is the fruit of freedom and freedom [is the fruit] of valour (εὐψυχος)” (*Thuc.* 2.43.4).

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 (12.15-17W).

The pan-Hellenic fame of the legendary King Leonidas and the indisputable authority of Tyrtaeus as the foremost martial elegist of all Greece confirm Brady's suggestion that there was little doubt in the mind of an average Greek about the proper justificatory reason for a soldier's sacrifice in war.

Whereas the goal, suggested by Brady, fits well with popular opinion and even with common sense, it is less than obvious that it fits equally well with the Aristotelian conception of virtue. Citing the good of *others* as the proper goal (and a motivating reason) of virtuous action implies a form of ethical altruism – a belief that the moral value of a character trait (or a behaviour stemming from it) is constituted by the benefits it confers, or is likely to confer, on other members of a moral community. But whether Aristotle's virtue ethics can be interpreted as a form of altruistic consequentialism is a highly controversial issue, which can only be addressed tangentially here. Admittedly, several places in the *Eth. Nic.* seem to claim that virtues contribute not only to individual happiness but to the common good as well, and, moreover, that the common good is, in some sense, preferable to personal *eudaimonia*. Only two such passages from the *Eth. Nic.* will be briefly examined below. The most frequently cited one reads as follows:

Those who busy themselves in an exceptional degree with noble (*καλόν*) actions all men approve and praise; and if all were to strive towards what is noble and strain every nerve to do the noblest deeds, everything would be as it should be for the common weal, and every one would secure for himself the goods that are greatest, since virtue is the greatest of goods (1169a6-11).

Here Aristotle affirms that both the personal good and the common weal would be successfully served if every single citizen strived to develop a virtuous character. The claim appears to be highly plausible as an empirical observation: if all citizens are honest, temperate, friendly, and just, the *polis* itself will surely flourish and prosper. But this factual observation, even if true, can hardly support a normative claim that virtues *should* be practised for the sake of the common weal. Rogers, commenting on this passage, observes that "Aristotle does not say [in these lines] the *καλόν* promotes an individual's good by promoting the common good, but that it leads to both the common good and that of each individual. Since, however, no priority or hierarchy is established among these goods, the passage no more shows that the *καλόν* is bound up with the community's than with one's personal good" (1993, 365). In other words, the tendency of virtuous characters to contribute to a harmonious and prosperous community is merely a (fortunate) side effect of their virtuous behaviour but does not constitute the

essence of the virtues. Virtues would still be intrinsically valuable for an individual even in the absence of such a beneficial social effect.

The second quote comes from the very first page of the *Eth. Nic.*, where Aristotle establishes the priority of the science of politics by virtue of the fact that politics, unlike all other sciences, is concerned with the highest good, the good of the collective:

Politics uses the rest of the sciences, and since, again, it legislates as to what we are to do and what we are to abstain from, the end of this science must include those of the others, so that this end must be the good for man (sic). For even if the end is the same for a single man and for a state, that of the state seems at all events something greater and more complete whether to attain or to preserve; though it is worthwhile to attain the end merely for one man, it is finer and more godlike (κάλλιον δὲ καὶ θεϊότερον) to attain it for a nation or for city-states (1094b6-10).

This idea has a close parallel in the *Politics* (1253a18–29), where Aristotle argues for the priority of the state over an individual, with an obvious correlative inference that the good of the state is more important than the good of a single citizen. But even though the science of ethics is but a branch of the science of politics, their final goals need not be identical. While the final goal of politics is indeed the communal weal, the goal of ethics is individual *eudaimonia*, even

if we grant the Aristotelian assumption that the former is in some sense superior and prior to the latter. As a politician, King Leonidas should be primarily concerned with the well-being of his native Sparta and that justifies and explains his decision to engage the Persians in a hopeless battle; as an individual who (hypothetically) would have accepted the Aristotelian ethical model of the virtues, the motive for his behaviour need not be the same. Moreover, one can act admirably and in a ‘godlike’ manner as a politician, yet still without acting in a truly virtuous manner.²¹

Praiseworthy social consequences of a virtuous behavior are not what makes that behaviour virtuous. We should be careful not to turn Aristotle into an early utilitarian thinker. Rogers rightly warns the readers of the quoted passage not to judge hastily: “To say that benefitting many is more virtuous or καλόν than benefitting one, is not to say that what is virtuous about benefitting many is the fact that one is benefitting many. Analogously, it is more courageous to stand firm in battle than to flee, but standing firm in battle is not what it is to be courageous, but instead a manifestation of courage, which consists, rather, in the

21 Aristotle never mentions the episode with the 300 Spartans, but, despite modern expectations, it is less than obvious that he would consider them as exemplars of true courage. Thus, Pears argues that Aristotle would disqualify them from the list of all courageous warriors on the basis of their apparent excess of confidence (1980, 183). I will suggest below that they probably would have been considered courageous by Aristotle (had he cared to discuss the topic) on other grounds.

proper moderation of one's fears and confidences" (1993, 367).

The form of ethics defended by Aristotle is quite appropriately called 'egoistic *eudaimonism*' – a system of behavioural constraints and the rules for character development where the ultimate beneficiary of one's rationally informed choices (i.e. as judged proper by the power of practical reason – *phronesis*) is the agent himself. There is simply no place in Aristotle's ethics for a sincere and altruistic concern for the well-being of others if it does not contribute in any way to one's own *eudaimonia*.²² If all virtuous actions (including those proceeding from the virtue of friendship) are self-regarding in the long run, it is highly unlikely that the philosopher would make an exception for courage and would advocate a form of utilitarianism when justifying the risk a soldier is exposed to in battle. We must therefore look elsewhere for the noble goal of bravery.

5. THE NOBILITY OF HONOUR

I suggest that we finally consider one other candidate for the noble goal of courage at the end of this article. In his analysis of the various deficient forms of

courage Aristotle mentions the courage of the citizen troops (*πολιτική ἀνδρεία*), that is, of the soldiers drafted into the army from the rank of ordinary citizens in time of war (as opposed to professional mercenaries) (1116a18-20).²³ He makes a further subdivision with regard to the motivation of these drafted warriors. Some of them join the army out of fear of punishment by the authorities, while others volunteer to fight because of considerations of shame and honour (1116a21-34). The latter group exhibits a form of courage that Aristotle obviously ranks above the former, forced variety. He praises the voluntary courage of the citizens as that "most closely resembling [true courage] (*μάλιστα γὰρ ἔοικεν*)" and his explanation of this rather favourable estimate is revealing: "For it [the form of voluntary courage of a citizen soldier] is due to shame and desire for a noble object (*καλοῦ ὄρεξιν*) namely, honour (*τιμὴ*)" (1116a28). This quote is unique as it is the only place where Aristotle explicitly identifies honour with "a noble object". By doing

22 In my estimate, Angier (2018) has convincingly shown that all recent attempts to present Aristotle as endorsing a form of altruistic ethics (e.g. in connection with his discussion of friendship) simply do not square with the available textual evidence. Aristotelian ethics is indeed a form of enlightened ethical egoism, but this should not be seen as being a denigrating remark. As Rogers argues, one of Aristotle's greatest insights was precisely the realisation that "altruism is unnecessary for virtue" (1993, 371).

23 Aristotle begins his description of the five forms of courage with the phrase *ἔστι μὲν οὖν ἡ ἀνδρεία τοιοῦτόν τι, λέγονται δὲ καὶ ἕτεροι κατὰ πέντε τρόπους* (116a15-16), which is meant to demarcate his own conception of this virtue from those other popular views that, apparently, compete for the title of true virtue but fall short for various reasons. This much is uncontroversial. It does not imply, however, that Aristotle rejects every single aspect of the description of those subsequent five forms. For example, as I argue below, Aristotle rejects 'political courage' as being identical with his own understanding, without necessarily rejecting the idea that honour, the intended goal of political courage, is nonetheless a noble object.

this Aristotle is apparently legitimising a desire for honour (and glory, we may assume) as the proper final goal of a courageous action. A fearless soldier motivated by his desire to leave a great name behind for posterity is thereby motivated by something truly noble and is to this extent exhibiting genuine virtue. So, perhaps, we have found what we were searching for – the noble goal of a courageous soldier is the noble object of honour.²⁴ But before resting with this conclusion, we should take a brief look at what Aristotle said about the value of honour in general.

Admittedly, Aristotle's view on the value of honour is somewhat ambivalent. One place where honour is discussed at some length occurs in the context of his search for the true meaning of happiness (εὐδαιμονία) at the beginning of the *Eth. Nic.* After a vulgar life devoted to pleasures was quickly dismissed, honour was presented as a common goal of “cultivated people active in politics,” and the question was raised whether it

would then be proper to identify honour with the final good. Aristotle's answer is rather straightforward: “[Honour] appears to be too superficial to be what we are seeking [i.e. final good], for it seems to depend more on those who honour than on the one honoured, whereas we intuitively believe that the good is something of our own” (1095b23-26). Thus, he continues, we may likewise safely dismiss political life and its main goal, honour, from consideration, and start looking elsewhere for the kind of life which would lead to happiness.²⁵ At the same time, as we have seen in the previous paragraph, on at least one occasion Aristotle seems to endorse honour as a noble, and, therefore, as a morally desirable end of action. Can honour, then, while being καλόν on the philosopher's own admission, ‘ground’ a courageous action as its final and proper goal?

The following conclusion, although tentative, seems to me rather plausible. While rejecting honour as the proper final end of human life in general, Aristotle is not denying its nobility or desirability in the relevant sense of the word. It may well be the case that the true happiness of a fulfilled life is not identical with a life devoted to honour, and yet a courageous agent, as earlier observed, was not expected to pursue his *own* happiness by engaging in life-threatening behaviour during war – for obvious reasons. By recognising honour as noble (καλόν), we are not implying that it is the ultimate self-sufficient final good,

24 It still remains puzzling why the voluntary courage of the citizen troops is not *identified* with genuine virtue by Aristotle but is said to be “most closely resembling” it. What exactly is missing and what else is needed to turn it into virtue? Irwin suggests the following explanation (Irwin prefers to translate καλόν as ‘fine’): “These citizen soldiers aim at honor, which is FINE. But they do not aim at the fine, as the virtuous person does. If they aimed at the fine, they would recognize that the action itself is fine whether or not it receives honor” (1999, 213). The explanation seems far-fetched as it turns Aristotle into a deontologist who recognises the absolute intrinsic moral value of an action, regardless of the consequences that it might bring for an agent.

25 The inadequacy of honour, as the common goal of “the many”, is also discussed at *Eth. Nic.* 1159a22-27.

i.e. we are not challenging Aristotle's evaluation of εὐδαιμονία as being "the noblest (κάλλιστον)" (1099a24-25). But it seems that a goal of action can still be noble, even without fitting the category of the "most final end" or "the noblest end" in the Aristotelian sense. As we have already seen, the qualification καλόν is freely applied by Aristotle to a variety of virtues, objects, and circumstances, and, when the pursuit of personal εὐδαιμονία comes into conflict with the harsh realities of war, there is no reason why a desire for honour and postmortem glory should be denied the characteristic of nobility.²⁶

Finally, Aristotle's brief digression on whether one's state as a happy (or unhappy) person can be affected after death (1100a18-31) may be cited as a supplementary point in favour of the above interpretation – although I do not know how much weight to assign to it. In addition to the "fortune of the descendants" as one of the possible causal factors that are thought (by 'the many') to affect one's happiness, Aristotle specifically mentions "[postmortem] honours and

dishonours (τιμαὶ καὶ ἀτιμίαι)" that may befall the deceased as another potential influence (1100a20). After considering the objection that happiness is an activity, he nonetheless tentatively concludes that "it would be odd if [these factors] did not for *some* time have *some* effect on the happiness [of a deceased person]" (1100a30). However mysterious and inconsistent with the Aristotelian conception of happiness this cryptic remark may otherwise sound, it provides direct textual evidence for describing a fallen but properly glorified warrior as not being devoid of *eudaimonia* after all. King Leonidas and his legendary regiment of 300 Spartans fought valiantly for the sake of the noble goal of "great glory (κλέος μέγα)" and the exceptional postmortem veneration they received must have had some effect (on Aristotle's admission) on their *eudaimonia* as well.

If we do accept honour as the proper noble goal of courage, two final observations should be made. First, the Aristotelian conception of courage will turn out to be more Homeric in nature than he was willing to admit in the text.²⁷ Secondly, for Aristotle the virtue of courage will remain an exclusively aristocratic virtue, the virtue of a select few heroes, as only these characters are capable of being motivated to risk their lives by the prospects of

26 Both honour (τιμή) and glory (κλέος) refer in Homer to the praise and admiration paid to rulers and warriors. While honour is typically enjoyed during the lifetime of a person (and often has monetary value), glory refers to the post-mortem extolment of a hero by later generations. Aristotle focuses on honour (τιμή) in his discussion, but there is no reason to suppose that he takes it to be qualitatively different from glory, as these two terms were used as close synonyms at least as early as the fifth century BCE. Cf. Aristophanes: "Divine Homer, where did he get honour and glory (τιμὴν καὶ κλέος) if not from teaching useful things?" (*Ran.* 1035).

27 Elsewhere I argue that the Homeric model of courage, insofar as it can be reconstructed from the actions of the central heroes of the epics, is fully compatible with the Aristotelian theoretical account, despite Aristotle's explicit protestations (Zavaliy 2017).

postmortem glory alone. The majority of ordinary warriors, such as those who are motivated by money, by fear of punishment, or even by a seemingly altruistic desire to protect their family, will have to rest content with something less than true courage, something that only approximates genuine virtue to various degrees. The obvious

elitist implication of this account, I believe, constitutes the main weakness of the Aristotelian view of courage, but its substantive criticism is only possible in conjunction with a well-developed alternative account of what constitutes true bravery. This daunting project, however, will have to be undertaken at another time.

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