

Courage and Self-Control

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An important question about the nature of courage is whether it is a form of self-control. In this paper I argue that there are different kinds of courage and therefore the question whether courage is a form of self-control

cannot be given a uniform answer. Courage exhibited in all cases may be classified as either spontaneous or deliberative courage. Spontaneous courage is not a form of self-control and usually is called for in emergency situations. It results from long-term moral cultivation, not a mindless impulse. Deliberative courage is usually shown in non-emergency situations. It may or may not involve self-control. In general, other things being equal, courage without exercising self-control is morally preferable. The absence of self-control is a necessary condition for ideal courage but ordinary courage is always accompanied by the exercise of will power.

An important question about the nature of courage is whether it is a form of self-control. Different philosophers in different traditions, such as Aristotle, Mencius, and some of our contemporaries, have answered the question quite differently.¹ Different answers to the question reflect different understandings of the nature of virtue. A study of courage might throw some light on the current discussion of virtue in general. In this paper I argue that there are two kinds of courage and that therefore the question whether courage is a form of self-control cannot be answered in a uniform way.

I

Let us call the first kind of courage "spontaneous courage". Such courage is usually exhibited in situations in which courageous agents face immediate danger and their choice between life and death (at least possible death) must be made within a very short time. For example, when a hero throws himself/herself on a grenade that is about to explode to save many lives, his/her decision is made and action is taken within a second. Similarly, when a courageous person risks his/her own life to save a child who is caught in fire or attacked by a wild animal, he or she must act very quickly in order to save the child. Although spontaneous courage could be exhibited in some non-emergency situations,² the paradigm of such courage is the courage exhibited in emergency situations

In cases of spontaneous courage, courageous agents concentrate their thought on what has to be done and do it without thinking much about the ensuing dangers. They act courageously without feeling fear. In such cases there are no conflicting desires involved and no self-control is needed, since the agents in these cases act spontaneously without much deliberation. Certainly, taking deliberation does not

entail exercising self-control, but acting spontaneously without much deliberation entails acting without the exercise of self-control. Confronted with a situation in which spontaneous courage is called for, an agent either acts courageously without self-control or fails to act courageously. There is no room for acting courageously with self-control.

But, a foolhardy person³ may be also able to face danger without feeling fear. What makes agents who display spontaneous courage different from foolhardy people? First, although foolhardy persons may also face danger without hesitation in some emergency situations, their doing so might be due to their ignorance of the nature of the danger they are facing. Because of this, foolhardy people may often fail to achieve their goals. Unlike foolhardy people, agents who display spontaneous courage know the danger they are getting into although they may not think about their own safety at the moment of action. At the moment of action, such courageous agents perceive what should be done and act on it without much reasoning. Because their concern for the desired goal is much deeper than their concern for their own safety, they temporarily silence their knowledge of the danger to themselves. Their forgetting their own safety at the moment of action is not due to their ignorance but due to their moral achievement. Spontaneously courageous actions are results of a long term moral cultivation. Second, foolhardy people may feel fearless in the face of great danger because they may not value their lives. Being courageous implies giving up something one holds very dear for what is noble.⁴ To love life and hate death is a precondition for being courageous. If someone does not desire to live and therefore faces dangers calmly, he or she is not courageous. It is because of a person's love for life that his or her risking life for what is noble is highly admirable. Although agents who exhibit spontaneous courage may not feel fear death and desire life on occasions on which spontaneous courage is called for, this does not entail that they do not desire to avoid death and preserve life in general. They regard death as a great evil and therefore hate death. But they do not hesitate to give up their lives when the right thing has to be done.

II

Another kind of courage is exhibited in those situations in which courageous actions are taken after deliberation. Let us call this kind of courage "deliberative courage". In cases of deliberative courage, courageous agents have some time to deliberate and anticipate consequences of their actions before they decide what to do. For example, during World War II a young Frenchman might have had

many days to think about whether he should join the Resistance against the Nazis. Certainly, in the case of deliberative courage, what the agent faces may not be confined to an immediate threat to life. Because of this, we say that someone is courageous when he or she undertakes extremely difficult work or a dangerous mission, or stands up for justice, or when he or she is determined to fight against terminal illness. In such cases, what the agent risks losing may be life, respect, reputation, or property, etc. Cases of deliberative courage sometimes do and sometimes do not involve self-control.

There are some cases of deliberative courage in which agents have deliberated carefully but have never been tempted to act cowardly. In these cases, agents may or may not feel fear. However, if they feel fear, their fear does not interfere with their decisions and actions. Socrates is an example of someone who felt no fear in the face of death. He knew well that if he did not escape he would die, but he refused to escape and was never tempted to escape. He faced death calmly and fearlessly. Being courageous always involves facing something fearful. Facing something fearful, especially great injury and death, is always painful. How could it be possible for some courageous people to face great danger, even death, without exercising self-control? According to John McDowell, it is their way of perceiving the situation that makes this possible (McDowell 1979: 334-335). Such courageous people perceive the situation as a situation in which they should endure the danger, and the reason for standing firm against danger is apprehended, not as outweighing any reasons for running away, but as silencing them. Since there are not opposite reasons or desires in such courageous agents, they do not have any internal friction in doing what is courageous.

The emotional motivation of such courageous agents might come from other virtues. Courage, as a moral virtue, always serves certain moral purposes such as justice or benevolence. The purposes which courage serves will provide emotional motivation to courageous agents if courageous agents are emotionally motivated to achieve these purposes. Take for example the relation between courage and benevolence. When a benevolent action requires courage, a benevolent and courageous person will be emotionally motivated to act courageously by his/her affection for others. For instance, when a benevolent and courageous agent risks his/her life to save another life without feeling fear, what he or she perceives is that another life has to be saved. He or she sees saving another life as so important that he or she ignores the danger to himself or herself in saving another life. His or her compassion and affection motivate him/her to risk his/her life for others. Such a heroic action is partly the result of benevolence. It is the agent's benevolence that provides the agent emotional motivation

for the courageous action. For a similar reason, the affection for justice and freedom can also be the emotional motivation for courageous agents' actions. During a war, what greatly inspires soldiers to be courageous is not that "being courageous is glorious or honorable" but that "it is glorious and honorable to fight for a great and just cause." When soldiers become passionate for such a cause, they are ready to act courageously in battle. In such a situation courageous agents believe that there is some thing more valuable than life and there is an evil greater than death, and therefore they can face death with passion—the affection for a just cause and pride in being part of such a cause. Certainly, having other virtues may be a necessary but not a sufficient condition for being courageous without the exercise of self-control. Courage cannot be reduced to other moral excellences (Blum 1988: 199-202).

III

However, there are some cases of deliberative courage in which agents overcome their fear and take a great risk after an internal battle. The courage exhibited by Edmund G. Ross falls into this category. Ross voted "Not guilty" in the frenzied trial to convict or acquit President Andrew Johnson, although doing so could have ended his political career, which he held very dearly. Given the circumstances, it is not surprising that Ross had great fear and struggled with himself in order to do what he believed was right. From his own description, we can see how Ross felt at the moment he spoke out his vote.

I almost literally looked down into my open grave. Friendships, position, fortune, everything that makes life desirable to an ambitious man were about to be swept away by the breath of my mouth, perhaps forever. It is not strange that my answer was carried waveringly over the air and failed to reach the limits of the audience, or that repetition was called for by distant Senators on the opposite side of the Chamber. (Quoted by Kennedy 1956: 139)

Although Ross battled with his fear to such a degree, he was courageous. What made him courageous is not that he did not have to struggle with his fear in the face of great danger and difficulty, but that he stood firm in the face of such danger and difficulty for the sake of what is right.

Clearly, the lack of internal struggle is not a necessary condition for being courageous. We may say that those who face danger or great difficulty for the right reason are courageous, no matter whether they

need to control their fear and battle with their opposing desire. Although courage may involve facing various kinds of difficulties and hardships, great courage always involves facing possibilities of serious physical injury, death, and fatal harm to one's career. As mortal creatures, human beings as a whole have great difficulty in facing such possibilities. Although there are people who face these possibilities calmly without emotional disturbance, most people cannot face them even with emotional disturbance. It is already a moral achievement for a person to face what he/she believes is really fearful with self-control. That is why we not only admire those who face the worst without emotional distress but also admire those who face the worst with emotional distress.

Certainly, we cannot say that the former are always more virtuous than the latter, as Philippa Foot has pointed out. To judge rightly about this, we need to look at what kind of difficulty the agent needs to overcome. If the difficulty comes from circumstances, the struggle the agent has does not discredit the agent's moral worth; if the difficulty comes from character, the struggle the agent has does discredit the agent's moral worth (Foot 1993: 259). Actually, the difficulty could also come from one's moral sense. When one is in a situation in which the requirements from different virtues or duties conflict, one may feel more difficulty in making right decisions than those who do not experience the conflict.⁵ Nevertheless, it would not be wrong to say that, other things being equal, those who do what is virtuous without a struggle with their inclinations are more virtuous than those who do what is virtuous with such struggle. In cases in which courage is required, other things being equal, these who face dangers and hardships without emotional disturbance are more perfect than those who face dangers and hardships with self-control. The former embody ideal courage, an ideal to which we all aspire, while the latter embody ordinary courage, a quality that we are all capable of possessing if we try.⁶

To sum up, this paper argues that there are two kinds of courage: spontaneous courage and deliberative courage. The former is not a form of self-control, while latter may or may not involve self-control. Other things being equal, courage without self-control is morally preferable. Lack of self-control is a necessary condition for ideal courage, but ordinary courage is always accompanied by the exercise of will power.

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NOTES

- 1 For discussions on Aristotle's and Mencius's view on courage, among others, see Jiang 1997 and 2000. For a contemporary view on courage, see Roberts 1993.
- 2 This is pointed out by Terry Horgan during one of our conversations.
- 3 I borrow the term from Aristotle. See Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (NE).
- 4 I agree with Aristotle that courage must be displayed in an action done for the sake of what is noble. See *NE* 1115b10-13
- 5 This is suggested by David Wong.
- 6 I would like to thank Christopher Gauker, Terry Horgan, Mark Pestana, and David Wong for their comments and suggestions on an earlier and longer version of the paper.