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# The Question of Courage

By William Ian Miller



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**C**ourage is first among virtues in heroic epic and in cultures of honor. Men cared to be known for their courage. It not only took courage to fight well, but the issue often being fought over was who had more of it. Courage was competitive. Men were ranked according to the degree of courage they possessed. Arguments arose as to what counted as truly courageous, what the perfect form of the virtue was, and what were lesser though still worthy semblances of it. Not only philosophers theorized about courage: warriors, politicians and spectators did so as well. The stakes were high, and so there emerged a politics of courage, a jockeying to define your performances as worthier than your competitor's.

Thus we have Pericles of Athens arguing—and trying to convince his fellow citizens—that

Athenian courage is superior to Spartan courage. His claim is that courage came naturally to Athenians, while Spartans had to be force-fed theirs by laborious, state-imposed training: “The prize for courage,” he says, “will surely be awarded most justly to those who best know the difference between hardship and pleasure and still are never tempted to shrink from danger.” Wishful thinking? Rigging the criteria of the prize for courage? Or just trying to buck up the citizenry for the war about to be embarked upon?

## The Power of Shame

Move now to Sparta some 30 years earlier. One Spartan, Aristodemus by name, was denied the first prize for courage at the Battle of Plataea in 479 BCE, though he had rushed forward in fury and routed a large force of Persians. The prize was instead given to Posidonius, a man who had fought bravely but held his place in the phalanx line. Aristodemus's courage was judged inferior because he wanted to die in battle to redeem honor he had lost at Thermopylae, whereas Posidonius had fought bravely without any wish to die. Posidonius knew something of a good life. He wanted to come away alive if he could, though he would die if he must.

Sounds like a perfectly reasonable way to rank the two performances, but Herodotus, to whom we owe the story, smells a fish; in his view Aristodemus was easily the most courageous fighter that day. The Spartans simply were not going to give a prize to Aristodemus, because he was Aristodemus and his deeds, no matter how effective and how glorious, did not count. Why?

A year earlier, Aristodemus had been one of Leonidas's 300 at Thermopylae, but Leonidas had excused him along with another man, Eurytus, for having severe eye infections. The two nearly blind men retired to a place several miles to the rear. Word of the battle came to them: Eurytus ordered his slave to lead him back to the battlefield to rejoin his comrades to die with them, while Aristodemus took advantage of his excuse to stay away. Eurytus was Aristodemus's bad luck, for they made a sorry contrast. Aristodemus returned to Sparta, to unrelenting shame and loathing.

## Contrasting Courage

The politics of courage is with us today. People still care intensely about courage, and

we're still trying to stack the deck in our own favor. Determining who has courage, what actions count, who gets the prize, is disputed now no less than in the *Iliad*. Look whom we call heroes and claim are courageous. In our day, we hear people praised for their courage for getting in an elevator if claustrophobic, getting on an airplane if stricken with fears of flying, investing in a Silicon Valley start-up, or, if a politician, for taking a position that might cause his approval rating to drop for a few weeks, while a Tibetan who incinerates himself for a cause he conceives much greater than himself is deemed fanatic or an example of the cheapness of life "over there," as was the case when the average Japanese soldier in World War II did deeds for which Americans won Medals of Honor, or Brits Victoria Crosses.

Some might lament the debasing of courage's coin, for it is surely debased, but others might rejoice that the virtue has been rescued from danger and death, softened and broadened, making it more easily available to all by eliminating risk to life and limb, while still employing martial metaphors to describe takeovers and acquisitions, the so-called entrepreneurial risk. And not just undertaking monetary risks, but courage is ascribed to resisting the temptation of pleasure too: the courage to resist lust or gluttony. But it was ever thus. Theories of courage cannot escape tendentiousness.

Indeed, Plato claims that philosophers, not warriors, are the purest exemplars of courage. The former, he says, do not fear death because they know life is really something best gotten over with, while the latter face death because of a greater fear of shame. He tries to preempt criticism of this preposterous claim by putting it in Socrates' mouth as he awaits death. No one doubted Socrates' courage. He was rather vain about it himself and, as a younger man, had won quite a reputation as a fearless soldier.

Needless to say, Plato's view is hardly disinterested; one detects the influence of the philosophers' lobby. Some of the braver



A visitor contemplates images of the Holocaust in an exhibition dedicated to the Nazi death camps at the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial's museum in Jerusalem, Israel

people I have met do not happen to be in humanities departments. A good portion of the wondrousness of Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain's stand at Little Round Top at Gettysburg in the American Civil War was that he managed it even though he was a classics professor.

### Fortitude vs. Aggression

The broad view of courage, the view that would make resisting pleasure a matter of courage, is hardly the dominant view, nor is it a recent invention of the American

only courageous against pain or fear, but mighty to contend against desires and pleasures." Plato thus may well be the first to grant courage to a recovering addict or to the person who says no to a tempting adulterous affair, thus emptying courage of precisely what makes it the theme of the greatest stories ever told.

The stricter martial view gets its classic formulation in Aristotle, who makes courage a matter of risking life and limb in war for one's country, kin or people. The martial view is easily the dominant

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self-esteem and self-help movements. Plato articulates it in an early dialogue. Socrates asks Laches, a well-known general, to define courage, and when Laches comes up with a quite reasonable definition from combat—"remaining at one's post and not running away"—Socrates presses him to expand it to include those "who are not

view, informing heroic literature and songs of triumph from Judea to the Germanic North all the way out to Iceland. Indeed, it is nearly a universal view of courage, and the broad view must be understood as a reaction to it, an attempt to steal a bit of martial courage's luster, democratize it, or in a less friendly way of putting it, dumbing

it down (so as to make it more readily available to the intellectually inclined).

Yet even within the confines of the narrower battle-oriented view of courage, two basic conceptions warred against each other as to which best represented the purest form. In a nutshell: was courage best exemplified by offense, marching into the teeth of danger, the charge; or was it best exemplified by defense, by refusal to quit one's post, by not backing down, by patient suffering over time? Later, this dispute was captured by



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warring ideologies: heroic aggressive honor vs. Christian and Stoic fortitude. (I apologize that my account is a Western one; were I to add in the East it would exceed my comfortable knowledge base.) The contrasts are not only substantive but also stylistic. Offense tended to be noisier, favoring intense expenditures of energy in short bursts with long, lazy intervals in between: gender it male. Defense required stolidity, constancy and, above all, endurance: call it feminine if you are so inclined. And the historical record is filled with examples of those who were courage itself on defense, but of rather mediocre virtue on offense, and vice versa.

And then the ambiguous cases, offense or defense is not clear, of self-immolating Buddhist monks who brought down the Diem regime, for whom taking it was a form of dishing it out.

### The Courage of Defense

The courage of offense was and remained, with some notable exceptions, the preserve of men and, by widespread ideology across a multitude of cultures, upper-class men. The courage of defense, by obvious necessity and by definition, was no less at home on the battlefield than the courage of offense. But defensive courage had within it seeds of expansion, for it was called to do service in a multitude of miserable and horrific conditions, not just on the battlefield.

Look how the courage of defense begins to colonize other domains. The ability to take it, not to dish it out, becomes the prize-winning form of courage, resulting in an express ticket to heaven when it came in the form of martyrdom, specifically Christian martyrdom. The hagiographical sources devoted to martyrdom put courage, as much as faith, squarely in issue, and rather make the former more to be marveled at than the latter. And women were no less eligible than men, rather more so in fact, for some of the most stunningly heroic of martyrs were women: Saints Blandina in the second century and Perpetua in the third. They couldn't be broken morally, even though every part of their bodies had been broken. But nonetheless, the passivity of being racked, flayed, fed to beasts in these saints' lives was reconceptualized as offensive action by the martyrs. The martyr was depicted as a gladiator, a fighter, wrestling with the devil, delivering blows as she lay bound, roasted and spitted. Martyrdom and the courage of defense borrowed its laudatory metaphors and imagery from offense; it was parasitical on aggressive courage for all its diction, for its songs of glory.

In the Germanic North, it took quite a dose of disbelief to accept a God who let himself be crucified, so the crucifixion was recast as a battle against the cross itself and the battle was extended to the next day; by having Christ's descent into hell look ever more like a military campaign against Satan, passion became action. Offense retained its conceptual allure even when the action was turning one's cheek to get slapped again, for as Paul recognized in his reformulation of the Sermon on the Mount's message, forgiveness and passivity were offensive weapons. In Paul's words: it was like pouring hot coals on the heads of your enemies. Passivity and forgiveness in the Stoic and Christian scheme were just moves in the honor game of

challenge and riposte, and again it was courage and toughness that was being contested. You think that slap on the face hurt? Here, take another shot, you cannot touch me.

As war became more mechanized, the virtues needed to endure, the courage of defense, martyr-like fortitude, began as a practical matter to dominate the battlefield itself, despite the charge never losing its primal allure. The image to keep in mind is the trenches of the Great War, where for all the extraordinary courage it took to go over the trench top, months could go by before one had to charge. And in the meantime, one had to suffer unrelenting mud, cold, filth, constant shelling, gas, the ubiquitous corpses and the stench of their rot, and the

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rats who ate them, the flies that hatched maggots in them, and the pain and itch of the lice and your own rotting trench feet. Take away the gas and shelling and some of the corpses and you have the endurance required of Roman legions doing duty on the Rhine, who mutinied on occasion because of the sheer misery of the cold and wet and a term of service that never seemed to end. By World War II, Eisenhower could formulate “real heroism” as “the uncomplaining acceptance of unendurable conditions.”

The death camp and Gulag of the 20th century, the horrors of evil governments, succeed in making survival itself its own kind of courage, seeking to avoid death at all costs, thus turning traditional courage and cowardice on their heads. Tales of escape and corresponding tales of rescue, life-saving rather than death-dealing or death-enduring, begin to elicit their share of courage prizes: Victoria Crosses, Pour le Mérites and Medals of Honor become almost as likely to be won by medics and stretcher bearers as by the man who storms the machine-gun nest.

## Moral Courage

My politics of courage keeps mostly confined to the narrower Aristotelian view of facing real danger to life and limb, the courage demanded by war, feud and mean streets. So I will expand my account to raise the question of moral courage.

Moral courage—the concept, that is—as distinguished from plain old courage, is a rather recent development; the term does not appear in English until the 19th century. It took a largely pacified society for people to think to distinguish stand-up-in-meeting kind of courage—the courage of risking ridicule, humiliation, loss of employment or social ostracism for speaking out against injustice, or of defying immoral or illegal orders from a

superior—from plain old courage. Before then, to stand up against the judges trying to burn your neighbor as a witch or your cousin as a heretic could get you burned as one too. Your life was on the line. The young girl from the projects who testifies against the drug dealer whom she saw kill his girlfriend is showing plain old courage; her life unfortunately is very much on the line, and likely to be very short because of her testimony. We need no recourse to moral courage to find her worthy of admiration.

But moral courage bears one telling requisite that in some domains distinguishes it from physical courage. Moral courage is lonely courage. Physical courage is no less courageous for having the support of comrades on the left and right in a shield wall, and when it must be carried out alone, it is all the more admirable. But moral courage loses no small part of its virtue when it is backed by a substantial support group. It takes little courage, moral or otherwise, for instance, to speak out against war or against Israel’s policies in a university setting in the Western world.



A stained glass window commemorating the martyrdom of Saint Blandina

Moral courage, though, cannot dispense with physical courage. Imagine the person who quite alone speaks out against an injustice in a meeting hostile to the moral and just position he voices, but who retracts his statement as soon as someone threatens to punch him once the meeting breaks up. Moral courage, to be entitled to its morals, or to its courage, cannot let itself be squelched by a threatening glance, or even by a good beating. Recall that girl testifying against the drug dealer, who was shaking like a leaf on the stand. No coward she. ❖