

# THE VIRTUE OF COURAGE



This Chapter is based upon the interpretation, concepts and approaches set out in Curzer, H.J. (2012) *Aristotle and the Virtues*, pp. 19-64 (OUP)

## SECTION 1: VIRTUE KNOWLEDGE

### 1. What can those who have this virtue do particularly well?

Those who are courageous can cope with things that threaten to harm or destroy them. In the face of such threats, they show both firmness of position and boldness of spirit. Courageous people are unduly moved by dangers. They are neither overcome by such dangers, nor do they overestimate their abilities in facing them. Courageous people have trained their emotions so that the levels of fear and confidence that they feel in situations fall into line with what reason suggests they should feel. They are neither paralysed by inaction, nor reckless with ill-judged action. They fear real dangers in appropriate ways, and are confident about tackling such dangers in appropriate ways.

Those with this virtue feel fear and confidence rightly, and act rightly in situations where they sense risk or impending harm; their actions are for the purpose of achieving a worthwhile good. The courageous person fears and is confident about the right things, in the right way, to the right extent and in the right situations.

#### Task 1

- \* Which emotions does the virtue of courage govern?
- \* Can courageous people feel fear and confidence? How might their fear and confidence differ from those who are less developed in the virtue of courage?

### 2. What are the benefits of acting out this virtue?

- \* **It will have a positive impact on us:** acting courageously is better than acting with cowardice or with bravado and rashness. It is good for us to act courageously, because that's the sort of thing that emotional-rational creatures (us) should do. It is an intrinsically human quality.
- \* **It will have a positive impact on the situation we are in:** acting courageously will help us to accomplish fine, noble and worthwhile goals, despite the risk of harm. If we act with cowardice, or rashness, we may fail to have the positive impact on the situation that is morally called for.
- \* **Without the virtue of courage in situations that call for them:** failing to act courageously when called to, or more precisely, acting in a cowardly or with rashness instead, may mean that we suffer harms that we might otherwise not have suffered, had we been courageous. Without courage to check them, the ignorant, or the wicked will prosper!

#### Task 2

Think of a time when you acted with courage.

Describe the impact your courageous act had on:

- \* You (did it build your confidence, for example, or challenge your fears?)
- \* The situation you were in (what good, if any, came of your courageous act?)
- \* What psychological or physical harm might you have suffered had you not acted courageously?



### 3. When might I have to practise this virtue?

- \* Practise this virtue in situations that call for courage. Consider these points:
  - \* Will the virtue of courage be able to do something about this situation?
  - \* Will it achieve something worthwhile?
  - \* What do I stand to lose through showing courage?
- \* What do I stand to lose through not being courageous?

#### Task 3

Look at when you identified yourself as having acted courageously in #Task 2 above. Explain how your courageous act met the criteria set out above.

### 4. Which emotions does this virtue govern?

#### When I experience the emotion defined as 'fear'

When I experience and identify the emotion or feeling called 'fear'. Signs of fear include:

- \* silent trembling
- \* going pale
- \* cold, as the body's surface temperature is reduced
- \* warmth in the lower digestive tract as the internal heat of that part of the body rises – we need to go to the toilet!
- \* fluttering, or pounding heart
- \* quavering voice, trembling lip, chattering teeth
- \* sweaty palms

Fear is a useful emotion because it alerts us to danger and stimulates us to look for options to resist or escape the danger. This emotion forces us to evaluate whether the principle is really worth suffering harm for. The important point, though, is to overcome having too much, or too little fear when we should be acting rightly.

#### Points to consider when identifying fear:

- \* What are the bad things that I fear happening to me by acting, or not acting in this situation? What are the risks to my person?
- \* What are the grounds of my fears? Should I be (this) afraid?

#### Task 4

Identify a situation in which you have experienced the emotion of 'fear'. Look at the signs above. Describe it. How afraid were you?

#### When I experience the emotion defined as 'over-confidence'

When I experience and identify the emotion or feeling called 'confidence'. 'Confidence' means to have faith in oneself, or in another. It is a useful emotion because it **en-courages** us to act for worthwhile goals – it gives us heart, and energises us. Fear erodes confidence, and confidence overcomes fear.

Emotional signs of 'confidence' include:

- \* Feeling 'on the front foot', or bold and positive;
- \* Ready for the challenge;

But confidence needs restraining, or basing on a sure and sound footing. Too much confidence, or over-confidence can lead to rashness, recklessness, and arrogance. It can make us feel invincible without good reason. So, we need to ask ourselves, in whom, or upon what have we placed our confidence, and on what grounds we have placed our confidence in that person, people, idea, or thing? Confidence is about the belief that something worthwhile can be achieved.

#### Points to consider on identifying confidence:

- \* What do I believe I can achieve? Will my actions make a difference to this situation?
- \* Can I be confident in my own abilities to avoid harm and/or to achieve some worthwhile good (either by how I accept the harm or independent of it)?
- \* What does over-confidence look like in a person?





## Task 5

Identify and describe a situation in which you experienced the emotion of 'confidence'. What did it feel like 'to be confident'? What was your confidence based upon?

You may find the following a useful means to defining emotions connected to the virtue of courage.

These are direct quotations from the very excellent Emotions: *An Essay in Aid of Moral Psychology*, Robert C. Roberts, 2003, CUP:

### FEAR:

**X presents a specific aversive possibility**,  
e.g. dangers, or harms to my personal, physical, social, psychological or spiritual integrity

**Of a [significant] degree of probability**, viz, it may happen; it is probable.

**May X or its aversive consequences be avoided**,  
i.e. how do I prevent what I fear from happening?

### ANXIETY, FRIGHT, DREAD, TERROR, PANIC, HORROR, SPOOK

**Anxiety:** X vaguely presents an aversive possibility of some degree of probability; may X or its aversive consequences, whatever they may be, be avoided.  
*I have a vague apprehension of losing money, status or respect.*

**Fright:** X presents an immediate and definite aversive possibility of a high degree of probability; may X or its aversive consequences be avoided right away.  
*My senses tell me that I am in danger.*

**Dread:** X is an unavoidable aversive future eventuality; if only X or its aversive consequences could be avoided! *The aversive object is inevitably approaching, e.g. news that I know will be bad (for example, next week's test).*

**Terror:** X vividly presents an extremely aversive possibility of a very high degree of probability; and I don't know what to do. *Paralysing.*

**Panic:** X vividly presents an extremely aversive possibility of a very high degree of probability; let me do something, just anything.

**Horror:** X is strongly aversive because it is grotesquely abnormal; may I escape from X or may X be restored to normalcy. *How sensitive am I to what is normal?*

**Spook:** By its sinister mysteriousness, X vaguely presents an aversive possibility of some degree of probability; may X or its aversive consequences, whatever they may be, be avoided.



## SECTION 2: VIRTUE REASONING

### 1. What are my basic dispositions and inclinations in the light of this virtue?

How would you define your basic dispositions and inclinations in the light of fear and confidence?

- \* Do you feel you tend more towards being overcome by fears in situations that call for courage to achieve something worthwhile?
- \* Do you feel you tend more towards being overconfident in situations that call for courage to achieve something worthwhile?

#### Task 1

- \* Divide into two groups: those who tend more towards experiencing fear in different situations, and those who tend more towards over-confidence (or 'cockiness'!).
- \* Discuss the situations in which you encounter those emotions.
- \* Now, match up in pairs: 1 from the 'Fear Group', and 1 from the 'Over-Confidence Group'. As a pair, come up with 1 practice that can help us to overcome fear, and 1 practice that can help us to overcome over-confidence.

#### N.B. According to Aristotle:

- \* If you tend more towards fear, when faced with the need to be more courageous, then think through ways you can show and practise greater confidence.
- \* If you tend more towards confidence, when faced with situations that call for greater courage, then think through ways you can show greater respect for the real dangers and issues involved in the situation.

#### Here is some advice from Aristotle on how to educate ourselves to grow in virtue:

- \* Hence he who aims at the intermediate must first depart from what is the more contrary to it... But we

*must consider the things towards which we ourselves also are easily carried away; for some of us tend to one thing, some to another; and this will be recognizable from the pleasure and pain we feel. We must drag ourselves away to the contrary extreme; for we shall get into the intermediate state by drawing away from error, as people do in straightening sticks that are bent (1109a30-b7).*

#### Task 2

Pool together all the suggestions that the class made in pairs about how to act in a way that overcomes our fears, and how to act in a way that can restrain our over-confidence. Put your suggestions in the appropriate category below. Display it in your workbooks, or classroom.

- \* **Problem:** I am afraid of too many things;

**Aristotle advises that:** *I need convincing and training that certain objects are not really dangerous.*

- \* **Problem:** I am too afraid of failure;

**Aristotle advises that:** *I need convincing and training that certain outcomes are really not so bad.*

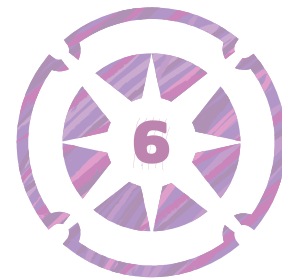
- \* **Problem:** I have too high a level of self-confidence

**Aristotle advises that:** *I need convincing and training that certain objects need to be treated with greater caution, and that certain outcomes are calling me to rethink my approach.*

- \* **Problem:** I have too high a fear threshold;

**Aristotle advises that:** *I need to think through ways of building my confidence through practising the very things of which I am afraid.*





## 2. Guidelines to handling our fears and over-confidence to act courageously

Aristotle highlights ways in which we can go wrong with respect to the virtue of courage, letting our fears or over-confidence get the better of our actions:

*Of the faults that are committed one consists in fearing what one should not, another in fearing as we should not, another consists in fearing when we should not, and so on; and so too with respect to the things that inspire confidence. The man, then, who faces and who fears the right things and with the right aim, and in the right way and at the right time, and who feels confidence under the corresponding conditions, is brave.*

*Aristotle, (1115b15-19) NE III.7*

Here are some guidelines on how to think through situations that you identify as triggering fear or confidence, and thus may be a call for you to practise acting more courageously. They should help you to think through whether you are feeling fear and confidence rightly:

### Fear

- \* Who, or what am I afraid of? Is it the right thing to be afraid of, or the wrong thing? What kind of damage, harm, or injury can it really do to me?
- \* What is the strength of my fear for this object or situation? Am I too afraid of it – or, not afraid enough?
- \* What is the situation that is making me afraid?

## 3. Courageous Role Models?

### Task 4

Get into groups of 3.

**Person 1** needs to select an example from literature or life who they think showed particular cowardice. Use the prompts in the 'underdoing it' section to explain how and why they showed excessive cowardice.

**Person 2** needs to select an example from literature or life who they think showed particular courage. Use

- \* Of whom am I afraid, and why?
- \* For how long should I really be afraid of this?
- \* Do I fear the right things, the right amount of things, in the right way and to the right amount?

### Confidence

- \* What am I confident about doing? What are the harms that confidence can avoid, or the good that being confident might achieve?
- \* What is the strength of my confidence? Is it too little, or too much?
- \* What are the grounds for my confidence and how reasonable and well-founded are they?
- \* What is the occasion for my confidence, and why?
- \* For how long should I have confidence?

### Task 3

Look back at the situations in which you feel you were paralysed with too much fear, or reckless, as a result of too much confidence. Use the criteria above to weigh up whether you feeling fear and over-confidence about the right things, to the right strength, for the right reasons, on the right occasions, and for the right length of time.

the prompts in the 'Golden Mean' column to explain why they showed such courage.

**Person 3** needs to select an example from literature or life who they think was particularly over-confident, rash, or cocky. Use the prompts in the 'Overdoing It' section to explain how and why they 'overcooked' the virtue of courage!

Present your answers as a group, and discuss and evaluate them. Ideally, all 3 people would have been involved in the same scenario.





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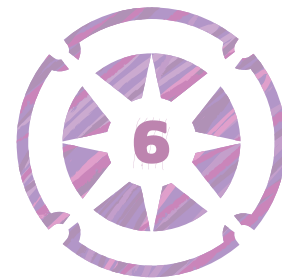
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<b>UNDERDOING IT</b>	<b>VIRTUE: THE GOLDEN MEAN</b>	<b>OVERDOING IT</b>
The following act or omission would have shown cowardice:	The following act or omission would show courage:	The following act or omission would have shown rashness:
It shows excessive fear because...	It is striving to avoid harm by:	It shows excessive confidence because...
It shows insufficient confidence because...	It is overcoming fear by:	It shows insufficient fear and respect for the true dangers of the situation...
It shows a shirking of courageous acts by...	It is reducing risks of overconfidence and harm by:	It displays hallmarks of ostentation, or bragging, which may lead to significant harm and damage for the individual acting.

**Further Points to Consider**

- \* Were your role models acting rightly in situations where there is a risk of some bodily or psychological harm? And, was there a reasonable possibility of avoiding that harm? Was there a possibility of achieving something worthwhile and good?
- \* Was it really worth taking the risk of physical harm, or damage to confidence, for this particular goal?
- \* Did the potential gains and the probability of achieving them outweigh the potential losses and the probability of not avoiding them?
- \* What were the potential gains of acting?
- \* What were the probable gains?
- \* What were the potential losses?
- \* What were the probable losses?





## 4. Scenarios Calling for Courage

### Task 5

#### Thinking Back:

Talk through a situation that called for you to act courageously. How did you handle it? Here are some suggestions:

- \* Have you resisted peer pressure?
- \* Have you spoken out about something that mattered, running against the tide of opinion?
- \* Have you acted for something worthwhile that could have caused you physical harm?

#### Thinking Forward:

Identify or define a situation that is calling you to act more courageously. Remember, it must be a situation that triggers either 'fear' in you, or 'confidence'.

Use the **Virtue Reasoning** strategies set out above to work out what a courageous action will look like for you, in your scenario, and what a cowardly or rash one would look like.

Here's the Good Sense Checklist to help.

#### A GOOD SENSE CHECKLIST

**I understand the moral point and purpose called for by the activity – I know which virtues the situation, or activity is calling me to practise and promote.**

**I understand how to balance out, or prioritise the clashing virtues.**

**I understand how to apply the guidelines I have learnt from experience and reflection.**

**I understand how my actions will be perceived by others.**

**I can specify what my emotions are alerting me to do.**

**I know how to practise the appropriate virtues to express the moral point of this activity.**

