

Geoffrey Scarre

On Courage.

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The people and actions we praise as courageous vary. In part, this is because the fears and dangers which people can face and overcome are themselves diverse. However, the multiplicity within courage is also due to the fact that we no longer limit courage to the ‘manliness’ of the warrior or soldier. We recognize that it can be courageous to refuse to fight and that ‘fighting’ can take forms other than physical confrontation and violence. Some of our highest exemplars of courage, such as Martin Luther King, Jr., are warriors of a quite different sort than the Spartans of yore. We honor both what Tim O’Brien called ‘the courage of the charge’ (in his memoir *If I Die in a Combat Zone*) but also the courage of those who endure great adversity, maintaining their dignity in seemingly hopeless circumstances.

In *On Courage*, Geoffrey Scarre sets out to recognize and appreciate the various manifestations of courage, resisting univocal and over-intellectualized accounts of the virtue while at the same time attempting to understand the distinctive value of courage, and why it remains a necessary, core virtue for all people. He guards against the characterization of courage as a ‘macho vice’ of the past (62ff) as well as conceptions of courage, such as Aristotle’s, that he sees as ‘needlessly restrictive’ (3). The resulting book is both a highly approachable overview of Western thought about courage and a strong contribution to several of the particular philosophical debates about the moral and psychological scope of courage and its relation to other virtues.

In the opening chapter, Scarre contrasts the fearlessness of Wagner’s Siegfried with John Wayne’s view that, ‘Courage is being scared to death—but saddling up anyway’ (18). Because Siegfried appears to be constitutionally fearless—having no grasp of the dangers and risks he confronts—Scarre agrees that it would seem odd to regard him as courageous. The person who is incapable of experiencing fear has nothing to overcome. Furthermore, as Scarre puts it, ‘Courage belongs only to those who believe they have something to lose, and care about losing it’ (21).

Although Scarre acknowledges the distinction between a person who performs a courageous act as a result of continence—who struggles greatly to overcome his or her fears—and the person who acts courageously as a matter of second nature, Scarre rejects the Aristotelian position that only the latter sort of person is truly courageous as ‘narrow and idealized’ (8). He claims that ‘(m)ost contemporary speakers of English would feel little conceptual strain’ in characterizing even the prior type of character above as courageous (9). He finds the restrictiveness of Aristotle’s position to be ‘ungenerous, failing to acknowledge adequately the moral worth of the struggle that most human beings have to mount against their own myriad weaknesses of character’ (9). Scarre

allows, however, that even where a person's courage manifests in part as an inner struggle against her own fears, 'it is essential that the source of her actions should lie within her,' and that this requirement 'excludes all such external aids such as drugs, surgery or manipulative mind control' (39). Thus, the 'liquid courage' of those who find boldness and daring in the bottom of a bottle of whiskey is not genuine courage, even if such external means of fear control are not in every case blameworthy (41).

Scarre contrasts two possible accounts of the psychology of courage. On the one hand, courage might be seen as a matter of 'fixing the will', or as Lady Macbeth puts it, 'screw(ing) your courage to the sticking place' (48). (This is not to say that Lady Macbeth stuck her own courage into the right place!) Here, courage is understood (in terms he borrows from David Velleman) as a matter of throwing one's weight behind the reasons for action that one has endorsed, even if other reasons exist, such as the fearfulness of the situation, which might be phenomenologically stronger. This rationalist conception of courage regards the courageous person as one who acts on what he thinks his best reasons are. On the other hand, courageous action could be seen as a matter of 'acting with spirit', in which one's 'irascible' passions (in Aquinas' terms) overwhelm the fears that would prevent one from pursuing a noble and courageous course of action, and spur one on in the face of danger and adversity. Scarre argues that both accounts capture cases we would describe as involving courage (and both accounts have their difficulties), and he does not think it necessary to choose between them. The person who 'screw(s) his courage to the sticking place' through an act of will, as well as the person whose passions enable him to confront and overcome danger, are both courageous, even if the processes which enabled courageous action differ. While one may be praised for her struggle (to fix her will on the courageous course of action), the other may be praised for his or her noble passions. Thus, 'courage is not only heterogeneous in its forms and instances, but also in its grounds of praise' (56).

Responding to concerns that Amélie Oksenberg Rorty has raised about the imperialistic tendencies of courage—its tendency to seek out opportunities to prove itself, potentially creating trouble where it didn't previously exist, and its resistance to conciliatory virtues such as tolerance and patience—Scarre argues that courage can be reconciled with virtues such as patience (68-75, 93-7). Indeed, because one significant form of courage, fortitude, involves enduring unavoidable adversity and great suffering without losing one's head or nerve, there is significant overlap between courage (in the form of fortitude) and patience (93-7). At the same time, Scarre argues against too close an identification of fortitude with patience, a conception he links to Stoicism (96-103). On his view, fortitude is 'the virtue of doing our duty even in taxing circumstances', whereas patience involves maintaining inner calm in the face of disturbance and frustration. Scarre claims that '[p]reaching fortitude should therefore never be mistaken for enjoining passive submission of evils' (96). However, Scarre may be mistaken in suggesting that patience, properly understood and cultivated, is merely passive by contrast. Still, his discussion raises interesting questions about the relationships between these virtues, and indicates areas where further philosophical investigation would be worthwhile.

Scarre takes a relativized view of the relationship between courage and goodness. A person acts with courage when his motives are ones that he recognizes as worthy ones. On this view, people whose motives we view as morally bad (or just foolish) may still be seen as courageous, and Scarre claims that ordinary use of the term generally favors this approach. For Scarre, there is a difference between praising a person's courage and praising his or her motives. Courage may be seen as praiseworthy in abstraction from the ends it serves (117). The distinctive praiseworthiness of courage is that it enables a person to persevere in his or her aims, despite danger and adversity. Scarre recognizes that it is 'perennially tempting' to deny courage to those whose values we condemn, but argues that it is more 'truthful, gracious, and tolerant' to recognize that courage can exist outside the boundaries of our own particular moral ideals and values (134). Those who disagree with Scarre and want to insist on more restrictive boundaries will want to consider whether Scarre has given sufficient attention to the distinction that can be drawn between courage and rashness, and whether Scarre's argument against (even a modest version of) the unity of the virtues thesis (124-8) is successful. While affirming that courage itself is a praiseworthy characteristic, Scarre recognizes that, '(courage) is at its best where it is summoned to serve morally fine ends for their own sake' (136).

In addition to the forms courage may take in facing political and moral adversaries, Scarre concludes his study by considering other domains in which courage is necessary. Given the secularizing tendencies of modern societies, Scarre suggests that courage will be needed by many in order to face the loss of confidence in traditional accounts of the nature and purpose of life, and in order to avoid being paralyzed by doubt and uncertainty. As he notes, when Yeats claimed that 'the best lack all conviction' in his poem 'The Second Coming', he was certainly not praising 'the best'. People who lack all conviction are complacent pushovers. Thus, 'we need the courage to pursue causes even though we know they may turn out to be wrong,' while at the same time having the courage to resist 'the attractions of dogmatism and actively expose our ideas to external challenges' and 'to live with difference, peaceably' (155-6).

Scarre is undoubtedly right that courage is a complex virtue that resists simple definition and that its necessity is not peculiar to any particular age, role, or area of life. Near the end of *On Courage*, Scarre remarks that '[n]ow, as ever, we need courage because there is so much that can go wrong for us' (157). This is true, but a bit underwhelming as a call to courage. While the vulnerability of human life is what makes courage essential, it is also worth recalling that the role it plays in enabling people to achieve great things in the face of adversity is what makes courage sublime.

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