The Emotions of Courage

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First, in feelings of fear and confidence the mean is bravery (andreia). The excessively fearless person is nameless . . . while the one who is excessively confident is rash; the one who is excessively afraid and deficient in confidence is cowardly.

—Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics

Why do we fail at being courageous? On the one hand, we can be overcome by fear. The fear of dying can overwhelm the noblest intentions. On the other hand, we may also be cowardly because of lack of confidence either in ourselves or in the goal of the action. In such cases, the level of fear may not be overwhelming but, because of the way we perceive ourselves or the worthiness of what we are doing, the fear is sufficient to turn us away from the act. The purpose of this paper is to explore in some detail the independent roles played by fear and confidence in courage and its corresponding vices, particularly cowardice. In addition to Aristotle’s examples of physical courage, I will use an example throughout the paper of what might be called psychological courage: an alcoholic’s struggle to overcome addiction to drink.

Now Aristotle clearly did not have alcoholics in mind in his discussion of courage, so it is worth spelling out in more detail why this example fits into an analysis of the emotions of courage. Aristotle himself would consider alcoholism a vice of intemperance. But courage and cowardice are deeply intertwined with the addiction. Courage enters the picture when the alcoholic tries to change. The future without the habit is unknown and frightening. The alcoholic fears being stigmatized by society, and the pain involved in breaking the habit can be substantial. Since a person becomes dependent on the drug, one of the greatest fears is loss of “self” if one acts to defeat the addiction. Courage involves deliberate choice in the face of painful or fearful circumstances for the sake of a worthy goal. The recovering alcoholic makes a momentous choice (or, perhaps better, series of choices) in both painful and fearful circumstances toward what Aristotle would consider a noble goal indeed: the integrity and development of the psyche. The relationship of fear and confidence in courage is critical in determining the success or failure of the recovering alcoholic just as it was for the success or failure of Aristotle’s soldier.

Aristotle implies that fear and the positive emotion of confidence may be mutually exclusive. If I fear going into battle to the point of running away, my cowardice seems directly related to a lack of confidence. If an alcoholic is terrified of facing life without a drink, that fear seems intrinsically tied to
lack of confidence in his abilities. Aristotle implies this close connection between fear and confidence several times in his more detailed discussion of courage. “Hence whoever stands firm against the right things and fears the right things, for the right end, in the right way, at the right time, and is correspondingly confident, is the brave person. . . .” And “[t]he person who is excessively afraid is the coward. . . . Though indeed he is also deficient in confidence, it is more his excessive pain that distinguishes him.” But what exactly is the relationship between these two feelings? Are fear and confidence opposite sides of the same emotion? Or could a person have a high level of fear in life and still be confident? And what exactly does “confidence” mean?

“Confidence” used in translation of Aristotle (for the Greek tharsos) is ambiguous at best. We are confident that what astronomy tells us about the solar system is accurate, but that is not what is meant here. Nor can the term refer only to confidence in the worth of the cause or in the worth of a potential action. Soldiers can be extremely confident of the worthiness of a war and still be cowards; an alcoholic may know full well the value of his family and still be too afraid to face his problem. Courage is not an intellectual virtue. The meaning seems closer to self-confidence. But this also is inadequate. It is not self-confidence about one’s carpentry skills. It is a confidence that an individual can do what is fine or best in difficult circumstances, that one can face a threat, be it physical or social, for the sake of a worthwhile cause. Clearly, a cause may inspire such confidence, but a positive view of one’s own ability is required to act on it. We do not have a distinct English word summarizing this trait. Along with other writers I will use “confidence” in this paper, keeping in mind that it refers to a faith in oneself to act for the best in threatening circumstances for the sake of a worthy goal.

Given this definition, it is important to clarify what appears to be a possible contradiction in Aristotle, who distinguishes courage from what is sometimes translated as “experience.” Aristotle claims that professional mercenaries with “experience” are not truly courageous. But if courage involves knowing the dangers in a situation and knowing one’s own abilities and skills, why then is Aristotle so hard on professional soldiers, who certainly are good judges of both? One problem lies, he says, in the fact that professionals start with the assumption of the superiority of their skills. This acts as an unrealistic façade that collapses under real danger. But clearly this is not true of all professional soldiers. Aristotle’s distinction is deeper than that. Motive is the key. Though not sufficient, confidence in the worth of the cause is a necessary condition of courage. The problem with trained mercenaries is that causes can be bought and sold to the highest bidder. Tharsos has nothing to do for such soldiers with using skills to defend one’s family or city, causes that are known and understood as noble. If the cause happens to be worthwhile, it is a matter of luck; it could just as well be a cause promoting vice if it paid enough. Thus, one of the key facets of courage, confidence in a worthwhile goal as an intrinsic cause of action, is absent for professional soldiers.

What then are “appropriate” fear and “appropriate” confidence? Aristotle’s model for fear is fear of death, and that certainly counts as an
appropriate fear. But there are different levels of appropriate fear, which Aristotle hints at with phrases like “in the right way” and “at the right time.” Generally speaking, a fear is appropriate if it matches the danger posed by the situation. Depending on the threat, this will vary from person to person but that does not make it completely relative. Given the situation, people can overreact and underreact, be overly frightened or not frightened enough. Just as with temperance, the mean is relative to the situation and the person’s own background, but there is a mean. The ideal in courage is not just a rigid control of fear, nor is it a denial of the emotion. The ideal is to judge a situation accurately, accept the emotion as part of human nature and, we hope, use well-developed habits to confront the fear and allow reason to guide our behavior toward a worthwhile goal. Analogous to other practical virtues, appropriate fear in this case is related to phronesis or practical wisdom as applied to threatening or dangerous situations.

To illustrate the above point consider the alcoholic entering treatment. What is the danger posed? A great deal of it is imaginary, for example, that a reputation will be ruined for life or that the individual is a failure as a human being. Overreaction by the alcoholic to a perceived negative social threat is common, and it is important in overcoming the addiction for an alcoholism counselor to create a “safe place.” Some fear is appropriate, however, since a person is exposing his reputation and self-image to other people, asking for help, and thereby admitting that his life needs a dramatic change. Another fear, often appropriate also, is fear of failing once again to overcome the addiction. The key is not to deny the fear, which would be a form of denying one’s weakness, but also not to overplay it. That correct level is the mean.

What is the appropriate level of confidence? This is less clear. What Aristotle means by the appropriate level is twofold. First, as noted above, is a realistic confidence in the worth of a cause that motivates positive action. The cause must be worth the risk, and we must be confident of that. Getting this right prevents us from being duped by shallow demagogues or risking our life or reputation for a cause of limited value. But we also need to know ourselves. We need to know when to stand up and when to flee, when to fight and when to surrender. This is not just a function of the cause and the situation; it is also a function of knowing our own skills and abilities. A second meaning of appropriate confidence then is a form of self-knowledge that we can rely on.

This question of confidence in our skills and abilities is often a difficult judgment that must be made very quickly. John cannot swim but finds himself in a sinking boat with his friends floundering in the water. How much can he do? How much should he do before his actions become not only ineffective but unintelligent? If Jane has limited artistic skills, no one would fault her for saying no to a friend who asked her to paint something. But if Jane has limited self-defense skills, how far should she go in defending a friend under attack? Courage by definition involves a risk, so the confidence one has in one’s skills or abilities cannot be simply a passive confidence. It must be a confidence that includes extending oneself in an effective manner. At some point it would be stupid for John to try to swim around helping
people or for Jane to counter an attack by one or more heavily armed thugs. But where is that limit? Throwing one's life away ineffectively is not courage. These questions about tharsos often plague people who have been in dangerous situations because courage requires us to push ourselves past what we know with relative certainty to areas where we are not certain at all. In hindsight we are rarely completely sure of how far we could have gone. Tharsos includes knowledge and confidence in our skills, an awareness of what we could do given those skills, and a will to extend those skills in dangerous situations to the farthest reasonable limits in an effective way.

The alcoholic example highlights this point about confidence in both the goal and ourselves. What is the alcoholic's goal in entering treatment? Details will vary but generally speaking it is a life devoid of addiction (the negative goal, so to speak) and a life that can be devoted to much more fulfilling and enriching activities: family, career, and caring for others (the positive goal). Confidence in the worthiness of this cause is essential to the alcoholic’s successful recovery. There must be a vision of what is possible, and that vision must be worthy of action.13 But the individual must also trust herself. For Aristotle's soldier courage involved trust in martial skills; for the recovering alcoholic it is confidence in her ability both to withstand the pains of withdrawal and to be a productive human being again. Inappropriately low confidence in the self often takes the form of a sense of worthlessness, a sense that the individual cannot handle this process and that, even if she could, there is nothing she can contribute of significance to the world. As one writer put it, the individual becomes “swamped in negativity.”14 Fear and confidence are independent variables in courage, with self-confidence being a major determining factor as to how we respond to fear.

The fact that fear and confidence are distinct emotions comes out in Aristotle's discussion of the vices associated with courage. Someone may simply be excessively fearless.15 As Aristotle says, such a person would appear to be psychologically unstable because he might, for example, have no fear of earthquakes or large waves. Yet at the same time he might or might not have the confidence to face them for a worthwhile cause (such as saving a friend’s life). Confidence is a positive emotion that one can do something or that one’s death serves a noble purpose. That is distinct from sitting on a deck chair on the Titanic being fearless about its sinking. We might attribute the latter to some type of temporary insanity (or on the Titanic, it might have been appropriate). In any case a person could simply have no fear, and this would have nothing whatsoever to do with any level of confidence either in a cause or in oneself.

We can also imagine someone being supremely confident with fear not being a defining factor. It is not necessarily that the person’s confidence has resulted from overcoming fear. It may be present for various other genetic or environmental reasons. The person walks around blithely self-confident in all situations. Such a person may have an incredibly distorted image of her own abilities, but the situation is certainly possible. Both of these possibilities have analogues in the alcoholic’s case. Excessive fearlessness is best illustrated by someone who denies all knowledge
of a “problem”; denial is often cited as the most difficult problem for clinicians. Excessive fearlessness based on denial can lead people to risky or dangerous situations because, after all, they have no problem. Excessive confidence, as we have noted, is not the same thing as excessive fearlessness. An excessively confident person might recognize dangers and might admit a problem. But the lack of realism lies in a bloated and distorted view of her abilities. Granted, excessive fearlessness and overconfidence almost always go together, but I believe Aristotle is correct that one can miss the mean on fear or confidence independently. The excessively fearless addict may in fact have little confidence; the look of confidence is a total front. Likewise, the overconfident alcoholic driver may genuinely think he can handle all situations that arise, including those he knows are dangerous. Appropriate fear may be present, but it is ignored because of the overconfidence in one’s skills.

If the two emotions are distinct, then excesses or deficiencies in either fear or confidence can distort courage. Here is a summary then of some of the more interesting possibilities:

1. Higher level of fear than a situation calls for, low level of confidence: the common perception of the coward.
2. Excessively low level of fear when real fear is appropriate, excessively high level of confidence: the common perception of the rash person.
3. Excessively high level of fear, yet the confidence level is also excessively high. How could this happen? One possibility is someone who has extensive anxiety from traumatic experiences in childhood that permeates much of his life. Fears in the person’s life are often inappropriate and excessive. Yet the individual responds with high or excessive confidence that may also be inappropriate, leading at times to rash behavior. Irrational fear that cannot be confronted realistically may motivate rashness to “prove” something to oneself or others. As noted above, such confidence may be a façade in the modern psychological sense of a defense mechanism. For Aristotle, to whom unconscious or subconscious motives are unintelligible, such rash behavior is produced by an excess of confidence, whatever its source. The person may then have both excessive fear and excessive confidence.
4. Excessively low level of fear and low level of confidence. This is the example of the person on the sinking ship with low confidence and possibly low self-regard who suddenly loses all fear. A more interesting question is whether this could be a lifelong or generalized condition. Such a person would have little confidence in life, both with regard to the worth of causes and regarding his own abilities. At the same time he would generally be unafraid of life, even when he should be. This may seem impossible, but actually it is not uncommon. One scenario might be that a person does not care that he cannot handle different situations. “Yes, I’m not very good at dealing with life. I don’t care. And this is supposed to be dangerous? I don’t care.” As noted above, certain alcoholics present clear examples of this latter condition. They have lost all confidence in themselves and all confidence in the worth of the projects.
they encounter in life. Their state is a form of depression brought on by drinking. Little seems worth it. At the same time fear is not present. *Because* life is not worth much and neither is the person, why should she fear anything? If nothing is of value, what threat is there to worry about? If the ship sinks, why be concerned?

Five other possibilities remain, only one of which is the ideal of courage. The other four all involve an imbalance in either the amount of fear or the level of confidence when the other emotion is appropriate. For example, a major source for many people of failing to act courageously is limited confidence in the face of appropriate or realistic fear. Cases of strong and appropriate fear challenge all humans. It does not take much in the way of limited confidence for an individual to run or avoid such situations. Even a small doubt about the worth of a cause can rationalize flight or inaction, as can a small question about one’s ability to deal with the threat. A family disagreement, a disappointment in one’s job, a remembrance of past failings—any of these can tip the scales for a recovering alcoholic and cause relapse.¹⁷ These blows to a weak self-image are almost always exaggerated even if, at times, the fear may be legitimate (e.g., one’s job may really be threatened). Since the perception of one’s abilities is not realistic, the level of confidence is not appropriate in Aristotle’s terms, even if the fear happens to be justified.

The area that today is called “moral courage” provides many more examples in which realistic fears and a lack of confidence lead to cowardice. How do we respond to our company’s surreptitious polluting of the environment? How do we respond to groundless gossip about a friend? The fears involved in acting may be realistic, but whether we actually do something in response to those fears may hinge on our level of confidence to put ourselves forward, so to speak. Protecting our insecure ego facilitates a great deal of moral cowardice. A low level of confidence is a major block to courage even when the fear involved is justified and appropriate.

Of the other negative possibilities, two lend themselves toward rashness and one toward confidence. Someone may be a poor judge of danger, and her level of fear may thus be inappropriately low, yet her level of confidence in her abilities or in the cause at hand may not be excessive. This would tend toward rashness. Similarly, a person can be overconfident yet have appropriate fear, and this could also lead to rashness. Again, doesn’t overconfidence ipso facto mean inappropriately low fear? Consider a war scene in which a soldier is well aware that death is possible and fears dying as much as his buddy. But he misreads his own abilities in the situation and becomes overconfident against the danger, thus leading to rash actions.

The final negative possibility is appropriate confidence and a high level of fear, which tends toward cowardice. A person can misread danger and blow it out of proportion. Again, this is likely tied to a low confidence level, but it is not necessarily so. For example, an excessive response to danger may be socially enforced (a kind of social paranoia, fairly common in history) and be unrelated to any level of personal confidence. The result might be cowardly behavior because the fear is overwhelming. What can I do, after all, when all those around me say that the danger is unstoppable and I
am but one person? Fear and confidence are thus deeply intertwined, but
the two emotions rely on distinct perceptions: the danger of the situation,
the worthiness of the cause, and the perception of one’s ability.

Courage lies in the interface where the limit of our confidence meets
the reality of a feared situation. Over time appropriate confidence in most
people tends to correlate with the appropriate level of fear, not because they
are on the same emotional continuum, but because one (confidence) often
(though not always) builds on dealing well with the other. We learn from
fearful situations both what is worthwhile to stand for in life and what we
can expect from our abilities and skills. Addictions such as alcoholism can
distort the level of fear and the perception of both our own abilities and the
value of what we are doing. Perhaps a useful analogy to clarify the relation-
ship between these independent variables is to compare the emotion of joy
with the emotional resolve we call perseverance. Many of the greatest joys
in life are the result of staying with a difficult task or project to completion.
Success in the latter is intimately linked to a sense of joyful accomplishment.
Joy and resolve are not the same feelings, nor are they necessarily linked,
but they are, in Aristotle’s terminology, a natural combination. Likewise,
appropriate confidence, especially in our own abilities, may well have a
genetic component and certainly relates to the way individuals are raised.
But overcoming fears is a major source of building confidence in both judg-
ing causes accurately as worthwhile and judging our own abilities as trust-
worthy. The emotions are distinct but are a natural combination.

Notes
1 B. McCrady and K. Sher, “Alcoholism Treatment Approaches: Patient Variables, Treat-
ment Variables,” in Medical and Social Aspects of Alcohol Abuse, ed. B. Tabakoff,
Process of Help-Seeking in Drug and Alcohol Abusers,” in The International Handbook
2 Aristotle notes that in emergency situations of danger, which are often the case when
courage is required, deliberation is impossible. But prior deliberation leading to
virtuous habits lays the groundwork for action (or lack thereof) in cases in which
reflection is impossible. Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, trans. Terence Irwin (Indiana-
polis: Hackett, 1985), 1117a17–22. For the alcoholic the decision itself to deal with the
addiction may be more or less deliberate. The decision may at times, as with physical
courage, be forced upon one by circumstances. In either case acting, or continuing to
act, has a good deal to do with prior character development overall.
3 For a broader discussion of this type of courage see my “Psychological Courage,” Phi-
4 L. Metzger, From Denial to Recovery: Counseling Problem Drinkers, Alcoholics, and Their
5 Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, 1115b17–19.
6 Ibid., 1115b34–1116a2.
7 David Pears makes the case for defining “confidence” in Aristotle as follows: the person
with confidence will “assess the chances of safety correctly, neither exaggerating
them nor minimizing them.” Pears bases his analysis on Aristotle’s discussion in
Rorty (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980), 183. But this
definition, as Pears himself alludes to, is so intellectualized that it seems too passive
for Aristotle’s use of the term in his ethical writings. If, for example, excessive
confidence leads to rashness and, as Aristotle says, the rash person pretends to have the “attitude” of the brave person but actually runs in the face of danger (Nicomachean Ethics, 1115b28–33), this implies strongly that the mean for confidence also has to do with accurately perceiving one’s own abilities and trusting them accordingly, not just intellectually assessing the chances of safety correctly.

8 Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, 1116b4–24.
9 Ibid., 1116b21–22.
10 Metzger, From Denial to Recovery, 68–70.
11 Antony Duff claims that such confidence in the worthiness of a course of action is the most significant meaning of tharsos. But it still seems quite possible that a person could be right about the worthiness of a cause and still be a coward. Something more is needed. See A. Duff, “Aristotelian Courage,” Ratio, 29 (June 1987): 10–11.
12 This is the major reason Aristotle claims young people have difficulty with many virtues, not just courage. They lack experience in reflecting on their own emotions.
13 This is one of the main benefits of joint treatment for alcoholism. Together, husband and wife can redefine goals and redefine their marriage relationship. Evidence indicates that treatment with couples yields more positive outcomes than individual-only treatment. B. McCrady, “The Marital Relationship and Alcoholism Treatment,” in Alcohol and the Family, ed. R. Collins, K. Leonard, and J. Searles (New York: Guilford, 1990), 338–55.
14 Metzger, From Denial to Recovery, 51–52.
16 Metzger, From Denial to Recovery, 61.