

Binghamton University

The Open Repository @ Binghamton (The ORB)

The Society for Ancient Greek Philosophy Newsletter

12-28-1996

Aristotle's Account of the Virtue of Courage in Nicomachean Ethics III.6-9

Howard J. Curzer

Texas Tech University, howard.curzer@ttu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://orb.binghamton.edu/sagp>



Part of the [Ancient History, Greek and Roman through Late Antiquity Commons](#), [Ancient Philosophy Commons](#), and the [History of Philosophy Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Curzer, Howard J., "Aristotle's Account of the Virtue of Courage in Nicomachean Ethics III.6-9" (1996). *The Society for Ancient Greek Philosophy Newsletter*. 183.

<https://orb.binghamton.edu/sagp/183>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by The Open Repository @ Binghamton (The ORB). It has been accepted for inclusion in The Society for Ancient Greek Philosophy Newsletter by an authorized administrator of The Open Repository @ Binghamton (The ORB). For more information, please contact ORB@binghamton.edu.

ARISTOTLE'S ACCOUNT OF THE VIRTUE OF COURAGE IN *NICOMACHEAN ETHICS* III.6-9

Howard J. Curzer
Philosophy Department
Texas Tech University
Lubbock, Texas 79409-3092

Society for Ancient Greek Philosophy
Eastern Division A.P.A.
Atlanta, Georgia
December 28, 1996

INTRODUCTION

Although courage is one of the few character traits which shows up on everyone's list of virtues, there is no agreement about the nature and features of courage. Even within the ancient world we find substantial variation. For example, the Homeric view of courage as a certain role in a social structure differs from the Socratic view in the *Laches* that courage is a sort of knowledge, which differs from the Platonic view in the *Republic* that courage is a certain relationship of parts within the soul, which differs from the Aristotelian view in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that courage is a disposition to feel, choose, and act in certain ways. Although these days Aristotle is said to be the father of virtue ethics, Aristotle's account of courage is not widely accepted. Perhaps that is because Aristotle's account is thought to conflict with his architectonic and with the truth at crucial points. In particular, Aristotle is criticized (a) for narrowing the sphere of courage too severely, (b) for conflating what should be two separate virtues, (c) for applying an implausible version of the doctrine of the mean to courage, (d) for making courage into a form of continence, and (e) for both affirming and denying that courageous acts are pleasant for courageous people. I shall provide a passage-by-passage interpretation of Aristotle's account of courage in NE III.6-9 which will acquit Aristotle of these five charges. I shall argue that Aristotle (a) does not limit courage to life-threatening situations on the battlefield; (b) is right to maintain that courage governs both fear and confidence; (c) applies a plausible doctrine of the mean to courage; (d) appropriately distinguishes courage from continence; and (e) does not affirm that courageous acts are overall pleasant for courageous people. In general, I hope to garner more respect for Aristotle's account of courage.

THE SPHERE OF COURAGE

Philosophers disagree to some extent about which people are virtuous and which people are vicious. But even when philosophers agree that a certain character is virtuous, they may disagree about what the virtues are. That is, they may disagree about how to divide the character of a virtuous person into virtues. Some philosophers prefer to analyze the virtuous character finely into many virtues in order to avoid reductionism,¹ while others prefer shorter lists of bulkier virtues in order to bring out certain relationships among character traits. Some list as virtues whatever character traits are valued by society.² Others simply use whatever scheme is convenient. One might claim that each virtue corresponds to a different emotion,³ or to a different sort of good,⁴ or a different mode of training,⁵ or a different temptation.⁶ However, Aristotle does none of these things. Instead, Aristotle proceeds in the following way. As a first approximation, he picks out important aspects of life in which a person must make some choices (risk, sensual pleasure, wealth, etc.), and maintains that each of these aspects is governed by a different virtue.⁷ That is, for each aspect of life, all acts involving that aspect exhibit a particular virtue or the absence of that virtue. Aristotle does not mention a method for picking out aspects. But then Aristotle does not claim that his list is

comprehensive. Other virtues could be added to his list. Moreover, other lists might cover the same ground equally well. They might divide life into a different set of aspects and generate a different, but equally good set of virtues.

Aristotle's second step is to narrow the aspect of each virtue by eliminating objects governed by other virtues. Aristotle is concerned to separate the spheres of the virtues in order to avoid overlap among the virtues. He wants his virtues to have disjoint spheres. That is, no act should exhibit more than one virtue or vice because each virtue governs different objects.⁸

Aristotle sometimes goes on to narrow the sphere of a virtue further using different principles. For example, after using the doctrine of disjoint spheres to narrow the sphere of temperance (*sophrosyne*) from all pleasures to sensual pleasures (1117b31-1118a1), Aristotle further restricts temperance to pleasures of touch (1118a16-27). Similarly, Aristotle not only uses the doctrine of disjoint spheres to eliminate honesty and dishonesty with respect to agreements from the sphere of truthfulness (1127a33-b1), he also restricts truthfulness to things which bring external goods to oneself (1127a9-17).

Fourth, in addition to narrowing the virtue's sphere, Aristotle often identifies a central exercise of the virtue, a core type of object among the objects governed by the virtue. For example, although temperance governs other tactile pleasures, it is particularly concerned with the pleasures of food, drink, and sex (1118b8). And although truthfulness governs both words and deeds which may bring various advantages to the agent or speaker, truthfulness is particularly concerned with claims about "the things which bring repute" (1127a21-22).⁹

Aristotle takes all four of these steps in describing courage (*andreia*). He assigns courage to an important aspect of life, applies the doctrine of disjoint spheres to this aspect, further limits the objects of courage in a different fashion, and finally identifies a paradigmatic class of actions which exhibit courage (and its associated vices). Aristotle begins his account of courage in III.6 by stipulating the sphere of courage, the subject matter of courage, to be fearful things or evils (1115a7). A natural view is that courage may be displayed toward a variety of different objects of fear and in a variety of different contexts. In the *Laches* Socrates includes, "not only those who are courageous in warfare, but also those who are brave in dangers at sea, and the ones who show courage in illness and poverty and affairs of state."¹⁰ Aristotle, however, rejects this natural view, explicitly addressing the objects and contexts mentioned by Socrates. He denies that the sphere of courage is *all* fearful things. Instead, Aristotle suggests that courage does not concern fears covered by other virtues.

[A] Now we fear all evils, e.g. disgrace, poverty, disease, friendlessness, death, but the brave man is not thought to be concerned with all. . . . He who fears [disgrace] is good and modest, and he who does not is shameless. . . . Poverty and disease we perhaps ought not to fear, nor in general the things that do not proceed from vice and are not due to a man himself. But not even the man who is fearless of these is brave. Yet we apply the word to him also in virtue of a similarity; for some who in the dangers of war are cowards are liberal and confident in the face of the loss of money. Nor is a man a coward if he fears insult to his wife and children or envy or anything of the kind; nor brave if he is confident when he is about to be flogged. (1115a10-24)¹¹

Aristotle argues here that even though people fear disgrace, disgrace is not an object in the sphere of courage because it is an object in the sphere of the quasi-virtue of shame (*aidos*) instead. Similarly, even though some people fear poverty, poverty is not governed by courage because it is governed by the virtue of liberality (*eleutherios*) instead. (See also 1122a3-7, 1127a33-b1.)¹² People fear insult and envy, but these are not governed by courage because they are already governed by good temper (*praotes*) and righteous indignation (*nemesis*)

respectively. Some people fear flogging (as punishment), but this is already governed by justice (*dikaiosune*). And so on. People who display appropriate amounts of fear toward these objects are sometimes called courageous because of a resemblance to true courage, but this is an imprecise use of the term. That is, Aristotle wants to insure that a single token of passion or action cannot exhibit both courage (or one of the failure modes associated with courage) and some other virtue (or one of that virtue's associated failure modes).

After eliminating various objects of fear from the sphere of courage, Aristotle naturally asks what fearful objects remain.

[B] With what sort of terrible things, then, is the brave man concerned? Surely with the greatest; for no one is more likely than he to stand his ground against what is dreadful. Now death is the most terrible of all things. (1115a24-26)

On the basis of this passage, it is tempting to attribute to Aristotle the belief that courage is only concerned with death, that courage can be displayed only in life-threatening circumstances.¹³ However, we need not read passage [B] as saying that death is the *only* terrible thing with which the brave person is concerned. It is possible to read the passage as saying merely that death is *one* thing with which the courageous person is concerned. That is, Aristotle may be saying that if courage is concerned with anything, it is concerned with death. It is not only possible, but also charitable to read passage [B] in this way. The view that courage is only concerned with death flies in the face of common sense and contradicts Aristotle's later inclusion of wounds and pain in the sphere of courage (1117a32-33, 1117b7-9). Thus a charitable interpretation will not accuse Aristotle of restricting the objects of courage to modes of death, but will instead take Aristotle to be picking out a paradigm object within the sphere of courage to use as an illustration in succeeding passages.

Aristotle further narrows the sphere of courage in the following crucial and rather neglected passage.

[C] But the brave man would not seem to be concerned even with death in *all* circumstances, e.g. at sea or in disease. In what circumstances, then? Surely in the noblest. Now such deaths are those in battle. . . . Yet at sea also, and in disease, the brave man is fearless, but not in the same way as the seamen; for he has given up hope for safety, and is disliking the thought of death in this shape, while they are hopeful because of their experience. At the same time, we show courage in situations where there is the opportunity of showing prowess or where death is noble; but in these forms of death neither of these conditions is fulfilled. (1115a28-b6)

In the last sentence of this passage Aristotle claims that courage governs situations where one can (a) "show prowess" and situations where (b) "death is noble (*kalon*)", but not in situations which meet neither condition. One can fear death in situations which meet neither condition. Why does courage not govern such situations? Aristotle illustrates this restriction of the sphere of courage with the situations of life-threatening danger at sea (for non-sailors) and (presumably terminal) illness. He says in these situations the brave man, "has given up hope for safety, and is disliking the thought of death in this shape." (a) Showing prowess is impossible in these situations because the brave man "has given up hope for safety". There is no possibility of avoiding the *counter-goal* in these situations, so there are no steps to take, no way to show prowess. (b) To be noble, death must have point, a reason. One must die for the sake of something worth dying for. But death at sea or from disease is pointless, and therefore ignoble. One's life is not sacrificed to defend one's city or accomplish some quest or maintain one's honor, etc.. There is no possibility of achieving an *external goal*. That is why the brave man "is disliking the thought of death in this shape." So Aristotle's claim may be rephrased in the following way. Showing courage is impossible in situations where (a) there is no way to

avoid death (or wounds or pain), and (b) there is also no way to achieve a worthwhile objective. Courageous action requires either hope of safety, or hope of success, or both. It follows that according to Aristotle, the Spartans at Thermopole could display courage even though they knew that they were doomed, because there was still hope of achieving the worthwhile goal of slowing down the enemy. They had hope of achieving their external goal even though avoiding the counter-goal was impossible. Similarly, according to Aristotle, a person defending herself from attack may be acting courageously even though her act has no external goal, because she does have hope of avoiding the counter-goal of death, wounds, and pain.¹⁴ But one cannot act courageously in situations where there is neither (a) hope of avoiding the counter-goal nor (b) hope of achieving an external goal. In other words, displaying courage is impossible in situations where there are no grounds for confidence.¹⁵

Is Aristotle right to maintain that courage only governs situations where some confidence as well as some fear should be felt? A situation where fear should not be felt is a riskless situation. Courage would be superfluous. A situation where confidence should not be felt is a hopeless situation. Courage would be useless. Perhaps it is difficult to accept that courage does not govern situations in which there is no hope for avoiding the counter-goal or achieving an external goal. We do applaud people who face inevitable death, wounds, or pain with fortitude, without "breaking down".¹⁶ Typically, however, these harms are not pointless. The dying, bleeding, or screaming person has an external goal of inspiring others or proving a point, and hopes to achieve that goal by facing suffering with fortitude. These acts are not counterexamples to Aristotle's view. Aristotle would agree that Socrates acts courageously by drinking poison calmly, for even though Socrates has no reasonable hope of surviving, he does have a reasonable hope of inspiring others to lead the philosophic life. Aristotle would agree that Billy acts courageously by defying a bully with no hope of avoiding a beating, for even if Billy has no audience to impress, Billy has a reasonable hope of proving a point to himself (and perhaps to the bully). We also applaud people who face inevitable, *pointless* death, wounds, or pain with fortitude, people who suffer these harms calmly when nothing is to be gained. However, I suggest that we applaud these people only because we conflate their acts with acts like those of Socrates and Billy which are not pointless. We simply should not admire fortitude when the counter-goal is unavoidable and the external goal is unachievable, for fortitude in such situations is not courage. How can the act of not breaking down be either good or bad when, by hypothesis, it makes no difference to anything, when it has no chance of sparing the person or of accomplishing any worthwhile goal? Aristotle is right to maintain that courage does not govern situations where confidence should not be felt.

PARAMETERS AND PASSIONS OF COURAGE

One central component of Aristotle's architectonic is that each virtue is a disposition to get several parameters right. In his general remarks about virtue Aristotle mentions right occasions, objects, people, goals, and manner (1106b21-23), but different virtues involve different parameters. For example, temperate people desire and enjoy the right objects on the right occasions to the right degree (1119b16-17). In III.7 Aristotle applies the thesis that virtue consists of getting several parameters of action and passion right to the virtue of courage and its related vices.

[D] 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, in the right way and at the right time, and who feels confidence under the corresponding conditions, is brave. (1115b15-19)

This passage makes several claims. First, the passage indicates that a courageous person fears the right things, the right way, and at the right time. So the parameters of courage include objects, amount, and frequency of fear. Fear is a function of these three variables. This aspect of courage may be modeled in a way which captures both Aristotle's target metaphor (1094a23-24, 1138b21-23) and his view that virtue is a mean of several parameters. Think of the three parameters as continua forming axes. Imagine two spheres centered on the intersection of the axes. The interior of the smaller sphere represents virtue. The area between the spheres represents vice. The exterior of the larger sphere represents brutishness. Shade half of the volume between the spheres. The shaded volume represents too little of each parameter; the unshaded volume between the spheres represents too much. Now every possible sort of fear concerned with courage can be represented as a point in three dimensional space. See illustration A.

One common view is that courage is simply overcoming one's fear. Aristotle rejects this view. As I shall mention below, Aristotle denies that courage involves overcoming anything. And as I have mentioned above, Aristotle denies that courage involves all fears. He also denies that courage involves only fears. Aristotle says that courage "is a mean with regard to feelings of fear (*phobos*) and confidence (*tharsos*)" (1115a5). Thus, it comes as no surprise when Aristotle says at 1115b15-19 that a courageous person not only fears rightly, but also is confident about the right things, in the right way, and at the right time. The parameters of courage include objects, amount, and frequency of confidence. See illustration B.

It has been suggested that Aristotle should have divided courage into two virtues; one governing fear and the other governing confidence.¹⁷ However, this would conflict with the doctrine of disjoint spheres as well as with our own experience. If Aristotle divided courage into two virtues, each virtue could be unproblematically displayed in situations which were not governed by the other. However, many situations including the most common and central situations calling for courage, demand that the agent weigh the risks and benefits of different options. The agent must balance the seriousness and likelihood of some harm against the value and probability of achieving some goal. If fear and confidence were governed by different virtues then such situations would fall into the spheres of both virtues, violating the doctrine of disjoint spheres. Moreover, in such situations, the agent does not feel two emotions. Instead, the agent feels one emotion which is a sort of blend of fear and confidence. "We must talk of the feelings overlaying, suffusing, interpenetrating each other: e.g. boldness shot through with fear, fear mastered by confidence, spirited but worried determination, phlegmatic determination, ambivalence."¹⁸ Bundling fear and confidence together under one virtue captures this fact while separating fear and confidence contradicts it.

A third point stated in passage [D] is that courage requires more than just appropriate fear and confidence. The courageous person "faces the right things". To be courageous one must choose and act rightly, as well feeling fear and confidence rightly. Thus, modeling courage requires two more targets. Choice and action involve goals rather than amounts, so the parameters of the choice and action targets are objects, frequency, and goals. See illustrations C and D.

Virtue (*arete*) is illustrated when all of the parameters of all four targets are medial. To go wrong with respect to any of these parameters on any of these four targets is to lack courage. People who go wrong within the limits of the normal are vicious, continent, or incontinent; people who go very wrong are brutish (*theriotes*) or as we might say, mentally ill. For example, "The man who is by nature apt to fear everything, even the squeak of a mouse, is cowardly with a brutish cowardice" (1149a7-8). Similarly, "he would be a sort of madman or insensible person if he feared nothing, neither earthquakes nor the waves" (1115b26-27). Continence (*enkrateia*) is illustrated when the parameters of the fear and/or confidence targets are not medial, but the parameters of the choice and action targets are medial. Incontinence

(*akrateia*) is illustrated when the parameters of the fear and/or confidence targets and the action target are not medial, but the parameters of the choice target are medial. Vice is illustrated when the parameters of the fear and/or confidence targets and the choice and action targets are not medial.

Notice that a single type of act may be caused by a variety of different character traits. Just as non-virtuous people of various sorts as well as virtuous people can perform virtuous acts (1105b5-12), so vicious acts can be performed by the incontinent and the brutish as well as by people with different sorts of cowardice and rashness. Some people flee from danger because they lack appropriate amounts of confidence that the counter-goal can be avoided or that the external goal can be achieved. Other people flee because although they are appropriately confident about the right objects before and after, they lack confidence at the time of the act. Still others flee because they feel excessive amounts of fear or fear the wrong objects. And so on.

Urmson criticizes Aristotle for not noticing "that it is possible, if unlikely, that one's character should exhibit deficiency in some respects, the mean in others, and excess in others, even with regard to a single specific excellence."¹⁹ But Aristotle *does* notice this. Aristotle's general point in III.8 is that people use the term "courage" loosely. They apply it to persons who resemble the courageous without being courageous. Common sense is sometimes wrong about whether a certain character trait is courage. Aristotle's examples of pseudo-courage also illustrate how it is possible to go wrong with respect to some of the courage parameters without going wrong with respect to others either on the same target or on different targets. Citizen-soldiers, for example, go wrong only with respect to the goal parameter. They get everything right except that instead of fighting to acquire or maintain their courage and to win the battle, they "face dangers because of the penalties imposed by the laws and the reproaches they would otherwise incur, and because of the honors they win by such action" (1116a18-19). Similarly, professional soldiers go wrong with respect to the "object" parameter, for they fly from some dangers which are not fearful enough to justify flight (1116b15-19). They excessively fear the right things on the right occasions. Indeed, it is common for a person to go to excess with respect to some parameters while being defective with respect to others on the same target. Such a person has both vices associated with courage. Aristotle correctly observes that people who are called rash often "are a mixture of rashness and cowardice" (1115b31-32).

Does Aristotle include all of the right parameters? Good tempered people correctly feel and exhibit anger with respect to the parameters of people and duration as well as the parameters of frequency, objects, and amount (1125b26-1126a27). Now even though we sometimes say that we are afraid of certain people, we actually fear what these people may do to us rather than the people, themselves. Thus, courage does not include a people parameter. On the other hand, I suggest that courage does involve a duration parameter. Some people typically feel the right amount of fear and confidence about the right objects on the right occasions, but then "lose their nerve" or "get cocky" while still in the courage-governed situation. That is, they become excessively afraid or confident. Such people do not maintain the right emotions for long enough. Other people remain afraid or confident after the danger and opportunity have passed. Such people maintain the right emotions for too long. Thus, duration seems to be a parameter of courage which is independent of the other three. And the right duration is a mean between too long and too short. Aristotle should have included the duration parameter in his account of courage just as he includes it in his account of good temper.

COURAGE AND THE DOCTRINE OF THE MEAN

Aristotle's much celebrated and much criticized doctrine of the mean is the core (though not the whole) of Aristotle's architectonic. The doctrine has two related components.

First, each virtue is bracketed by two vices. Second, each vice is an excess or a defect of something. The following passage is Aristotle's general statement of the doctrine of the mean.

[E] [Virtue] is a mean between two vices, that which depends upon excess and that which depends on defect; and again it is a mean because the vices respectively fall short of or exceed what is right in both passions and actions, while virtue both finds and chooses that which is intermediate. (1107a2-6)

Passage [E] indicates the link between the doctrine of the mean's two components. There are exactly two vices per virtue *because* the right quantity for each parameter is a mean between two extremes. Each virtuous action and passion is medial with respect to all relevant parameters. Going to excess with respect to any parameter(s) is one vice; being deficient with respect to any parameter(s) is the opposite vice.

Let us examine the application of the doctrine's two components to the virtue of courage. Does Aristotle believe that there are exactly two vices corresponding to courage? Well, on the one hand, in II.7 Aristotle mentions two opposite failure modes for every virtue except courage for which he mentions three.

[F] With regard to feelings of fear and confidence courage is the mean; of the people who exceed, he who exceeds in fearlessness has no name . . . while the man who exceeds in confidence is rash, and he who exceeds in fear and falls short in confidence is a coward. (1107a33-b4)

And in III.7 Aristotle mentions not two, but four failure modes with respect to courage. (a) insensitive fearlessness (deficient in fear), (b) rashness (excessive confidence), (c) rashness mixed with cowardice (excessive confidence and excessive fear), (d) cowardice (excessive fear and deficient in confidence). On the other hand, just as he does with most other virtues Aristotle bundles the people who lack courage into two clusters: those who go to excess (1115b24-35) and those who fall short (1115b35-1116a2). And Aristotle sums up the relationship of the virtue and its associated error modes by contrasting courage with two extremes. He says,

[G] The coward, the rash man, and the brave man, then, are concerned with the same objects but are differently disposed toward them; for the first two exceed and fall short, while the third holds the middle, which is the right, position. (1116a4-7)

Perhaps it would be best to put it this way. Aristotle uses the terms "rashness" and "cowardice" ambiguously. Let us say that rashness₁ is the general disposition to take some parameters of courage to excess, and rashness₂ is the more specific disposition to take some parameters of confidence to excess. Similarly, cowardice₁ is the general disposition to take some parameters of courage to defect, and cowardice₂ is the more specific disposition to take some parameters of fear to defect. Now we can see that Aristotle does believe that there are two vices corresponding to courage: rashness₁ and cowardice₁. Each of these two vices can take a variety of forms. The varieties of rashness₁ include insensitive fearlessness and rashness₂, and the varieties of cowardice₁ include cowardice₂ and overcaution. So excessive confidence₂ is rashness₂; deficient confidence is overcaution₂; excessive fear is cowardice₂; and deficient fear is insensitive fearlessness.

Aristotle certainly believes that going wrong with respect to courage involves excess and defect and the right quantity for each parameter is a mean. Aristotle says, for example,

[H] Of those who go to excess he who exceeds in fearlessness has no name. The man who exceeds in fear is a coward; for he fears both what he ought not and as he ought not, and all the similar characterizations attach to him. (1115b24-1116a2)

But is Aristotle right to maintain that the error modes of courage are excesses and defects? Hursthouse maintains that going wrong with respect to courage does not always involve excess and defect. She says, the concept of "right object [of courage] cannot be specified as a mean, and more generally, some vices that correspond to . . . courage cannot be understood as dispositions to exhibit or feel an emotion (a *pathos*) too much or too little."²⁰ Hursthouse observes that according to Aristotle it is right to fear only death, pain, and wounds. Then she imagines people who fear only the dark, enclosed spaces, and mice. Hursthouse calls such people *fearless phobics* and observes that they fear the wrong objects without fearing too many or too few objects.

Hursthouse's fearless phobics may be counterexamples to the thesis that (a) if a person goes wrong with respect to some parameter then he or she goes to excess or defect with respect to *that* parameter. However, Aristotle is not committed to this thesis. He is only committed to the weaker thesis that, (b) if a person goes wrong with respect to some parameter then he or she goes to excess or defect with respect to *some* parameter. It need not be the same parameter. For example, one sort of deficient fear is fearing only some of the right objects and no other objects, and this sort of fear is being deficient with respect to the object parameter. However, there are other sorts of deficient fear which involve wrong objects, but which are deficient with respect to parameters other than the object parameter. Fearless phobics fear the wrong objects without fearing too many or too few objects. They are not cases of excess or defect with respect to the object parameter. But, they are cases of excess and defect with respect to the amount parameter. They are too fearful about some things (e.g. mice) and insufficiently fearful about others (e.g. death). A fearless phobic is, therefore, a mixture of cowardice, and overcaution. So Hursthouse's fearless phobics are not counterexamples to the thesis that (b) if a person goes wrong with respect to some parameter then he or she goes to excess or defect with respect to *some* parameter. And this thesis is all Aristotle needs for the doctrine of the mean.²¹

COURAGE AND CONTINENCE

The fact that courageous acts involve fear raises the question of how to distinguish the courageous person from the person who is merely continent.²² Aristotle clearly believes that the courageous person is not merely continent (1146a9-16, 1151b34-1152a3). Yet the following argument seems to commit Aristotle to the thesis that the courageous person risking death (or wounds or pain) *is* continent.

- (1) The courageous person feels fear and acts rightly. (1115b11-13)
- (2) This fear involves a desire to avoid death. (*De An* 413b24, 414b4-6, 431a8-10)
- (3) The courageous person desires to avoid death and acts rightly. (from 1 & 2)
- (4) The courageous person overcomes a desire to avoid death in order to act rightly. (from 3)
- (5) Overcoming a desire to avoid death in order to act rightly is continence.
- (6) The courageous person is continent. (from 4 & 5)

One strategy for avoiding this contradiction is to deny that the courageous person feels fear, to deny premise (1). Perhaps the courageous person feels no fear because he or she does not believe that anything important is at risk. If, like Socrates, you think death is not an evil, then you will not be afraid in life-threatening situations. But as Heil observes, Aristotle rejects this view because he thinks the virtuous person feels fear when appropriate, and that death is an appropriate object for fear.²³

The usual way to state the difference between the virtuous and the merely continent is that virtuous people perform virtuous acts motivated, at least partially, by good desires without internal conflict, while continent people must overcome bad desires in order to perform the same virtuous acts. Heil redraws the distinction. On his interpretation, both the virtuous person and the continent person overcome desires to shirk virtuous acts. The difference is that the desires of the virtuous person are appropriate, but the desires of the continent person are inappropriate. So Heil denies premise (5). Although the courageous person on the battlefield overcomes a desire to flee, this conflict between reason and desire does not show that he or she is merely continent. It is appropriate to desire to flee because death is an appropriate object of fear, although actually fleeing the battle is wrong, of course.²⁴

Heil pays a heavy price for his solution. First, Heil's claim that virtuous people struggle against their desires is incompatible with Aristotle's oft repeated claim that the virtuous person's reason and desire are in harmony (e.g. 1102b21-28). Second, on the standard view, good desires are those which should be acted upon, and bad desires are those which should be overcome. But on Heil's interpretation, desires to act viciously, desires which should be overcome, turn out to be good desires. What is good about them? Indeed, good and bad desires seem to be the same. Both courageous people and continent people desire to flee the battle, for example.

Leighton tries to exonerate Aristotle by arguing that fear is advantageous rather than merely something to be overcome. He takes Aristotle to be claiming that "fear provides significant information about our surroundings, the imminence of painful or destructive evils." Moreover, "fear functions to *warn* us regarding [this] information." Finally, fear "provides the motivation, stimulates the thinking, and engages us in the action we need in order to deal with the circumstances of which it warns."²⁵

There are three problems with Leighton's suggestion. First, Aristotle rightly understands fear to be a response to information rather than a provider of information. We do not first feel afraid, and then realize that danger is imminent. Instead, we first realize that danger is imminent, and then feel afraid. As Aristotle says, "fear is felt by those who believe something [bad] to be likely to happen to them . . ." (*Rhet* 1382b33-34). So what makes fear a good thing is not that it informs us of danger and warns us that danger is bad. Second, fear does not motivate us to act. Aristotle defines fear simply as "a pain or disturbance due to a mental picture of some destructive or painful evil in the future" (*Rhet* 1382a22-23). Leighton is correct to maintain that fear is useful, but it is not useful because it sounds an alarm or kicks us into action. Instead, as Aristotle says, "fear sets us thinking what can be done" (*Rhet* 1383a6-7). Fear is useful because it stimulates deliberation. The third problem with Leighton's suggestion is that it is irrelevant. Demonstrating the usefulness of fear does not distinguish the courageous from the continent. Something might be advantageous in some ways and yet still motivate us to perform cowardly acts. The question is not whether fear is advantageous, but rather whether fear typically needs to be overcome so that the courageous person must struggle against fear.

My strategy for allowing Aristotle to distinguish courage and continence is to challenge the validity of the above argument. Aristotle maintains that courageous people feel fear, and therefore desire to avoid death. But this desire does not imply that courageous people desire to avoid courageous acts such as standing fast in battle, for that is not the only way to avoid death. That is, statement (4) does not follow from statement (3). The *cowardly* person avoids death by shirking courageous acts, but the courageous person avoids death by performing courageous acts *in ways which reduce the risk*. Thus, the courageous person does not *overcome* a desire in order to perform courageous acts. The courageous person is not continent. Fear's contribution is not to oppose courageous acts, but rather to transform what might otherwise have been rash acts into careful acts. (Similarly, the contribution of confidence is to transform what might otherwise have been cowardly acts into risky acts.)

Courageous people feel fear, but their fear does not push them toward cowardly acts like "throw away the shield and run." Instead their fear pushes them toward courageous acts like "tighten the shield strap to increase safety and fight."²⁶ The claim that fear does not involve a desire to shirk courageous acts may seem implausible if one focuses upon life or death situations, but consider a child who is eager yet afraid to ride a horse, or a professor who is enthusiastic yet apprehensive about presenting a paper. Such cases are not best described as conflicts between a desire to avoid the act and a stronger desire to push on. Instead, the fear transforms the desire to push on into a desire to push on carefully. The child holds on tight; the professor reviews his or her notes yet again. The fear involves a desire to reduce risk by performing the activity carefully rather than a desire to reduce risk by avoiding the activity altogether.

Indeed, the thesis that fear need not involve a temptation to flee the battle seems implausible to contemporary common sense only because, unlike Aristotle, contemporary common sense thinks that continence is the best we can hope for. One interpretation of the Christian doctrine of original sin is that temptation is inevitable, and so the best person is the person who successfully resists temptation. Applying this doctrine to the battlefield situation yields the claim that the best person successfully resists the temptation to flee. Since courage must name the best state of character with respect to fear, and since contemporary common sense is infected by the Christian doctrine of original sin, contemporary common sense names the disposition to resist the temptation to flee, courage. Thus, when the child who performs several brave acts says, "I was afraid, so I am not really brave," the child is told that courage consists in overcoming fear. Contemporary common sense calls the character trait of Aristotelian continence, courage.

For many situations, the best most of us seem able to do is overcome our vicious desires. The widespread practice of dieting, for example, is one familiar illustration of this fact. However, I maintain that Aristotle and the child are right about courage, and about temptation in general. It is not that virtue is continence, but rather that virtue is rare and hard. So few of us make it past continence that contemporary common sense has lost faith in a state beyond continence. Yet just as most people acknowledge, when pushed, that there are people who do not need to diet, who give charity without reluctance, who do not get inappropriately angry, so contemporary common sense should acknowledge that there are people who reliably perform courageous acts without having to overcome a desire to do otherwise.

PLEASURE, PAIN, AND COURAGE

Aristotle seems to contradict himself on the question of whether courageous acts are painful. In II.3 he says,

[I] We must take as a sign of states of character the pleasure or pain that supervenes on acts; for . . . he who stands his ground against things that are terrible and delights in this or at least is not pained is brave, while the man who is pained is a coward. . . . Hence we ought to have been brought up in a particular way from our very youth, as Plato says, so as both to delight in and to be pained by the things that we ought; for this is the right education. (1104b3-13)

Here Aristotle seems to be saying that a courageous person performing a courageous act feels pleasure or at least feels no pain. This is a central claim for Aristotle because he uses pleasure and pain both as evidence of a person's virtue (as the first sentence says) and as part of a pedagogical strategy (as the last sentence says). Yet in III.9 where Aristotle devotes a whole chapter to the relation of courage and pain and pleasure, he says of the courageous person,

[J] Death and wounds will be painful to the brave man and against his will, but he will face them because it is noble to do so or because it is base not to do so the more he is possessed of virtue in its entirety and the happier he is, the more he will be pained at the thought of death . . . It is not the case, then, with all the virtues that the exercise of them is pleasant, except in so far as it reaches its end. (1117b9-16)

Here Aristotle seems to be saying that even though achieving the external goal of a courageous act is pleasant for the courageous person, the courageous act, itself, is typically painful to perform and even to contemplate.²⁷

An examination of some aspects of Aristotle's view of the relationship between virtuous acts and pleasure will resolve this tension. In passage [I] Aristotle is talking about a type of pleasure or pain that results from the awareness that one is acting well or badly. The virtuous person enjoys performing virtuous acts because he or she knows that the acts are virtuous and is pained by performing vicious acts because he or she knows that the acts are vicious. (Similarly, the vicious person, having the wrong principles, is pained by performing virtuous acts because he or she believes that the acts are vicious.) That is, the virtuous person enjoys the realization that he or she is performing a virtuous act. The temperate person feels this *second order* pleasure upon performing temperate acts, the liberal person upon performing liberal acts, and the courageous person upon performing courageous acts. However, Aristotle is not making a claim about the *overall* pleasantness of the act in passage [J]. In addition to the second order pleasure felt by virtuous people because of their realization that they are performing virtuous acts, virtuous acts also generate *first order* pleasures and pains. Just as temperate acts produce sensual pleasures and pains and liberal acts produce the pleasures and pains of spending and giving, so courageous acts produce the pleasures and pains of taking risks in order to achieve worthwhile goals. In passage [J] Aristotle is maintaining that when both first and second order pleasure and pain are considered, some virtuous acts (in particular, some courageous acts) produce more pain than pleasure for the virtuous person.

The first order pleasures of courageous acts arise predominately from the attainment of the goals. In the first part of passage [J] Aristotle is making the point that the first order pains arise from "death and wounds" and even "the thought of death." In the last part of passage [J] Aristotle is saying that if the goal of a courageous act *is not* achieved, then the first order pain outweighs the second order pleasure, and the act is overall painful. However, if the goal of a courageous act *is* achieved, then the first order pain is outweighed by first order pleasures of goal attainment plus the second order pleasure. The act is overall pleasant. Thus, a courageous act is typically not pleasant "except in so far as it reaches its end."²⁸

CONCLUSION

Aristotle's account of courage exhibits several general principles of his architectonic. First, Aristotle applies to courage what I have called the doctrine of disjoint spheres. (1) Each virtue has its own sphere completely separate from the spheres of all other virtues. Aristotle then goes on to narrow the sphere of courage by insisting correctly that courage governs only situations involving both fear and confidence. Aristotle does not make the mistake of further restricting courage to life-threatening situations.

Like his accounts of other virtues, Aristotle's account of courage involves several different parameters. (2) Each virtue is a disposition for getting all of the relevant parameters right. (3) People can go wrong with respect to some parameter without going wrong with respect to the others. This produces some character traits which are often mistaken for courage because they resemble courage in some respects. People can even be excessive with

respect to some parameters while being defective with respect to others. They can be rash cowards. Aristotle neglects the duration parameter of courage. On the other hand, he rightly avoids the temptation to divide courage into a fear virtue and a confidence virtue.

Aristotle's account of courage conforms to his doctrine of the mean. (4) For each parameter there are two ways to go wrong. (5) A disposition for going to excess with respect to any parameter(s) is one vice; a disposition for being deficient with respect to any parameter(s) is the opposite vice; and a disposition for getting all of the parameters in a mean is virtue. Aristotle is committed to the plausible thesis that, if a person goes wrong with respect to some parameter then he or she goes to excess or defect with respect to *some* parameter, rather than the dubious thesis that if a person goes wrong with respect to some parameter then he or she goes to excess or defect with respect to *that* parameter.

Virtue and vice are not the only sorts of character traits. (6) A disposition for getting choice and action right despite going wrong with respect to some other parameter(s) is continence; a disposition for getting choice right but action wrong because of going wrong with respect to some other parameter(s) is incontinence. (7) A disposition for going *very* wrong is brutishness. As long as we recognize that fear can push people to guard their safety not only by performing cowardly acts, but also by being careful about performing courageous acts, we will see that Aristotle does not conflate courage and continence.

Aristotle does not contradict himself by maintaining that courageous acts both are and are not pleasant for the courageous. (8) He believes that virtuous actions may produce both first order pleasures and first order pains for virtuous people. (9) However, virtuous people always enjoy the realization that they are performing virtuous acts. In the case of courage, the first order pains of courageous acts typically outweigh the pleasure of knowing that one is acting rightly except in cases where the courageous act achieves its external goal.

Overall, Aristotle's account of courage in NE III.6-9 illustrates many of the components of Aristotle's architectonic of the virtues without going wrong in the five ways that critics have suggested. Therefore, Aristotle's account of courage deserves more respect.

NOTES

1. E. Pincoffs, *Quandaries and Virtues*, (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1986).
2. Although many have accused Aristotle of this, he is not guilty. Aristotle is an innovator, not a mere expositor and apologist for his society. (P. Gottlieb, "Aristotle's 'Nameless' Virtues," *Phronesis*, p. 1-15).
3. Urmson attributes this view to Aristotle (Urmson, *Aristotle's Ethics*, [Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988], p. 37). But for Aristotle some virtues involve more than one passion; some virtues involve none. Courage, for example, involves fear and confidence, but friendliness, truthfulness, and ready wit involve no passion. So it is not true that to every virtue there corresponds exactly one passion. Similarly, it is not true that to every passion there corresponds exactly one virtue. Fear, for example, is not governed solely by courage. Courage concerns fear of death, wounds, and pain, but fear of disgrace, poverty, insult, and friendlessness are governed respectively by the virtues of shame, liberality, good temper, and friendship (1115a10-24). Thus, Aristotle does not assign each virtue to a different emotion.
4. Reeve attributes this view to Aristotle (C. D. C. Reeve, *Practices of Reason* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992], p. 169-171). But for Aristotle some virtues involve more than one good; some virtues involve none. Temperance governs food, drink, and sex, while wit is a virtue that governs no external good. Similarly, it is not true that to every good there

corresponds exactly one virtue. Beauty is an external good not governed by a virtue, while wealth is governed in different ways by both liberality and justice. Thus, Aristotle does not assign each virtue to a different sort of good.

5. Irwin attributes this view to Aristotle. He explains Aristotle's restriction of temperance to the pleasures of touch and taste in the following way. "Different forms of over-indulgence associated with different desires need separate training; a reduction in someone's desire to listen to music will not necessarily reduce his excessive liking for whiskey" (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. T. Irwin [Indianapolis: Hackett, 1985], p. 323). However, reducing a person's desire for sex will not necessarily reduce his or her excessive liking for whiskey, either. Moreover, reducing a person's desire for honor might also reduce his or her excessive liking for wealth. There is no reason to think that there is a one-to-one correspondence between modes of training and spheres of virtue and no reason to attribute this view to Aristotle, either.

6. Ross maintains that each virtue is a tendency to resist a different sort of temptation. Thus, Ross accuses Aristotle's account of courage of conflating two virtues: caution which is the resisting of rashness and courage which is the resisting of cowardice. (W. D. Ross, *Aristotle* [London: Methuen, 1923], p. 205-206.) As other commentators have observed, this principle reduces virtue to continence. But there are other objections to Ross's interpretation, too. Aristotle observes that there are many tempting ways of going wrong for each way of going right (1106b35). So Ross's interpretation implies that every time a person acts and feels right, he or she is displaying a multitude of virtues.

Hursthouse suggests that one virtue governs food and drink while another virtue governs sex because people can go wrong with respect to one without going wrong with respect to the other (R. Hursthouse "A False Doctrine of the Mean," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 81 [1980-1981], p. 62). In general, Hursthouse is suggesting that two objects should be in different spheres if a person can go wrong with respect to one without going wrong with respect to the other. But people can go wrong with respect to chocolate and not broccoli, even though these foods clearly belong in the same sphere. An intemperate person goes wrong with respect to *some*, but not necessarily *all* of the pleasures of temperance. In general, each virtue must govern many sorts of failures.

7. M. Nussbaum, "Non-Relative Virtues: An Aristotelian Approach," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 13 (1988), p. 35.

8. For Aristotle, an act is always a behavior-under-a-description. The same behavior (the same set of motions) may have several different descriptions, and therefore may be several different acts. Thus, the same behavior may exhibit different virtues under different descriptions.

9. Sparshott suggests that the standard use of the virtue term provides focal meaning to the virtue, that "all the related uses are to be explained by one paradigm case, much in the same way that substance is the paradigm of 'being'" (F. Sparshott, *Taking Life Seriously* [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994], p. 150). However, it is not the case that the many exercises of the virtue are understood in terms of a paradigm exercise. Instead, the standard exercise is simply the clearest or the most common exercise of the virtue.

10. Plato, *Laches*, trans. R. Sprague, 191d.

11. All quotations from Aristotle are taken from *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. J. Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984) except that I translate *arete* as "virtue" rather than "excellence".

12. Aristotle's suggestion that we should not fear poverty, disease, or "in general the things

that do not proceed from vice and are not due to a man himself" is a mistake. First, poverty and disease often result from the vices of prodigality and self-indulgence (1119b34-1120a1, 1119a16-20). Second, Aristotle acknowledges that we should fear death in battle which typically is *not* the result of vice. So Aristotle's specific claim about poverty and disease as well as his general claim about fearing things that do not arise from vice are incorrect and inconsistent with his other claims.

13. A. Duff, "Aristotelian Courage," *Ratio*, 29 (1987), p. 2-155; Ross, 207.

14. Pears denies and Duff affirms that, according to Aristotle, the Spartans at Thermopole can display courage (D. Pears, "Courage as a Mean," *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*, ed. A. Rorty, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), p. 183; Duff, 10-14). Pears affirms and Rogers denies that courageous acts are always performed for the sake of some external goal. Thus, Pears denies and Rogers affirms that, according to Aristotle, the person defending herself from attack can display courage (D. Pears, "Aristotle's Analysis of Courage," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 3 [1987], p. 273). (K. Rogers, "Aristotle on the Motive of Courage," *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 32 [1994], p. 304-305). In addition to the counter-goal and the external goal, courageous action also has an *internal goal*. This goal terminology was originally deployed by Pears.

15. Stocker suggests that just as the object of fear is the counter-goal, so the object of confidence is the external goal. (M. Stocker, *Plural and Conflicting Values* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990], p. 131, 140). However, one can also feel some confidence about the avoidance of the counter-goal.

16. Indeed, Duff takes the martyr who "goes willingly (even gladly) to her death" to be a paradigm of Aristotelian courage (Duff, 10). It is not clear whether Duff takes the martyr's death to have an external goal, however.

17. J. O. Urmson, "Aristotle Doctrine of the Mean," *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*, ed. A. Rorty, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), p. 169-170; Ross, 206. The question of whether Aristotelian courage should be divided into two virtues is different from the question (mentioned above) of whether courage should be limited to situations requiring both fear and confidence. Theoretically, a virtue list might contain a single virtue of courage governing situations involving either fear or confidence as well as situations involving both. Or a virtue list might contain both a fear virtue and a confidence virtue, each of which governs only situations requiring both fear and confidence.

18. Stocker, 143.

19. Urmson, "Aristotle Doctrine of the Mean," 161.

20. Hursthouse, 61.

21. For a more thorough rebuttal of Hursthouse, see H. Curzer, "A Defense of Aristotle's Doctrine of the Mean," *Ancient Philosophy*, 16 (1996), 1-10.

22. Technically, Aristotle uses the terms, "continence" and "incontinence" to stand for the continence and incontinence corresponding to temperance, but he allows that there are analogous character traits corresponding to other virtues. In this paper I shall use "continence" and "incontinence" to stand for the continence and incontinence corresponding to courage.

23. J. Heil, "Why is Aristotle's Brave Man So Frightened? The Paradox of Courage in the Eudemian Ethics," *Apeiron*, 29 (1996), p. 55-57.

24. Heil, 50-52, 65-68. Heil claims that courage is a form of endurance (*karteria*). But

Aristotle defines endurance as overcoming a desire to avoid pain in order to act rightly, just as continence is overcoming a desire for pleasure in order to act rightly. (Aristotle sometimes subsumes both under the term "continence".) Endurance is not overcoming good desires or overcoming good desires to avoid pain. Moreover, tying courage to endurance is problematic. Aristotle distinguishes virtue from endurance (1145a33-1145b2). Indeed, Aristotle says that endurance is worse than continence (1150a36-b1) so endurance is certainly worse than virtue, and not equal to virtue as Heil's interpretation requires.

25. S. Layton, "Aristotle's Courageous Passions," *Phronesis*, 33, (1988), p. 90-94.

26. Duff, 10-13; Leighton, 94; Stocker, 144; C. Young, "Aristotle on Courage," *Humanitas: Essays in Honor of Ralph Ross*, ed. Q. Howe (Claremont California, Scripps College Press, 1977), p. 198.

27. Broadie tries to resolve this contradiction by suggesting that when Aristotle says that the courageous agent is pleased or not pained by a courageous act, Aristotle means that he or she acts without reluctance and takes satisfaction from performing the act. But when Aristotle says that the courageous agent *is* pained Aristotle means that he or she feels pain (S. Broadie, *Ethics with Aristotle* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1991], p. 91). I think Broadie's attempt at resolution fails, however. Throughout II.3 "pleasure" seems to mean pleasure rather than non-reluctance.

28. Duff also thinks that the courageous person feels a mixture of pleasure and pain. However, Duff thinks the pleasure outweighs the pain while transforming the fear because the courageous person is confident in the worth of his or her actions (Duff, 10-14).

ILLUSTRATION A
FEAR

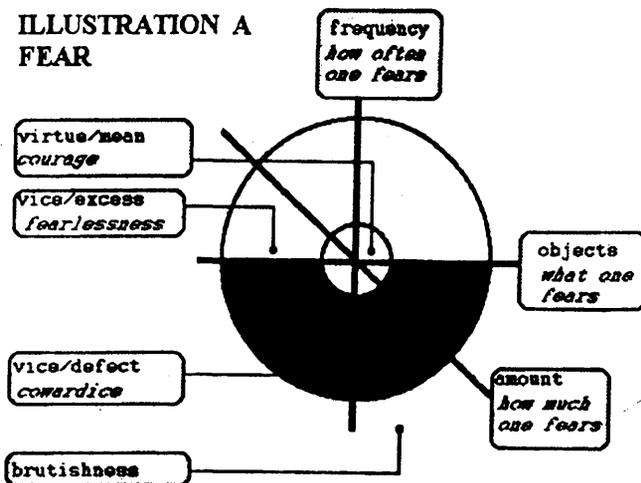


ILLUSTRATION B
CONFIDENCE

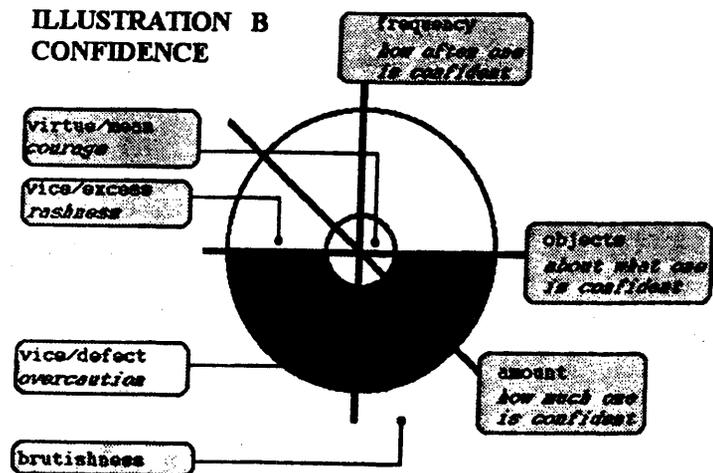


ILLUSTRATION C
CHOICE

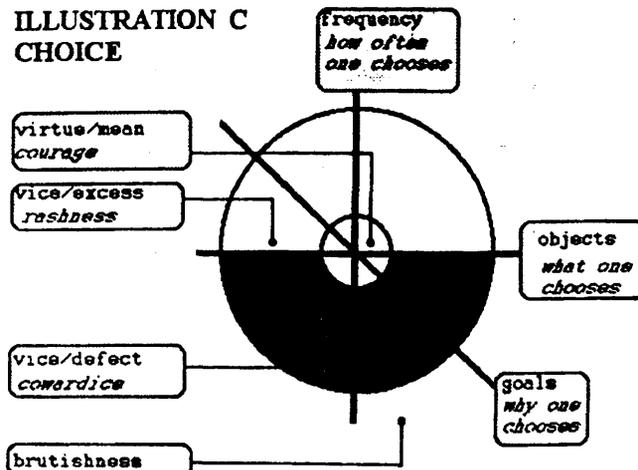


ILLUSTRATION D
ACTION

