

# THE PROBLEM OF COURAGE

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## INTRODUCTION The Problem of Understanding Courage

The problem of understanding courage is certainly not new. Throughout the centuries ancient and modern peoples have attempted to define and understand courage. Philosophers, soldiers and common citizens alike have struggled to understand what it is about an action that makes it courageous. Much is at stake in the response to this question because everyone wants to be considered courageous, but it certainly is possible that not everyone is. How should this distinction be made and who should be the one to draw the line that separates those courageous individuals from those who lack the virtue? Courage continues to be the only virtue that nations officially reward through the bestowing of public honors, so what makes it so important and why is something so important so difficult to define? Centuries of men were defined and unmade by the courage or the cowardice that marked their actions. Yet, no one has been able to provide a universal blueprint of courageous action so that everyone can precisely understand the nature of courage.

However, just because a blueprint that defines courageous action has not been provided does not mean that generations of men have not made good attempts to create one. As we shall see in Plato's *Laches* dialogue, Socrates endeavored to provide an

incredibly broad definition of courage that accounted for every single instance in which courageous action might be possible. He wanted to take into account and consider how courage related to everyday common activities such as facing individual sicknesses, poverty, pains and fears. Socrates even believed that animals possessed a certain degree of courage. However, such a broad definition of courage seems to somehow cheapen the idea that we all have about it. What would be so special about courage if everyone possessed it?

It seems that everyone has a desire to be considered courageous, and in a society today where equality has come to mean that all persons should be equal in everything the idea of courage has also become egalitarian and incredibly broad. If all people are considered to be equal who is going to openly proclaim that his equal is a coward? According to modern thinking everyone is courageous in different ways and everyone possesses a certain degree of courage. One person may be able to stand up to his boss, while another may be able to drive a carload of screaming kids to soccer practice. Today soccer moms are considered to possess the same virtue as the Homeric heroes of ancient times. If one pays attention closely it is possible to hear someone speak of courage on almost a daily basis, and if you are a frequent watcher of the news it may be possible to hear of it even more often. Whether they know it or not Americans with their broad conception of courage have been attempting to find a definition of it following the example of Socrates. According to this idea everyone is courageous in some way, and the difficulties come in deciding at what point an action is con-

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sidered courageous, and what exactly is it about that action that makes it so?

Today it is common to hear a politician called courageous for standing up for what he believes in even though he may be standing alone on the issue. A patient suffering from a horrendous disease is called courageous because of his quiet and uncomplaining sufferance under tremendous pain. Persons suffering from obesity are said to exhibit courage for showing a certain willing steadfastness to forgo the pleasures of eating heartily for a more restrained diet. A wife is called courageous for standing up against an abusive husband. A person with a family and many responsibilities is called courageous for acting upon their desire to better themselves by taking the time to pursue further educational or career objectives. A soldier on a battlefield overseas is said to be courageous because of his service for his country.

It would seem that since the title of "courageous" is given so frequently that Americans should have a solid understanding of what courageous actions entail. If one were to go out upon a street corner in some random city and place in America and ask each passerby "what is courage" almost everyone, if not everyone, would give his or her own definition of what they think it to be. The variety of definitions provided would prove that no one knows conclusively what exactly courage is. Many modern Americans would agree that all or most of the actions mentioned above are indeed courageous actions, while most noted philosophers and scholars of the subject would only recognize one—the soldier in battle—as being truly courageous.

Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethics* is perhaps the best-known advocate that the proper sphere of courage is solely the battlefield. Yet, what exactly is it about the battlefield that designates it as the proper stage for courageous action? It is only upon

the battlefield that a man faces and fears the terrible danger of having his own life taken from him by another man in mortal combat. The soldier confronts the hazard to his own life, and yet he still is able to overcome his fear somehow and do the right thing anyway. An employee may be able to overcome his fear and do the right thing by confronting his boss about something, but there is no risk that he will die. The soccer mom may be able to patiently endure screaming children for an extended amount of time but the children while perhaps testing her sanity are not making any sustained attempt to take her life. By limiting the possibility of courageous action to the battlefield Aristotle narrows the widened definition of courage that not only asserted itself during the times of Plato but is also common in America today.

What is it about courage that makes it so important for the community and so desired by those who live in it? Individuals possessing courage on the battlefield have for centuries been believed to be absolutely necessary in order for one to defend himself, his family, his country, and his interests from outside dangers and threats. The courage of each soldier within the city insured the safety of the home and the continued existence of the community. Without the courage of the soldier the city would be taken over and the people enslaved.

The courage of the soldier maintains the security of the *polis*, and as a direct result the community is allowed to become a safe-haven for the other virtues to develop and manifest themselves. Courage is a uniquely public virtue used for the protection of the city. As a result there is something very political about it, a certain politics of courage, because in it so much is at stake for those who are said to possess the virtue. Generations ago if one lived in a free society it was a sign of his ancestor's courage. Just as the *Star Spangled Banner*

says "the land of the free and the home of the brave" a nation's freedom was equated with the courage of the people who had fought and died to defend and preserve it.

So then how then should we attempt to understand courage? Should we attempt to use the broad Platonic definition or more restrained Aristotelian definition when considering seemingly courageous actions? This is a question that transcends ancient times, which we can see in the writings of Lord Moran who attempted to somehow combine the two. Lord Moran was a close friend and personal physician to Winston Churchill, and as such he personally witnessed the atrocities of both World War I and World War II. Moran believed that courage was found on the battlefield, however, it was a virtue that everyone was capable of possessing and was not nearly as exclusive as the Aristotelian idea of the courageous man. Moran described courage in a way that it had never been considered before by likening it to a bank account into which a man made deposits and withdrawals. Although each person initially started out possessing courage, if the account was ever completely drained of it he would be bankrupt and unable to possess it ever again. Moran explains:

How is courage spent in war? Courage is will-power, whereof no man has an unlimited stock; and when in war it is used up, he is finished. A man's courage is his capital and he is always spending. The call on the bank may be only the daily drain of the front line or it may be a sudden draft which threatens to close the account. His will is perhaps almost destroyed by intensive shelling, by heavy bombing, or by a bloody battle, or it is gradually used up by monotony, by exposure, by the loss of support of stancher spirits on

whom he has come to depend, by physical exhaustion, by a wrong attitude to danger, to casualties, to war, to death itself.<sup>1</sup>

Later in his book Moran clarified this idea even further saying that, "if a soldier is always using up his capital he may from time to time add to it. There is a paying in as well as a paying out...however, men wear out in war like clothes."<sup>2</sup>

Moran, I believe, rightfully keeps the battlefield as the proper stage for courageous action. However, his idea that courage is like a bank account grants the Platonic possibility that everyone possesses courage. According to Moran some people may have more of it in their account than others, but everyone has a certain degree of courage to spend when they need it. It is clear that there is an intrinsic problem in understanding courage, and this thesis will make no attempt to solve that problem outright. If it is even possible to solve this problem and define courage then such an endeavor would deserve and indeed require far more time and space.

Courage is a virtue that is difficult to define with any degree of precision, but using Plato and Aristotle we shall attempt to understand something about it. Plato's *Laches* preceded Aristotle and in many ways Plato can be seen to raise the problem of defining courage that Aristotle picked up and attempted to answer. Aristotle seemed to realize that one of dilemmas inherent in the *Laches* is that if everyone is said to possess courage then it is simply a common virtue rather than a noble one. If courage truly is a common virtue then why do we admire it and talk of it so highly? Aristotle aspired to restore nobility to courageous

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<sup>1</sup> Moran, Lord. *The Anatomy of Courage*. (London; Chiswick Press, 1946.) p. Preface x

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70

action by limiting the possibilities for it to the battlefield. In this thesis both the problem of courage brought out in the *Laches*, and the response to it that is discussed in the *Nicomachean Ethics* will be analyzed in order to see how and why Aristotle designates the battlefield as the only stage upon which courageous action is rightfully performed.

## Plato's *Laches*: Historical Background

It would be difficult to understand the *Laches*, Plato's dialogue on courage, without a basic knowledge of the characters and the historical context in which the dialogue took place. The *Laches* is set sometime around 423 B.C. during a critical point in Athens' war with Sparta. The main participants in the dialogue were Nicias, Laches and Socrates and the men who posed the questions upon which the dialogue began were Lysimachus and Melesias.

Lysimachus and Melesias were both sons of famous fathers. Lysimachus was the son of Aristeides, a famous general and statesman, who was second in command at the battle of Marathon, and had earned the nickname "The Just." Melesias was the son of Thucydides a prominent aristocrat who had opposed the democratic party of Pericles.

Nicias and Laches were both famous Athenian generals and the dialogue was made to take place at the height of their power. Of the two generals Nicias was the more famous. His actions are described in Thucydides' *The Peloponnesian War*<sup>3</sup> and Plutarch included him in his *Lives*. Aristotle even said that Nicias was one of three men

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<sup>3</sup> Thucydides. *The Peloponnesian War*. (T.E. Wick Edition) (New York; The Modern Library, 1982.) See III 51. IV 27-28, 42, 53-54, 119, 129-132. V 16-20, 43-46. VI 8-14, 19-25, 47-50, 96-104. VII 1-6, 8, 10-17, 42, 69, 76-78, 85-86

who stood out as one of the finest citizens of Athens.<sup>4</sup> While Laches is mentioned several times in Thucydides<sup>5</sup> his place is of lesser prominence and importance. This raises the question: why was the dialogue named after the lesser of the two generals? This will be discussed further later on.

Lysimachus and Melesias, now as older men had sons of their own that were named after their famous grandfathers. At the beginning of the dialogue Lysimachus admits that their fathers were great men, but that they for some reason had not been able to measure up to their ancestor's reputations. In speaking of this to Nicias and Laches he said:

Now each of us, concerning his own father, has many noble deeds to tell the young men, which they accomplished both in war and in peace, managing the affairs both of the allies and of this city, but as for our own deeds, neither of us has any to tell. These things make us rather ashamed before them, and we blame our fathers for letting us live a soft life, when we became lads, while they were busy with the affairs of others.<sup>6</sup>

Lysimachus confides that he is unlike his father to the two men who are similar in character to his father in the hope that they will be able to help him. It is an interesting admission, and both Lysimachus and Melesias hope that these famous generals will be able to tell them how to

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<sup>4</sup> See *Constitution of Athens*, 28.5: and Plutarch. *The Rise and Fall of Athens: Nine Greek Lives*. (London; Penguin Books, 1960.) p. 208

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* See III 86,88, 90, 99, 103, 115. VI 1, 6, 75. IV 118. V 19, 24, 61, 74

<sup>6</sup> Pangle, Thomas L (Editor). *The Roots of Political Philosophy: Ten Forgotten Socratic Dialogues*. Ithaca NY; Cornell University Press, 1987. Plato. *Laches*. Translated by James H. Nichols Jr. (179c)

guide their sons so that they may continue in the path of greatness that their grandfathers set out before them. Lysimachus and Melesias seem to be quite humble and it certainly is true that they lack inflated egos as they are able to so openly and freely admit that their own lives are ordinary and shameful in that they are unlike their fathers. Because of the shame they feel they go and ask for help from Laches and Nicias hoping that the famous generals will be able to help them prescribe a course of study that will allow their own sons to be worthy of the ancestral names that they bear. Lysimachus noted: "we are looking into this: what should they learn or practice so as to become as good as possible...someone proposed this study to us, saying it would be noble for a youth to learn fighting in armor."<sup>7</sup>

What is so interesting about the beginning of the conversation is that while Lysimachus and Melesias are able to admit that their own lives are shameful, they blame their fathers who in their own estimation were too occupied with public affairs to provide them with an adequate education. They believe that their lack of a proper education is the reason for their inability to perform noble deeds. This is why they begin the conversation asking what the best course of study would be for their sons. However, might the ability to perform noble deeds be a result of a superior natural endowment that is independent of the learning that takes place through education? In other words could their fathers have possessed certain virtues that they could not have even taught to their sons? Are there some virtues that are naturally endowed or can a virtue be learned through training and habit? These are questions that even the philosophers disagree upon. Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethics* says, "Socrates...thought courage was

knowledge."<sup>8</sup> Socrates believed that the virtue courage was a form of knowledge that could be taught while Aristotle believed that courage was more of a disposition that each individual possessed and cultivated.

Nicias and Laches agree to help Lysimachus and Melesias decide the best course of education to pursue, but before they begin Laches introduces Socrates to the men as one who can perhaps best determine a noble course of study for their sons. Laches indicates that Socrates is qualified to participate in such a discussion because he was more than just a philosopher he was also a soldier who had fought by his side at Delium. When people think of Socrates they probably do not think of him as a soldier. However, there are several accounts of his action in battle. Laches noted, "for in the flight of Delium<sup>9</sup> he withdrew along with me, and I tell you that, if the others had been willing to be such as he, the city would have been upright and would not then have suffered such a fall."<sup>10</sup> Alcibiades confirmed this account in Plato's *Symposium*, and he also gave a personal account of Socrates' action in the heat of battle.

I am bound to tell—of his courage in battle; for who but he saved my life? Now this was the engagement in which I received the prize of valour: for I was wounded and he would not leave me, but rescued me and my arms; and he ought to have received the prize of valour which the generals wanted to confer on me partly on account of my rank, and I told them so, but he was more eager

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 179e

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<sup>8</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*. (Martin Ostwald Translation.) (Upper Saddle River, NJ; Prentice Hall, 1999.) 1116b 3-5. Hereafter NE

<sup>9</sup> For an account of the retreat from Delium see Thucydides IV 90-101

<sup>10</sup> Plato. *Laches*. Translated by James H. Nichols Jr. 181b

than the generals that I and not he should have the prize.<sup>11</sup>

With Laches' endorsement of his bravery, his general reputation for knowledge and the ability to teach others everyone agreed that Socrates would make a very fine addition to their conversation. They began by discussing the first proposed course of study and that was fighting in armor. The conversation moved from the study of fighting in armor as noble to the study of all things as a noble course of study. The men all agreed that they were pursuing a study for the sake of the soul of each young man. It was further decided that if virtue were present in their sons then they would have good souls. Socrates indicated that the men should not "examine the whole of virtue straightaway, but some part."<sup>12</sup> This seems to indicate that Socrates believed that virtue was not one solid whole, but a collection of many parts. He suggested courage as the part of virtue to discuss first, as it was the virtue most closely aligned to a study of fighting in armor.

## The First Definition of Courage is Put Forth

Before a study of the virtue courage could begin the group decided that they should attempt to put forth a definition of what it was. Laches put forth the first definition of courage. He defined a courageous man as one who is "willing to remain in the ranks and defend himself against the enemies and should not flee."<sup>13</sup> This definition of courage does not sound too objectionable. It is interesting to note though that this definition would disqualify

both Laches and Socrates from possessing the virtue since both of them fled together at Delium after the Athenians were defeated. Predictably, Socrates objected to the definition that it was possible to be courageous by not just standing one's ground but also by fleeing. He cited Homer<sup>14</sup> as saying that the Scythians fought the same pursuing and fleeing. Socrates asserted that Homer praised Aeneas for "the knowledge of flight," and he said that Homer praised him by calling him a "counselor of flight."<sup>15</sup>

However, it is very important to note that the Greek word for "flight," *phobos*, also means fear, terror or fright. Most translations of Homer's *Iliad* adopt this later usage.<sup>16</sup> Homer was not praising Aeneas as a "counselor of flight." He was praising him as one who strikes fear into his enemies. A translation of the passage with this alternative interpretation reads, "Aeneas, who strikes men to terror."<sup>17</sup> None of the dialogue's participants challenge this manipulation of Homer's passage, however, and the dialogue continues. Whether his misinterpretation of Homer was intentional or an honest mistake we cannot know, but this serves as a good reminder that we must read those passages that attempt to define courage with care. Socrates cast aside Laches' first definition of courage, a definition that did not include him as able to possess the virtue based on his conduct at Delium, by misusing the words of Homer.

Although Laches did not directly challenge Socrates' manipulation of Homer's text he still was not so willing to give up on his definition of courage. He replied, "that is fine, Socrates, for he (Homer) was speaking about chariots ... but the heavy-armed soldiery, of the Greeks at least, fight as I am

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<sup>11</sup> Plato. *The Symposium*. Translated by Raphael Demos. 220d-220e

<sup>12</sup> Plato. *Laches*. Translated by James H. Nichols Jr. 190 c-d

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 190e

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<sup>14</sup> See *The Iliad*, Book V 223, V 272, and VIII 107

<sup>15</sup> Plato. *Laches*. 191b

<sup>16</sup> See the translation by Lattimore, Richmond

<sup>17</sup> *The Iliad*, Book VIII 107 (Lattimore, Richmond)

saying."<sup>18</sup> Socrates then spoke of the Spartans who at Plataea began to retreat from the battlefield but when the Persians broke ranks, the Spartans turned around, fought and won the battle there. Upon hearing Socrates' example Laches finally gave up on his definition of courage.

It is unfortunate that Laches or anyone for that matter did not challenge Socrates further. Socrates' example was once again a bad one. It was correct that it did not fulfill Laches definition in the exact literal sense, however, the Spartans could still have been said to be courageous under the general idea of Laches' definition. The Spartans fell back, but when the Persians broke ranks the Spartans returned and attacked again. Perhaps they did not remain in their original ranks or maybe they did remain in their ranks while they were temporarily retreating, but they were not prevented by their fear from coming back, assuming the same risk that they had previously by fighting the Persians and eventually earning the victory. The Spartans appeared to retreat and they did not remain in their original position but they did not flee the battlefield. Fleeing occurs when a person believes that the cause in which he is engaged cannot be won and out of fear or a desire to preserve his life quits the field of battle entirely and does not stop running until the threat of danger is removed.

In the beginning of the dialogue Laches introduces Socrates to the others as one who is "always spending his time whenever there is any noble study or practice of the sort you are seeking for the youths."<sup>19</sup> Whether all of the interlocutors were genuinely persuaded by Socrates' rebuttal of Laches' definition or they were too intimidated to speak out against Socrates because of his reputation as a wise and

learned man one cannot tell. While Laches was busy agreeing with Socrates everyone else remained silent. Certainly, Lysimachus and Melesias would not challenge Socrates who possessed the ability to teach them what they wanted to learn. Similarly, Laches is unwilling to further challenge Socrates who "is always spending his time" in study and practice while he himself spends his time with his public duties and seems to agree that men such as he have a "neglectful disposition toward both children and other private affairs."<sup>20</sup> Nicias, the most famous and most formally educated of all the men in the dialogue, has the most to lose from being proven wrong by challenging Socrates further on the issue, and so he says nothing at all. The participants in the discussion are unwilling to challenge Socrates because of the deference they pay him not only as a learned philosopher but also as somewhat of an accomplished soldier. Laches proves this when he says, "To you, then, Socrates, I give the command both to teach and to refute me however you wish...from the day when you shared the danger with me (at Delium) and gave of your own virtue proof which he who is to give proof must justly give."<sup>21</sup>

It would seem that Laches in his first definition very nearly describes what most people would consider a courageous action. Certainly one would not assert that running away from a battle, even firing a weapon while running away, is as courageous as someone that stands firm and defends himself from his enemies. Once Socrates casts this definition aside and an interesting possibility for a definition of courage is shut out it seems that the rest of the dialogue is spent looking for a virtue that has to some degree been prevented from being found.

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<sup>18</sup> Plato. *Laches*. 191b

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 180b

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 180b

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 189b

Laches like Aristotle believed that courage was only found upon the battlefield as can be seen from his definition of the courageous man as one that "remains in the ranks and does not flee." Socrates objects to Laches' definition because he believes that courage is a virtue that can also be displayed away from the battlefield. Socrates agrees that courage is displayed upon the battlefield,<sup>22</sup> however; he believes that it can be displayed in many other places as well. In the *Laches*, Plato raises the question that Aristotle later answers. What is the proper place that courageous action is found? Are there places where it is possible to find courage other than simply the battlefield?

### Subsequent Definitions of Courage

After Laches' definition of courage seems to fall apart Socrates decided to reformulate the question under examination. He did this to fit his purpose of finding a definition of courage that applied to places other than the battlefield. The way in which he does this, however, eventually makes finding the definition of courage in the dialogue an impossibility. But we have said that courage is difficult to define precisely, and perhaps one can learn the most about courage when he continues struggling with it. Most philosophers agree that courage can most easily and in some cases only be found upon the battlefield. Yet, Socrates moves the discussion of courage away from the battlefield in order to suit his purpose of discovering a definition of courage that applies to every situation where such action could conceivably take place.

Socrates accepted the blame for Laches not giving a "fine answer" because he confessed that he did not ask the question

in a "fine manner."<sup>23</sup> Socrates expanded the sphere of courageous action much further than any succeeding philosopher would be willing to go. I would even argue that Socrates expanded the sphere of courageous action beyond the possibilities for courage.

For I wished to inquire of you about not only those who are courageous in the heavy-armed soldiery but also those in the cavalry and in every form of warfare, and not only those in war but also those who are courageous in dangers at sea, and those who are courageous toward sickness and poverty or even toward politics, and yet further not only those who are courageous toward pains or fears but also those who are terribly clever at fighting against desires or pleasures, whether remaining or turning around in retreat—for there are presumably some courageous people, Laches in such things too.<sup>24</sup>

Even later in the dialogue Socrates asserted that wild animals were able to have courage.<sup>25</sup> Socrates expanded the possibilities for courage so broadly that it would be very difficult for anyone to formulate a definition of courage that would apply to all of these situations.

Under these guidelines and with Socrates' help Laches formulates the next definition of courage as a prudent steadfastness of the soul.<sup>26</sup> Socrates quickly dismantles this definition by asking whether a man who is willing to fight after prudently calculating that reinforcements will be coming to help him is more courageous than a man who is on the opposing side and

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 191a

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 191c

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 191d-e

<sup>25</sup> See 196 e

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 192d



knows that he probably will not prevail but stands firm and fights anyway. Laches agrees the later man is more courageous and they quickly abandon the new definition for a modified version of it—courage is instead a foolish steadfastness of soul.

However, this definition falls apart even more quickly as Socrates reminds Laches that they agreed that courage was something good and that being foolish could not be said to be good. At this point Laches becomes frustrated. He is an Athenian general who has fought in many battles. He has dedicated his life to public matters and to fighting for Athens yet he cannot define the virtue that he believes he possesses more than any of the other virtues. It is important to note that Laches' entire career was performed upon the battlefield and all of his definitions somehow involved fighting in battle. This is not the case with Nicias.

Up until this point in the dialogue Nicias has been relatively silent. Nicias is more than a general he is also an Athenian statesman who over the course of his life has become very wealthy. Because of his wealth he has been able to receive an education. The best teachers educate his sons, and he mentions Damon as one of them.<sup>27</sup> So it should not be a surprise that as Laches defined courage on the battlefield, Nicias will define courage as "a certain wisdom, the knowledge of the terrible and confidence inspiring things."<sup>28</sup> This offends Laches, for if courage is wisdom and knowledge then he does not have it.

To this definition Socrates raises a flurry of objections including his idea mentioned earlier that it is possible for there to be courageous animals, and since animals do not have knowledge or wisdom this definition must be false. Nicias is not as easily defeated, however, and he rebutted

Socrates, which was perhaps a sign of his education that he was more willing to challenge the ideas of others. This marked the first time in the dialogue that Socrates had been challenged.

I think, rather, that the fearless and the courageous are not the same thing. I think that a very few people have a share in courage and forethought, whereas very many—among men and women and children and wild animals—have a share in boldness and daring and fearlessness with lack of forethought. So then, these things that you and the many call courageous, I call bold.<sup>29</sup>

This remark offends Laches even more than the first and he objects vehemently to this idea. He does not want to be considered "bold" along with women, children and wild animals. This disagreement adds some humor to the dialogue because Laches does not forgive him and any chance he gets he attempts to pick a fight with Nicias to get back at him. Laches complains, "he endeavors to deprive those whom all agree to be courageous of this honor."<sup>30</sup> Nicias' definition removes Laches from the possibility of having courage because it equates courage with a certain knowledge and "forethought" instead of the "fearlessness" displayed on the battlefield. Laches refuses to believe that he who has dedicated his whole life fighting for Athens does not possess courage. Instead of offering a defense or counter argument, however, he clings to Socrates and his criticisms of Nicias' definition. This is humorous because the mighty warrior Laches begins to act like a child who has been wrongfully picked on at the playground and clings to his teacher's

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<sup>27</sup> See 180d, 200b

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 195a

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 197b

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 197c

dress all the while giving his menacing attacker dirty looks and verbal jabs when he can. *Laches* never offers his own rebuttal of Nicias' definition, but as he has been offended he wholeheartedly agrees and takes pleasure in all of Socrates' arguments against him.

However, Nicias' rebuttal is quite interesting and it would seem to succeed in excluding animals from the possibility of having courage. Socrates attacks Nicias' idea that courage is a knowledge of terrible and confidence inspiring things by asking him if he considers knowledge of future evils or future events that inspire confidence as courage also. Nicias asserts that he does. This sort of knowledge, however, would only belong to the gods or diviners. This admission is very telling of Nicias who according to Plutarch was very superstitious and a frequent visitor of the diviners. Well after this dialogue was supposed to have taken place Plutarch attributed the annihilation of the Athenian forces under Nicias at Syracuse to his terror that was inspired by the nocturnal eclipse of the moon. Consulting a soothsayer Nicias was told not to move his army because the eclipse was a bad omen. The already weakened Athenian army was a sitting duck for the Syracusans who came and destroyed the army and put Nicias to death.<sup>31</sup> Nicias could have chose to flee to safety or he could have gathered his weakened force and prepared for battle. He did neither of these options and instead chose to follow the advice of the soothsayer and remain sitting where they were completely unprepared for battle. In this way Nicias seeks knowledge of future goods and evils from the soothsayers as a substitute for courage and actually going out and making war upon the battlefield. He allows "bad omens" or his

superstitions to be his excuse for not having to act courageously and fight his enemies upon the battlefield.

It could be argued that if there had been ancient gods that sent messages through such occurrences as the nocturnal eclipse of the moon that Nicias' refusal to move the army would have been considered prudent and right, not an action that was based upon an excuse. However, it seems that an action can only be truly courageous if it is decided upon and performed by a human being independent of the gods or the heavens. It would not necessarily be considered courageous, for one to go into battle knowing that as a result of the god's power and protection he would win the battle. As we shall see Aristotle's courageous man is defined by the way he overcomes his fear in order to exert his prowess over his enemies. If an army took to the field knowing that they would win because the gods were with them, it would seem that the gods were exerting their prowess over the enemy instead of the mortal men who had called upon them. It is true that the men would be the one's performing upon the battlefield, but the gods would be working through them in order to help them succeed. For an action to be considered courageous it seems necessary that the action be performed by a human being independent of the assistance of the gods. As the gods would have more power than any human being it would seem that any contest where a man under the direction of the gods attempted to exert his prowess over another would be completely unfair and un-human and therefore completely invalid.

The *Laches* ends like most Platonic dialogues, for all of the participants eventually grow weary of their task and leave without ever resolving the issue that they set out to. The dialogue ends without ever answering the question of what courage is, which of course will grant Aristotle the

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<sup>31</sup> Plutarch. *The Rise and Fall of Athens: Nine Greek Lives*. (London; Penguin Books, 1960.) pp. 236-242

opportunity to attempt to answer the question. Even though no definition of courage was ever agreed upon what can we learn of courage from this dialogue? I think that both Laches in his first definition and later Nicias in his rebuttal of Socrates' objections describe things that very much sound like possibilities for courageous action. I think and Aristotle will agree that Laches rightfully confines courageous action to the battlefield. I also think that Nicias was correct in making the distinctions between courage, fearlessness, boldness and daring. Nicias asserts that animals and children lack the knowledge of what fear is. As a result their actions cannot be called courageous but must be identified as fearless. In the *Laches*, Socrates expands the idea of courage to encompass a broad range of possibilities, however, if we hope to enjoy a different fate than the interlocutors in the dialogue the range of possibilities must be narrowed rather than expanded.

Although no definition of courage comes from the *Laches* something of courage may be learned from the characters of the three types of men that are revealed in the dialogue. Laches, a very public and political man, believes that courage is fulfilling one's duty to his country by standing firm, fighting and if need be dying on the battlefield. His strong devotion to his country and the desire to do his duty replace his fear of death and allow him to behave courageously in battle.

Socrates is a man with philosophic knowledge but was also a man of courageous action in battle as told by Alcibiades. A combination of these qualities (the ability to use reason to see the importance of fighting for one's country and the courage to actually fight) allows Socrates to perform courageously in battle and overcome the fears and feelings of danger that he may have.

And then there is Nicias, who lacks the political convictions of Laches and the philosophic knowledge of Socrates. Nicias has attempted to devote himself to both a political and a philosophical life as a general and as a student of Damon. This is unlike either of his contemporaries who clearly chose one style of living over the other. As a result of trying to live these two types of life simultaneously without seriously devoting himself to one or the other it would seem that he becomes rather mediocre in both. Nicias was filled with fear about what was to happen in the future and as a result he tried to alleviate that fear by substituting the prophesies of his soothsayers for his having to make decisions and act with courage. According to Plutarch, his reliance on the prophesies of the soothsayers and his unwillingness to act upon his own inclinations substituting for them the divinations of others eventually led to his death at Syracuse.

Like Nicias, Laches and Socrates also die unnatural deaths. Laches dies in battle at Mantinea and Socrates is eventually put to death as well. It would seem that the deaths of Socrates and Laches happened because each believed in their convictions and way of life so strongly that they were able to overcome their fear of death and in fact die for their convictions. Socrates was put to death for practicing his philosophy and Laches died doing his duty fighting for Athens in battle. Nicias died also, but his death seemed foolish and somehow preventable or at least less noble than the others. Had he either fully retreated or fought whole-heartedly instead of refusing to move because of his reliance on the prophesies of others he would have either survived or died a noble death. Although no definition of courage survives Socrates objections it would seem according to these examples that there may be something to Laches' "steadfastness of soul" definition.

The *Laches* puts forward the idea that there are two different types of truly courageous men and other categories of men who are incapable of courageous actions. There are courageous men of action like Laches, and there are men who because of their capacity for thought are able to perform courageously when called upon like Socrates. And then of course there are other types of men who like Nicias cannot be truly courageous because they are somewhere in between without any strong conviction one way or the other and as a result they must search for a substitute for courage. Hence this is perhaps the reason the dialogue is named after Laches instead of Nicias. Laches was a courageous man of action while Nicias' reliance upon superstition made him a man of inaction.

Even though we are able to understand these things from the dialogue courage is never defined. Therefore, we leave the dialogue feeling very much like the discouraged Laches who said, "I am truly irritated, if I am unable to say what I thus perceive in my mind. For in my opinion, at least, I do perceive in my mind what courage is, and I don't know how it just now fled away from me."<sup>32</sup> Giving a definition of courage or explaining just what it is that makes an action courageous can seem to be an easy task. Everyone thinks that they know what courage is and they hope that their definition does not exclude them from the possibility of having it. But while setting out to define just exactly what it is about an act that makes it courageous we will often times find ourselves like Laches irritated that such a seemingly easy task has eluded us. With this we turn to Aristotle in the hope that he will be able to succeed where the interlocutors in the *Laches* dialogue may have failed.

## Aristotle's *Politics* and the Stage for Courageous Action

Aristotle in the *Politics*, theorized how communities came into being, and it was here that he famously claimed that man was by nature a political animal.<sup>33</sup> Since man was by nature a political animal each man on some basic level was said to have an innate desire to find and associate with other men. Once a group of these men came together and realized that they could have better lives by working together instead of working individually a city was formed. And while the city came into being for the sake of living, it was said to exist for the sake of living well.

It is in these cities that men lived and it is reasonable to assume that disputes between two or more cities could bring them to war with each other. In these contests each man would have to defend the city and in doing so defend his family and interests. It is clear that since the city and its need for defense demand the existence of courage then for Aristotle an action will only be considered courageous that is performed upon the battlefield. Courage is a public virtue that is used for the protection of the city, and so remembering the importance of the *polis* in Aristotle's *Politics* will be helpful in understanding Aristotle's view of courage.

Aristotle wrote his *Ethics* and his *Politics* at approximately the same time. The *Ethics* which came first was an explanation and description of the virtues that one needed to achieve happiness, practice virtue, and in the end be a virtuous citizen of the *polis*. The *Ethics* was the search for the goal or end toward which the science of politics would aim. It is reasonable that Aristotle

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 194 a

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<sup>33</sup> Lord, Carnes (Editor). Aristotle. *The Politics*. (The University of Chicago Press; Chicago, 1984.) 1253a1 2-3

attempted understand the purpose of political science before he would attempt to describe the workings of the *polis* in the *Politics*. The virtues described in the *Ethics* are personal and individualized and presumably upon reading it each person would make an attempt to cultivate them. If a man read and understood the *Ethics* and the end of political science then he would best be able to understand Aristotle's *Politics*. But courage and the *polis* go beyond the individual. They are both very public things. The *polis* exists for the sake of living well with one another in a city, and courage is the virtue that men use to defend the *polis* from external threats.

## The Proper Education of the Young

The *Laches* dialogue presented two problems that Aristotle attempted to answer. Before we move on to consider the larger problem of what courage is we shall, like the interlocutors in the *Laches*, first consider the place of courage in a proper education. Aristotle in his *Politics* devoted a whole book to the proper education of the young. Especially worth noting because of its relevance to the *Laches* is a section in which Aristotle discusses courage and fighting in armor and how it relates to the proper education of the young. It would seem that if such an education were good then the Spartans would be among the finest ancient examples of this, for they trained their male children for success on the battlefield from a very early age. Aristotle in speaking of both topics said of the Spartans:

The Spartans...turn out children resembling beasts by imposing severe exertions, the assumption being that this is the most advantageous thing with a view to

courage.....Superintendence must not look to a single virtue, and particularly not to this one...For neither among the other animals nor in the case of [barbarian] nations do we see courage accompanying the most savage, but rather those with tamer and lionlike characters....We know that the Spartans themselves so long as they persevered in their love of exertion, had preeminence over others, while at present they fall short of others in both gymnastic and military contests. For it was not by exercising the youth in this manner that they stood out, but merely by the fact of their training against others who did not train. The element of nobility, not what is beastlike, should have the leading role. For it is not the wolf or any other beasts that would join the contest in any noble danger, but rather a good man. Those who are overly lax with their children in this direction and leave them untutored in the necessary things turn out citizens who are in the true sense vulgar, making them useful for political expertise with a view to one task only.<sup>34</sup>

The question first under examination in the *Laches* was whether fighting in armor, or as Aristotle says "imposing severe exertions," upon the young was a proper thing to do with the aim of making their children both courageous and great men. The Spartans imposed severe exertions on their children from an early age. With raw courage as the primary focus of education Spartan children came to be like the barbarian savages. This sort of education made the Spartans great and fierce warriors, but it was only responsible for their military domin-

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<sup>34</sup> *The Politics*. 1338bl 9-14

ance in that the other nations did not "impose severe exertions" on their own children. Of course trained soldiers would be victorious over untrained ones. But when the other nations began to participate in military training they caught up with the Spartans in military might. Once the other nations began training the Spartans were no longer superior militarily and they were inferior as citizens because they were like savage animals that lacked the virtues necessary to govern themselves.

Aristotle says that a courageous man or state requires tamer lion-like characters. A lion in the wild is much more dangerous than a captive lion because it has the freedom to do as it pleases and nothing holds its raw power in check. The Spartans were like wild lions in that they were trained solely in courage and nothing else. They did not know how to hold their savageness in check because all they knew was severe exertions and fighting. Aristotle suggests that courage requires not only a tamer lion-like character, but that it also requires an element of nobility as the leading role of education. An education that taught children all of the virtues necessary for good citizenship in a regime provided necessary restraints against raw courage. Such an education produced tamer lion-like characters in that they could perform courageously when they needed to, but they could also act with civility and good will toward their fellow citizens when the state was not at war. The Spartans had little problem defending their *polis* from outside threats, however, when at peace they were ill equipped to defend their *polis* from themselves.

The Spartans erred in that they wanted to train their children to be courageous men and they got courageous but savage beasts. Instead they should have educated their children to be good and noble men infused with all of the virtues necessary

for good citizenship. Because the Spartans left their children untutored in the other virtues necessary for ruling each other and administering justice in their public affairs the Spartans became vulgar and useless citizens that were only suited for defending the city. If Aristotle had been among the interlocutors in the *Laches* he would have no doubt said that teaching children to only be courageous was going about the education of the young all the wrong way. Aristotle understood that courage cannot be treated as the guiding virtue in an educational system, but instead a man's courage must be subordinated to something else, which is perhaps the "element of nobility" that he believes should have the leading role in education. If children are to become thoughtful and useful citizens they need to be taught all the virtues necessary, of which courage is one, to defend the city not only from outside invaders but to also protect the city from themselves.

## Aristotle on Courage

Aristotle's ideas on courage can be very difficult to interpret and understand. William Ian Miller describes Aristotle on courage as "a pit of quicksand, frustratingly implausible in some ways. But it is he, not Plato or Socrates, who rightly sets the terms for later philosophical discussions of courage."<sup>35</sup> Plato in the *Laches* formulated the question of courage that Aristotle would take over in his *Ethics* and attempt to answer. Plato's entire dialogue was a conversation aimed at answering this question; however, it ended without solving any of the questions or issues pertaining to courage. While Plato served us well in formulating the questions that need to be considered when thinking of courage we shall now turn

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<sup>35</sup> Miller, William Ian. *The Mystery of Courage* (Cambridge, MA; Harvard University Press, 2000.) p. 47

to Aristotle to see if he can provide a definition of courage and answer the question that the others could not. Aristotle's conception of courage replaced Plato's, and generations of resulting philosophical theories, reflections and meditations upon the idea reflect the Aristotelian notion of courage in some way. While Plato may have helped to show the importance of understanding courage, Aristotle has actually helped generations of thinkers and students to consider the problem of courage in more useful and interesting ways.

## **Courage and the Irrational Part of the Soul**

In Book I of the *Ethics*, Aristotle stated that a "man who is truly concerned about politics seems to devote special attention to virtue, since it is his aim to make the citizens good and law abiding."<sup>36</sup> Aristotle further clarifies what virtue is by claiming that it is not excellence of the body but excellence of the soul and that therefore the student of politics must study the soul.<sup>37</sup> As both a student of politics and a student of courage it is necessary to understand how the virtue of courage relates to one's soul. Aristotle believed that the soul was divided into two elements, an irrational and a rational part, and he considered courage to be a disposition or virtue of the irrational part of the soul.<sup>38</sup> The virtues that Aristotle discusses throughout his *Ethics* are all considered to train these elements of the soul in certain ways. The irrational part of the soul can be well ordered or badly ordered. When the irrational part of the soul is well ordered it is considered to possess courage. Of all the virtues discussed in the *Ethics* only the virtues of courage and self-

control are considered to be dispositions under the direction of the irrational part of the soul.

The irrational part of the soul is further broken down into two parts. First, there is a vegetative element, which is common to all creatures because it is responsible for the nurture and growth of the body. This part does not partake in reason because it accounts for the body's natural growth processes. This is illustrated by the fact that a man or beast grows from a newborn to an adult and the circulatory and respiratory systems function continuously without command or without the individual using his reasoning to make it happen.

However, according to Aristotle, there is "another integral element of the soul which, though irrational, still does partake of reason in some way."<sup>39</sup> It is in this the second section of the irrational part of the soul that courage originates. Perhaps the reason why Miller believes Aristotle's idea of courage to be like a pit of quicksand is because his explanation of this part of the soul is left undefined and mostly ambiguous. From his discussion of it there is nothing to grasp firmly and hold onto, and while Aristotle attempts to clarify his discussion of courage it seems that the more he moves and thrashes about the more hopelessly stuck we seem to become. He states that, "there is something in the soul besides the rational element, which opposes and reacts against it...but it too seems to partake of reason...and the morally strong man accepts the leadership of reason, and is perhaps more obedient still in a self-controlled and courageous man, since in him everything is in harmony with the voice of reason."<sup>40</sup>

If a truly courageous man is a man who manifests all of Aristotle's virtues then not only would the virtues of the rational

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<sup>36</sup> NE. 1102a 8

<sup>37</sup> NE. 1102a 16, 23

<sup>38</sup> NE. 1102a 27

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<sup>39</sup> NE. 1102b 13

<sup>40</sup> NE. 1102b 21

part of the soul follow reason, but his courageousness, a virtue of the irrational part of his soul would also obey reason. In this man both the irrational and rational parts of the soul accept and are in harmony with the voice of reason. It should not be a surprise that once again a philosopher has somehow aligned courageous action with reason.

Let us consider for a moment how the rational and the irrational part of the soul are related if they are related at all. Why is courage considered a virtue of the irrational part of the soul? Courage is a virtue of the irrational part of the soul because it governs fear, and fear is considered a passion in that it is not something rational. Courage is the virtue that makes one handle fear well, and cowardice is the vice that results from handling fear badly. To be considered courageous each man must discover how to manage this passion as reason suggests. Self-control, the other virtue of the irrational part of the soul, governs the bodily passions just as courage governs fear. Fear and the bodily pleasures have no foundation in reason unlike the virtues of the rational part of the soul. One may attempt to reason that he will not be afraid in battle, but unless he has arrived upon the battlefield and has been confronted with that fear, no one knows how he will respond to it. Courage and self-control differ from the virtues of the rational part of the soul in that each attempts to harness the passions of men, which are irrational feelings, in order that each man may handle himself well when submitted to the pressure to give himself to his passions.

So if courage and self-control do not concern themselves with the rational impulses then why did Aristotle say that the irrational part of the soul involved reason and that a courageous man is most in harmony with the voice of reason? Aristotle states later that courage and self-control "possess reason in the sense that we say it is

reasonable to accept the advice of a father, not in the sense that we have a rational understanding of mathematical propositions."<sup>41</sup> The advice of a father or an elder in general is seen to possess more wisdom than the advice of one's peers. This wisdom has been gained over time because a father has more life experience than his son does.

I think that Aristotle's distinction between two types of reasoning, advice and mathematical propositions, illuminate this problem interestingly. The advice from one's father is a collection of observations based upon experience, and while it may be factual and reasonable it need not be based upon fact or reason. Conversely, mathematical propositions are not based upon anything other than cut and dry facts. There is nothing cut and dry about courage and there is not a precise explanation or theory that can exactly define it, or make a person show it.

A man that performs courageous action possesses the reason to be able to perform courageous acts. This specific type of reason is somewhat ambiguous because it is not clearly manifest but rather it is like taking the advice of a father. As a man he possesses the reasoning of mathematical propositions in that the factual information that he has learned throughout his life is responsible for his place in society. It is simply true that a man cannot be raised ignorant of all factual information, and the courageous man is certainly not this man.

The courageous man is able to possess both types of reasoning and use them each in their proper time and place. A man when called upon to perform courageous action does not possess reasoning that is cut and dry like a mathematical proposition. He may not know or understand the exact reason for doing something but only that such an action and overcoming his fear is the right thing to do. The performance of an action known to be right

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<sup>41</sup> NE. 1102b 32



attaches nobility to that action. Perhaps this is why Aristotle says that the courageous man is most in harmony with the voice of reason. He knows and accepts the leadership of both types of reason when it is the proper time to do so.

Aristotle said that the student of politics must study the soul and he also said that the study of politics is not precise.<sup>42</sup> It follows then that the study of the soul and the virtues that make it up also cannot be precise. I suspect that the reason so many people get frustrated when trying to understand Aristotle on courage is because they want a precise answer, one that will apply in all situations and at all times. However, the study of courage and the reason or rationality that it possesses does not provide one precise answer like a mathematical proposition, and the answers that it does provide are not always clear or convincing. There are no variables that could be substituted into the equation Action "A" plus Circumstances "B" equals "courage."

## The Battlefield and Aristotle's Courageous Man

At the very beginning of his discussion of courage in Book III of the *Ethics* Aristotle relates that courage is the mean with respect to fear and confidence. Fear and confidence are the two passions that the courageous man must overcome. If he is able to succeed then he is said to possess courage, but if he is unable to conquer his passions then he proves his cowardice or his recklessness. Aristotle continues, "we fear all evils, e.g., disrepute, poverty, disease, friendlessness, death. But it does not seem that a courageous man is concerned with all of these."<sup>43</sup> His idea of courage, right from

the very beginning, conflicts with the conception of courage held by Socrates, for he believed that it was possible that one could be courageous facing disease and the other struggles of everyday life.

It seems that right from the beginning Aristotle starts squeezing down on Socrates' definition of courage taking his broad deliberations of courageous action and substituting them with a drastically narrower consideration of courage. Aristotle begins this by saying that man should fear death. Death is the end of one's life and as no living person has experienced death it is not only the end of one's being but it is also one of life's great unknowns. People tend to fear what they do not know or cannot understand and as such death is something that is properly feared.

However, not just a fear of any death is acceptable for Aristotle's definition of courageous action. In fact, Aristotle attacks Plato again and specifically mentions that the fear of death by drowning or disease is not an example of an opportunity for a man to show courageous action.<sup>44</sup> Aristotle states, "what kind of death, then, does bring out courage? Doubtless the noblest kind, and that is death in battle, for in battle a man is faced by the greatest and most noble of dangers."<sup>45</sup>

Immediately upon this revelation Aristotle ventured his own definition of courage. "We might define as courageous a man who fearlessly faces a noble death and any situations that bring a sudden death ...brought about by war...furthermore, circumstances which bring out courage are those in which a man can show his prowess or where he can die a noble death."<sup>46</sup> In comparison to Socrates, Aristotle's definition of courage is very narrow. For Aristotle,

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<sup>42</sup> NE. 1102a 16, 23. and 1094b 23

<sup>43</sup> NE. 1115a 10

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<sup>44</sup> NE. 1115a 28

<sup>45</sup> NE. 1115a 30

<sup>46</sup> NE. 1115a 32-35. 1115b 5

there can only be courage if there are battlefields and there can only be battlefields if there is war. If there is not war then true courage cannot be said to exist. So it seems that the city and its need for defense from foreign enemies upon the battlefield are the occasions for courage.

What is it about the battlefield that makes it the only sphere of courageous action for Aristotle? Courage has been said to be the mean between fear and confidence, and it would be fair to say that a simple definition of courage would be performing well despite one's fear of performing that action. From this it is clear that fear must necessarily be present in order to inspire courageous action. It seems that Socrates in his discussion of courage is willing to consider any action courageous that overcomes every type of fear that one could face, for he wants to find a definition of courage that encompasses everything that one may encounter in daily life. Aristotle completely rejects this idea. At the most basic level courage is not simply based upon fear but the fear of death—the highest of all fears. But for Aristotle it is even more than this. It is not just the fear of death but the fear of death on the battlefield—the noblest of all deaths.

According to Aristotle there are many evils that a man could be said to fear such as "disrepute, poverty, disease, friendlessness and death."<sup>47</sup> However, he believes that some of these are right to fear; for example, a man should fear disrepute, and if he does not he is considered shameless. Also fearing that insults will be made to a family member does not make a person a coward. Aristotle says that men who have no fear of all these things resemble the courageous man but are not truly courageous.

The fearful thing that most concerns the courageous man is death upon the battlefield. It is true that poverty and disease are

similar to the battlefield in their ability to cause death, however, facing such deaths are not considered to be courageous. Aristotle says that "death is the end, and once a man is dead it seems that there is no longer anything good or evil for him."<sup>48</sup> This is true of all kinds of death, however, death on the battlefield is different than all other kinds of death. He says that in battle man is faced by the greatest and noblest of dangers. In addition to providing the fear of death in battle, the battlefield also affords the proper scope of action for a man to prove his courageousness by actively showing his prowess over his enemies in a fight. The battlefield allows each man the opportunity to demonstrate through his actions whether or not he has been able to conquer his fear of death.

A man who will die from a disease knows that death is imminent. His body feels sick or tired, and he can no longer perform tasks that were once easy for him. Whether he knows he has a disease or not, he can feel his body weakening and beginning to shut down. He has no choice in the matter of his death. He cannot halt the spread or progress of the disease, he cannot choose to get it. He has contracted the disease unwillingly. He knows he will die soon and has time to prepare for his passing. He certainly may be fearful of dying, but he will experience it regardless of his fear, and whether he is able to conquer this fear or not is immaterial. He will still die whether he is afraid of dying or not. The same could be said of a poverty-stricken man who may die of starvation. He has no choice in the matter and he will still die regardless of whether he is able to conquer his fear of dying or not. These types of death are not courageous because we may only see if a man possesses courage when he is consciously acting and showing his prowess over his mortal foes in order to overcome his fear of death. A death

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<sup>47</sup> NE. 1115a 10

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<sup>48</sup> NE. 1115a 26

by starvation, drowning or disease does not provide this opportunity.

The courageous man, unlike the diseased or starved man, is in his prime as a man. Before a battle he is young, tough, and perfectly healthy. Typically sick and weak persons do not rush out onto the battlefield to fight a war. Armies are usually composed of the best and toughest of the society. The courageous man can perform his daily tasks with ease, and he fully expects to live a long life. He does not think about dying very often because such an outcome would be unlikely for a man in such good physical condition. However, if he is called to the battlefield he goes to fight even though he may possibly die.

The time of death for a perfectly healthy man is uncertain, while the death of a poverty-stricken or a diseased man is all too certain. While the diseased man does not have a choice between life and death, the soldier does in most cases. Many times he does not have to fight. He does not have to risk his life. He can go home and avoid the battle if he chooses. He may fear death, especially so young, with so much yet to do and so much to lose. But the courageous man conquers this fear, fights, and voluntarily risks his life anyway. The diseased man has no choice, while the courageous man does have a choice to avoid danger and he chooses not to. The decision to stay in his ranks and fight with his comrades combined with the actions that he performs on the battlefield determines his courageousness.

If death by poverty or disease is not the sphere of action for the courageous man what about a sailor facing a death at sea? He too is in his prime, and he too has the choice of not risking his life when he decides to become a sailor for he could choose another profession. He still becomes a sailor despite knowing the risks involved. While this scenario is more similar to death in battle than poverty or disease it is not courageous

action. None of these examples are courageous because they do not provide an opportunity for man to die a noble death, nor do they allow him the chance to exert his prowess over another man.

Courage can only be shown upon the battlefield where each man has an opportunity to show his prowess and to live and die by his own actions. This is why other forms of death cannot be considered courageous for Aristotle. On the battlefield a man faces another human being head on in a fight to the death. Human beings are more or less equal in their faculties, reasoning, and abilities to a very large degree. For example, a human being fighting another human being is more of a contest between equals than a human being fighting a dog. Because of superior skill or ability one combatant will be victorious on the battlefield and one will lose. It is even possible that both combatants may die from injuries sustained in the conflict. However, each man is facing a human being with the same general capabilities that human minds and bodies entail.

To say that men fight an equal human being on the battlefield in no way implies that collectively the battles must be between nations equal in size, strength and ability in order for courage to be present. When an army is outnumbered or clearly going to lose they still can be considered courageous. Courage is not necessarily in the equality of the fight but in how each man acts despite his intense fear of death. A rash person doesn't feel fear and the coward cannot act well when he is confronted with fear. The courageous man both feels fear and acts well.

When a man is facing death by a disease he is fighting against something which is completely beyond his control, whereas in battle his actions control his fate to a large degree. The man will eventually die from the disease and there is no chance for him to show his prowess by vanquishing

the disease. He is not in head to head combat with another human being, for he is fighting something that is inhuman. When fighting a deadly disease there is little hope that man can prevail victorious, however, when fighting another man there is a chance that he will win the fight.

The same may be said for death at sea. Man is not an equal power with the power of nature. Nature, just like a disease, is inherently more powerful than man. A man in a boat fighting fifty-foot waves is always going to lose and there is no chance that he will conquer the waves and show his prowess over nature. When fighting other human beings men assume the risk of death upon the battlefield and they have the opportunity to show their prowess over one another.

When fighting against an inhuman opponent, victory is impossible and there is no motive other than an attempt at the man's own individual self-preservation. In battle each man has more of a choice. He can fight or he can choose not to fight. The fact that he chooses to fight and risk dying is what makes him courageous. A man who fights a disease has no such choice. He can fight and still die in the end or he can give up and die. If given the choice to go head to head with a deadly disease or against giant tsunami swells who would ever choose to do so and why?

I think there is something to the Aristotle's belief that upon the battlefield men die noble deaths. Men are upon the battlefield fighting for their *polis*. They are not encountering each other as personal foes but as public foes of warring nations. They are not individuals, they are part of a larger whole. Aristotle says that courageous action can be found in circumstances in which a man can show his prowess or where he can die a noble death. Both of these options occur simultaneously upon the battlefield. If a man exerts his prowess over another and is

victorious on the field of battle his action could be said to be courageous. The same man who just as easily may have lost the fight and died may also be considered courageous because he died a noble death.

This raises an interesting problem. If it is possible for both combatants to have courage then in World War II must we grant that those who fought for the Nazi cause were courageous? Must we bestow the same upon the hijackers of the airliners on September 11th who believed themselves to be warriors in a jihad? Much to our relief the answer to both of these questions is no. As we will see the motives for fighting are very important to Aristotle. Men must fight for correct motives and those motives must be noble. The Nazi's Aryan Race, their extermination of the Jews, and their efforts to fight and die in order to preserve a regime based upon horribly evil ideas cannot be said to be noble. It cannot be said that the soldiers who were inspired by their leaders to fight for these motives were fighting for the right motives properly understood. If they were fighting for their *polis* and their *polis* was fundamentally evil wouldn't their actions lack the nobility needed for courageous action? Since fighting for evil motives cannot be said to be noble such actions would not fall under the category of virtue or noble action and would be missing an important component of courageous action.

However, there have been accounts by those who fought against the Nazi's that certain German soldiers did indeed perform courageously at certain times. How can this be? If we have said that the Nazi's were not courageous then how can we admit that individual German soldiers may have acted courageously? We have asserted that courage is an important public virtue that is needed for the protection of the city from outside threats. However, courage may also be considered a private virtue in that only individuals that make up the city can possess

it. Aristotle noted that it was the way an individual faced a noble danger and feared his own death that brought out courage. Aristotle noted that death in battle was the noblest death and that fighting in battle was the noblest of dangers. He added, "this is corroborated by the honors which states as well as monarchs bestow upon courage."<sup>49</sup> While a man may die for his city upon the battlefield and be awarded posthumously for his courage the nobility of his death belongs to him and does not have to necessarily be equated with the cause for which he fought. A German that others believed to possess courage may have fought for the evil Nazi cause, but this in no way can take away from the fact that he as an individual came to terms with his fear of death, showed his prowess over his foes and behaved well despite his fear. In this way courage is both a public and a private virtue, for cities may "corroborate" by their honors that a soldier's death in battle was noble, but they do not make those deaths noble.

Similarly, the terrorists of September 11th, and indeed all suicide martyr terrorists and bombers are not courageous because they are not dying for the right motives. Except for the pilots the hijackers of September 11th were not even fighting other men. They murdered themselves and others because they thought that by doing so they would be rewarded in the afterlife. Suicide martyrs do not engage the enemy face to face upon the battlefield. They sacrifice their lives without a head to head fight in order to kill an unsuspecting enemy. Suicide bombers that perform such actions for the hope of some future benefit or reward are not examples of courageous action because they do not fear death as the end but rather they see it as the beginning of something much better.

The courageous man "will fear what is fearful; but he will endure it in the right way and as reason directs for the sake of acting nobly."<sup>50</sup> It is important to understand that the courageous man still feels fear. For Aristotle, courage is not the elimination of fear altogether but coming to terms with it. Because courage is a disposition to be cultivated each man throughout his life gradually learns how to act courageously and as he learns to act courageously by habit he becomes truly courageous. When the courageous man is faced with a fearful situation he uses his reason to understand how to deal with his fear and why he must do so. He must overcome his fear in order to act nobly, if he is unable to do this it stands to reason that his inaction would be ignoble. A man that is unable to overcome his fear and is paralyzed with it when action is needed is a coward.

As alluded to, it is important for Aristotle if one is to show true courage that he must "endure and fear the right things, for the right motive, in the right manner, and at the right time...for a courageous man feels and acts according to the merits of each case and as reason guides him."<sup>51</sup> These qualifications further narrow the definition of courage. In order to have courage one must fear the right thing—death in battle. He must overcome this fear and must decide from the merits of each case whether the situation calls for fighting and risking his life. If the situation requires that he fight he must overcome his fear of death in battle and act nobly. He must act for the right motive—because doing so is noble and doing otherwise is base. In order to be truly courageous his motives cannot be for any sort of personal or economic gain. Among other places this is where the Germans and terrorists fail once again. By their actions the

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<sup>49</sup> NE. 1115a 31-32

<sup>50</sup> NE. 1115b 12

<sup>51</sup> NE. 1115b 17-21

leaders of the Nazis were hoping to gain the domination of the world while the terrorists were hoping to gain an eternal reward. He must act in the right manner—pursuing his foe face to face upon the battlefield. And he must act at the right time—when he is faced with an enemy that is trying to exert his prowess over him.

Aristotle, in perhaps his best description of courage, says, "courageous men...are keen in the thick of action but calm beforehand."<sup>52</sup> A man of courage shows his prowess over his enemies in the heat of battle, and before the battle he has a steeled resolve and knows that he must fight because it is the right thing to do. If he is to die then he shall have a noble death. But he cannot let his fear of death scare him from his duty. If each soldier in an army were scared from their duty the polis would fall to the enemy without resistance and all of the citizens not just the soldiers would be enslaved or killed. The willingness of the courageous man to die in battle hopefully insures, if he is victorious, the safety and continued well-being of the *polis*.

## The Courage of the Citizen Soldier

Satisfied that he had sufficiently described the nature of courage Aristotle ventured forward with qualities that in his estimation people confused with courage. In explaining these qualities Aristotle further clarifies his idea of courage. He noted that people often confused them with true courage. This seems to mean that there is something in each of these qualities that is very nearly courageous, but that there is also something in them that is somehow lacking the virtue. He stressed that the qualities similar to courage are not true courage, although the first quality "the courage of the

citizen soldier" he says is most similar to true courage. Aristotle describes the "courage of the citizen soldier" by saying, "citizens, it seems, endure dangers because the laws and customs penalize and stigmatize them if they do not, and honor them if they do."<sup>53</sup>

Instead of acting for the "right motive" as the courageous man does, the citizen soldier acts either because he is afraid of incurring shame from the polis or he hopes to in some way be rewarded for his service. The courageous man also is motivated by a reward for his service in the survival of his city, but he does not fight only for this motive. He fights on the battlefield because it is an opportunity to act nobly and show his prowess. The citizen soldier is motivated solely by the fear of punishment or the hope of reward. Courageous action ought to be motivated not because it is forced or demanded but because such action is noble. The citizen soldier is not truly courageous because he is not self-motivated to perform the right actions. Instead he is motivated by the thought of how he will suffer if he does not perform the right action or how much he will gain if he does. It is interesting that Aristotle likens the courage of the citizen soldier as being most like true courage. Everything about the actions performed by the citizen soldier appears truly courageous. It is the impurity of his motives that disqualify him in the end.

Since the courage of the citizen soldier is the most similar to courage it deserves a thorough examination so that we may see what about it is courageous and what is not. I am reminded of a story in Herodotus' *Histories* concerning Aristodemus and the Spartan Three Hundred at the Battle of Thermopylae. Before the battle began Leonidas the Spartan king and military leader released Aristodemus and a man

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<sup>52</sup> NE. 1116a 8

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<sup>53</sup> NE. 1116a 18

named Eurytus who were two members of the Three Hundred, from the responsibility of taking up arms in the upcoming battle. Both soldiers were suffering from severe pains in their eyes and they had difficulty seeing, so he allowed them to rest and relax nearby in Alpeni.

Once they arrived at their destination they were informed that the Spartans and Persians were engaged in heavy fighting. Although he could hardly see, Eurytus, knowing the shame Spartan society would put upon him if he did not fight, asked his slave to hand him his sword and lead him back to the battlefield. Upon returning to the battlefield the slave returned Eurytus to his comrades where he attempted to charge with his regiment. However, as can be imagined for a blind man upon the battlefield he was quickly and easily killed when he made the charge.

Meanwhile, Aristodemus because of his affliction chose to stay behind, and when the Three Hundred were slaughtered upon the battlefield because of his luck or his great misfortune he was the only surviving member of the Three Hundred. Aristodemus upon surviving the battle decided to return home to Sparta and when he arrived he was met with tremendous insult and degradation. The people were furious and heaped shame upon him that would last for the rest of his life and even after his death. They even gave him a nickname that he was to be called from that time on, "Aristodemus the Coward."<sup>54</sup>

The members of the Three Hundred had what would appear to be Aristotle's idea of the courage of the citizen soldier. There was a profound sense of honor and shame attached to courage and cowardice. It seems that Spartan society had a pretty strict maxim that was unwritten but known by all that one should come home victorious or not

come home at all. The Spartans were fighting the battle for the glory of Sparta, and they could not return home unless they had achieved victory.

Even though Eurytus and Aristodemus had legitimate medical excuses, which should have excused them from any shameful punishment, Eurytus was not willing to take that chance and he ran into battle even though he could not see. Even though Aristodemus most likely understood the future result of his decision he still made the choice to stay away from the battle and he suffered life-long consequences.

Who seems the most courageous from this story Eurytus or Aristodemus? If one is using the Aristotelian definition of courage then Aristodemus the coward would seem to be more of an example, although an imperfect one, of this type of courageous man. Reason guided Aristodemus and so he lived to fight successfully and courageously later on. Aristodemus reasonably made the choice not to fight at Thermopylae because he was blinded by an eye infection. Eurytus would seem to have been reckless instead of truly courageous when he charged into the battle blindly.

The citizen soldier is like Eurytus who chose to fight even though he would certainly die rather than endure the shame of returning to Sparta as a surviving member of a defeated army. Aristotle when discussing the courage of the citizen soldier noted that, "courageous action ought to be motivated not by compulsion, but by the fact that it is noble."<sup>55</sup> In his recklessness to overcome possible shame that would be heaped upon him, Eurytus actively sought his own death. For it cannot be said that a blind man running into battle was performing as reason directed for the sake of acting nobly. For a blind man it certainly is not reasonable to fight in battle. Aristotle believed that

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<sup>54</sup> Herodotus. *The History of Herodotus*. (7.229-232)

<sup>55</sup> NE. 1116b 2-3

nothing was more terrifying than the thought of dying in battle, but for Eurytus being shamed by the community spurred him to action because in his mind it was even more terrifying than death. But Aristodemus, who chose to stay behind despite the threat of punishment, survived and lived to fight another day after the infection had passed. Herodotus related that at the Battle of Plataea:

The best of the Spartans was Aristodemus, in my judgment, who, because he alone of the Three Hundred survived Thermopylae, had been shamed and dishonored. After him the bravest was Posidonius...and when there was some dispute about who was actually the bravest, those Spartans who were present gave as their judgment that Aristodemus was but that he had openly wanted to die to redress the dishonor that lay on him...but that Posidonius was not seeking death in his bravery and so he was that much the better man of the two....All those I have mentioned were killed in the fight and were decorated for honor, except Aristodemus. But Aristodemus, because he wanted to die, for the reason just stated was not honored.<sup>56</sup>

Aristodemus not only fought at Plataea, but his performance was the best of the Spartans. Those responsible for judging the conduct of each soldier agreed that Aristodemus was seemingly the bravest upon the battlefield. However, as courage and preserving the *polis* were the foundations of Spartan society how could they proclaim "Aristodemus the coward" the bravest of the Spartans at Plataea? They accused Aristodemus of actively seeking his death to redress his past shame and

dishonor, but there was one problem with their supposition—Aristodemus lived. Could "Aristodemus the coward" have been all along the most courageous of the Spartans?

Aristotle said that the courageous man "endures and fear the right things, for the right motive, in the right manner, and at the right time...for a courageous man feels and acts according to the merits of each case and as reason guides him."<sup>57</sup> Eurytus feared the wrong thing—being shamed by the community. He fought for the wrong motive—to avoid being shamed by the community. He neglected his reason, but most of all he fought at the wrong time—he was blind. The fear of punishment that he knew he would receive if he came home alive caused Eurytus to act unreasonably and persuaded him to run blindly into battle. Eurytus was compelled to fight because of his fear of punishment from the *polis* even though he was blind and as a result he is a very good example of the courage of the citizen soldier.

### Other Qualities Similar to Courage

Next, Aristotle brings up the example of professional soldiers. Since they fight on the battlefield regularly it would seem on the surface that they would possess courage as much as anyone would. However, professional soldiers are not considered to be courageous because they do not fight for the right motive. They are fighting for pay and they are indifferent toward the cause in which they are engaged. Aristotle hints that if a professional soldier sincerely believes that he is about to die then he will turn into a coward and run away from danger. It is their experience in fighting and the conditioning their bodies have received to be excellent warriors that

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<sup>56</sup> Herodotus. *The History of Herodotus*. (9.71)

<sup>57</sup> NE. 1115b 17-21



makes them feared and seem to have true courage. But because they are not fighting for the right reasons their actions lack the nobility of the courageous man. Aristotle says that citizen militia will stand their ground and die while professional soldiers are the first to run away. The militia prefer death to being disgraced upon the battlefield while the professional soldiers fear death more than disgrace and do not mind fleeing the battlefield like cowards if their death appears to be imminent. According to Aristotle, because professional soldiers have no loyalty to the cause for which they fight they are unwilling to attempt to master their fear of death and this is why they cannot be considered courageous.

Third, Aristotle notes that a man of spirited temper may be confused as a man of courage. He considers a man with a spirited temper to be one who has been injured in some way and as a result he becomes like a "wild beast and turns on those who wounded him."<sup>58</sup> This is not considered to be true courage because the man with a spirited temper is motivated to fight by the pain he has received and rushes into action without letting his reason guide him. Because he is motivated by his pain and does not think clearly about what he is doing he does not feel the fear that is needed to be overcome for an action to be considered courageous. He may be "keen in the thick of action" but as he rushes into the fight he has had no opportunity to ponder what he is doing and he does not understand that he may die as a result of his actions. He is motivated by the pain that was inflicted upon him not by the knowledge that fighting another man on the battlefield and exerting his prowess over him is a noble action. He is not guided by reason for his passions and his emotions block out his reason and spur him to immediate action. According to Aristotle,

the man with a spirited temper is not courageous because reason plays no part in deciding how he should act.

Fourth, Aristotle states that optimists are not courageous people. Optimists are confident because they believe in their strength, they are unaccustomed to ever losing, and they think that they will never get hurt. The courageous man is inspired to do what is noble and is willing to fight in battle to achieve his aim. The optimist is willing to fight in battle because he has never lost before and his power has never seriously been challenged. His confidence is not gained through reason and reflection as the courageous man but through his knowledge of his past success and experience. According to Aristotle, the optimist is not courageous because he lacks the genuine fear that the courageous man feels.

Aristotle continues discussing the optimist saying "it is a mark of even greater courage to be fearless and unruffled when suddenly faced with a terrifying situation than when the danger was clear beforehand."<sup>59</sup> When the danger is clear beforehand it is possible for the courageous man to contemplate and overcome his fear because he understands what he is getting into and he understands that his actions are noble. When a man acts courageously during a sudden and terrifying situation it shows that he has mastered his fear to such a degree that he does not even have to think about what he has to do in any given situation. He automatically knows what needs to be done, and that his actions are both needed and noble. Since he has mastered his fear so well he is able to do the noble thing quickly and with little thought.

Finally, Aristotle declares that people who act in ignorance of any danger cannot be said to be courageous. If a man

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<sup>58</sup> NE. 1116b 25

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<sup>59</sup> NE. 1117a 17-20

does not understand that what he is doing could possibly end his life he cannot have ever contemplated the danger of that action. He is acting without fear because he is ignorant of the danger involved. He does not understand what he is doing and since there is no fear he cannot fear the right things, for the right motive, in the right manner, at the right time. Because he is ignorant of the danger full and informed reason cannot be said to guide him. According to Aristotle the man ignorant of danger is not courageous because he is unaware that he is in danger and as a result he feels no fear at all.

Aristotle wraps up his discussion of courage with a brief description of it in relation to pleasure and pain. "Death and wounds will be painful for a courageous man and he will suffer them unwillingly, but he will endure them because it is noble to do so."<sup>60</sup> The courageous man is not a god; the wounds that he receives are painful to him, as they are to everyone else. The courageous man does not go into battle hoping to receive wounds; he suffers them only unwillingly but he does so because such action is noble.

"The happier he is the more pain death will bring him. Life is more worth living for such a man than for anyone else, and he stands to lose the greatest goods, and realizes that fact, and that is painful. But he is no less courageous for that, and perhaps rather more so."<sup>61</sup> The more a man is happy, prosperous and successful the more courageous that man is considered to be because he stands the most to lose in death.

## **CONCLUSION**

### **How is Nobility Related to Courage?**

Aristotle on courage has been likened to a pit of quicksand because it seems that the more you attempt to understand the virtue the more that you are confused by it. Aristotle gives a definition of the courageous man and he confines his sphere of operation to the battlefield. But there is something ambiguous in Aristotle's definition that perhaps prohibits the problem of courage from being solved. After all, courage is not like a mathematical proposition there is no precise answer to the problem of courage. Aristotle puts forth an answer to Plato's problem of defining courage but in the end his definition stops short of completely explaining it. The ambiguity in Aristotle's definition of courage lies in the idea of nobility. Aristotle frequently discusses the courageous man as being willing to face a "noble death" and "noble danger," and the courageous man acts as reason directs for the sake of acting "nobly." How does nobility relate to courage and why doesn't he ever make an attempt to define the "nobility" of the courageous man? These are questions that are very difficult if not impossible to answer based upon the material in the text, for Aristotle never exactly explains nobility and how it relates to courage.

It seems though that the previous sections on Aristotelian courage would be somehow incomplete, however, without at least some attempt at figuring out just what this "nobility" is. It is interesting to note that Aristotle did not directly explain nobility in the *Ethics*, and before making this attempt we should wonder why he left it undefined? At the very beginning of this discussion of Aristotelian courage we saw that Aristotle explained in the *Politics* how courage

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<sup>60</sup> NE. 1117b 8

<sup>61</sup> NE. 1117b 10-12

related to the proper education of the young. Using the Spartans as an example he noted that educating the young to only be courageous made them beastlike and bad overall citizens in the end. A city that places such a high standard upon courageous action produces men that are usually at best only capable of achieving the courage of the citizen soldier. Men in these societies do not fight because doing so is noble and doing otherwise is base, but they fight because they are in a way forced to. If they do not fight in battle they will be shamed and disgraced for the rest of their lives. This mentality causes men to fear being called a coward more than they fear death, which is unnatural according to Aristotle who believed that death should be the most fearful thing of all. This all resulted from the Spartan's belief that one should come home victorious or not come home at all. A society that holds courage so highly also believes cowardice to be the greatest character flaw of all and as such it is feared even more than death.

This is all very clear in the story of Aristodemus the coward and the Spartan Three Hundred. Even though Eurystus was blind, and could not fight he stumbled blindly to the field at Thermopylae and was quickly killed. Reason or the desire to perform noble action did not guide Eurystus. The fear of being shamed caused him to act as he did. Such action cannot be considered courageous, and it exposes a major flaw in the Spartan's idea that courage should be the only virtue inculcated in the young from an early age. The Spartans were victorious only so long as the other nations did not train their men to fight in battle. However, once the other nations trained their soldiers, not only to be courageous but also in the virtues of good citizenship, the Spartans were surpassed and seemingly doomed.

The other nations that presumably let "the element of nobility" take the prominent

role in the education of their children produced men that were not only prepared for the rigors of the battlefield but were also prepared to follow and use their reason in order to govern both themselves and their passions on the battlefield and within the *polis*. A proper education for the young would teach both the nature of noble action and how to properly reason, so that each man would be best prepared to not only conquer his natural fear of death on the battlefield when the time came but also live within the *polis* as a good citizen. Eurystus and the Spartans were not educated in this way, and as a result they performed foolishly in battle. The Spartan culture of shame was like the idea of modern peer pressure in that a man was made to suffer if he did not conform to the ideals and actions of the group. Societies that pressure their soldiers in this way create lemming-like men who are willing to be killed needlessly only because everyone else will be killed. Societies that train men to be courageous and stigmatize cowardice force men to perform courageously and as a result they snuff out the ability of each man to reason for himself in order to decide his actions. It seems that there was nothing noble about the actions of Eurystus, in fact his actions could only be classified as foolish. Men that are trained in this way according to Aristotle are beastlike and are useful for only one task within the city and that is fighting and dying for it.

The element of nobility in education teaches men to use their reasoning in order to be good citizens useful for many tasks within the city because each man is taught to understand his individual importance, function, and place within the society. Not only must men be able to defend the city, but they must also be able to interact together peacefully and govern themselves. Men trained according to the element of nobility are not lemmings, and they will not do something only because everyone else

does it. When they act they are able to understand the reason and necessity for their actions whether it be in the city or upon the battlefield. Aristotle noted that, "it is not the wolf or the other beasts that would join the contest in any noble danger, but rather a good man."<sup>62</sup> When there is a noble danger, which is the danger that the courageous man faces, it is not men like the Spartans who succeed in the end but the men who are trained to recognize nobility and what it requires.

While it is never spelled out directly in the text it seems that nobility is closely tied to understanding what it means to be a good citizen and being able to recognize and confront both internal and external dangers to the *polis* in a reasonable way. It seems, although it is never textually confirmed, that the "noble death" and "noble danger" that the courageous man risks upon the battlefield is his willingness to perform reasoned self-sacrifice in battle for the *polis*. It could immediately be noted that Eurytus was both willing and in fact did die at Thermopylae for his *polis*. However, that is not what is meant by this idea for we have already established that his action was not reasonable and because of the stigma that Sparta placed upon cowardice it is unclear how truly willing he was to perform as he did.

Aristotle's courageous man does not want to die in battle, and in fact he fears such a death. He is able to use his reason to understand when he should fight and he is able to conquer his fear, perform well, and risk being killed for his *polis*. He uses his reason to understand that it is necessary to act at the right time, in the right manner, for the right motive, for the sake of acting nobly. While his courage benefits the *polis*, it is an individualized virtue and a sign of his personal excellence. The closest that Aristotle comes to endorsing this idea in his

*Ethics* is when he stated that, "in battle a man is faced by the greatest and most noble of dangers. This is corroborated by the honors which states as well as monarchs bestow upon courage."<sup>63</sup> The *polis* corroborates or accepts and confirms that the actions of the courageous man are performed in the face of the noblest of dangers. The *polis* also honors the courageous man for his actions upon the battlefield. It is true of both past and present regimes that nations honor their citizens for courage, but do not necessarily honor them for any of the other virtues. It seems that a state would honor a man for his courage because it's survival clearly has a stake in the matter. If the community is full of stingy, petty, grouchy, boorish people (corresponding vices to more of Aristotle's virtues) the community can still exist, and the lawmakers within that society can make laws to remedy these vices. However, if it is full of cowardly people it cannot defend itself from outside threats, and the community will be taken over and the people enslaved.

Although much of Herodotus' account of Aristodemus does not allow us the opportunity to judge whether he was truly a good example of Aristotelian courage, we can at the very least determine that he was more courageous than Eurytus. Aristodemus was aware that his staying behind at Thermopylae would most likely result in public disgrace, but he reasonably decided that his blindness prevented him from being an effective soldier. In this way Aristodemus seems very un-Spartan. He did not believe that he should come home victorious or not come home at all. Aristodemus' maxim seemed instead to be that if I live today, then I live to fight another day. And he in fact did live to fight again at Plataea. He understood that fighting at Thermopylae would not have been the "right time." But when his eyes had healed and his

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<sup>62</sup> *The Politics*. 1338bl 12-13

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<sup>63</sup> NE. 1115a 30-31

*polis* was confronted with a danger he went to the battlefield to defend it where he showed his prowess better than any of the other Spartans.

When the opportunity at Plataea arose perhaps Aristodemus recognized that the interests of the *polis* required him to take to the field in defense of it. Since the Spartans taught their children to be courageous following the model of the courage of the citizen soldier, if Aristodemus was truly courageous then it seems that he somehow must have been naturally endowed with the ability to recognize the "element of nobility" in his actions. He was keen in the thick of action at Plataea, exerting his prowess over others and performing for the sake of noble action. Regardless, Sparta still refused to honor Aristodemus as a courageous man, but if he was indeed a courageous man of the Aristotelian model I suspect that he would not care too much. Sparta did not need to honor him to corroborate his courageousness, for his own actions proved to him that he was and that would have been good enough.

While states and monarchs honor men for their courage the courageous man does not perform for the sake of honors and awards. He understands that he is called upon to fight and he recognizes as a man who understands the element of nobility that to do otherwise is base. If Aristodemus was truly a courageous man of the Aristotelian model we should not feel sorry for him. Using his reason he would have understood that he was acting at the right time, that he faced "noble danger," and that he had the possibility of dying a "noble death" upon the battlefield for his country. A truly courageous man does not necessarily need public honors from his *polis*. For by his actions on the battlefield the courageous man whether he lives or dies leaves the field with honor and self-fulfilled satisfaction.

However, Aristodemus and his nickname "the Coward" that he was given after Thermopylae stuck with him and even upon performing courageously the Spartans believed the motives for his performance were suspect. The Spartans believed that Aristodemus' actions lacked courageousness in that they believed that he was actively seeking his death in a reckless manner to vindicate his past wrongs. It seems that perhaps the Spartan indictment may be too harsh and may be founded more upon the years of bad feeling and harsh treatment that they gave to Aristodemus rather than the whole truth. Aristodemus may not have died but he was said to have performed best of them all, which most likely means he exerted his prowess frequently upon the battlefield.

What his motives were are unknown. However, if he had not fought he would have had nothing to lose. He already was known as a coward. Also, the Spartans refused to honor him because they said that he wanted and in fact tried to die. However, he survived the battle, which seems to show either that he did not try to die or that he was so pathetic of a human being that he could not get himself killed on a dangerous battlefield. Maybe Aristodemus did not want to fight in the battle but he felt obligated to vindicate himself. Or maybe he truly displayed courageous action. Herodotus' story of Aristodemus seems just about as ambiguous as Aristotle's idea of courage. There is no commentary on how Aristodemus dealt with being called a coward. Perhaps it didn't bother him. Perhaps it made him angry that he was treated so poorly for such a seemingly unjust reason. It seems that he may have took to the field for the sake of acting nobly as reason directed. At Plataea it is clear that he was keen in the thick of action and calm beforehand. Maybe he was a man of true courage after all.

As we have said the problem of courage has transcended ancient times and it is still with us today. Plato helped to define the problem, and Aristotle seriously attempted to solve it. Aristotle helped to narrow the sphere of courageous action, and he allowed us to get somewhat of a grasp upon the nature of courage. But as he never precisely defined the idea of nobility his idea of courage is incomplete. As much as Aristotle contributed to our understanding of courage we seem to have found ourselves like Laches, confused and amazed that once again the problem has escaped from us unresolved. The problem of courage and cowardice upon the battlefield is a problem older than Aristodemus and Eurytus and as modern as the very latest battles we have fought. Robert Burdette, a veteran of the American Civil War, in response to this problem wrote, "What is a coward, anyhow? Cravens, and dastards, and poltroons, we know at sight. But who are the cowards? And how do we distinguish them from the heroes? How does God tell?"<sup>64</sup> I guess that we should not feel too discouraged that we must stop exploring the problem of courage without having found a definitive answer. For it seems that if there is any bit of truth in what Burdette wondered then at least we are in good company.

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<sup>64</sup> Burdette, Robert J. *The Drums of the 47th*. (Indianapolis: Bobbs Merrill, 1914.) A story from the Civil War that is very similar to the one of Aristodemus and Eurytus that discusses courage and cowardice and how they relate to the battlefield appears on pps. 97-108

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