Socrates and Aristotle on the Definition of Courage*

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Many authors have suggested that the definitions of courage offered by Socrates (in *Laches*) and Aristotle (in Book III, Chapters 6 through 9 of *Nichomachean Ethics*) are at odds with one another. Even Aristotle himself suggests that these definitions are quite different. This paper will explain and compare the definitions developed by these two philosophers, showing them to be quite compatible; it is only the theoretical backgrounds which support these definitions that lead one to think that the theories are dissimilar.[1]

I

Socrates never offers his own definition of courage in *Laches*. However, the arguments which he uses against Nicias and Laches reveals much of what he thought the nature of courage to be, since he seldom refutes an entire definition. By looking at the unrefuted points, Socrates' own definition of courage can be pieced together (Santas, p. 184).[2] This is the approach that will be taken in this paper to explain Socrates' view of courage.

The first definition is offered by Laches (at 1908), and he defines courage on the battlefield (which is to be expected from a general). Socrates shows this definition to be too narrow, however, for (1) there are battle tactics which would seem to contradict this definition, and (2) there are other situations in which one may show courage. So Laches' first definition fails because there are circumstances in which courage may be displayed which Laches has failed to account for in his definition.

While Socrates may have over-expanded the realm of courage through his example situations,[3] he has clearly shown the type of definition which he is really looking for: he wants to learn what is common to all actions

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which are referred to as courageous. By using examples of courage in circumstances not involving the battlefield, Socrates has shown that the definition must account for all possible circumstances in which courage might be exhibited.

This provides the first piece of information concerning Socrates' own definition of courage. Socrates does not limit courage to the battlefield, but sees that it may be displayed in a variety of contexts. Therefore, any definition must take these different possibilities into account. A definition which fails to explain courage in all of these different situations does not adequately define courage and must be rejected.

This leads to Laches' second definition of courage, where he suggests that courage "is a sort of endurance of the soul" [192C]. While this definition does attempt to find that which is common to all acts of courage, it will fail because it is too broad and sweeping. Endurance may be common to courageous acts, but is not a distinctive trait of courageous actions (Santas, p. 188). Specifically, Socrates first points out that foolish endurance cannot be construed as courage, since foolish endurance is *not* noble while courage *is* noble (at 192D). This narrows Laches' definition to wise endurance.

Yet this will also fail, since some who endure wisely do not seem to be truly courageous (at 192E-193A). Socrates mentions two examples: those who wisely endure in the spending of money for gain, and doctors who wisely endure is the treatment of their patients. Neither of these are acting courageously, although they are enduring wisely. These examples indicate that acts which are truly courageous must aim at noble ends (which wise endurance in spending money fails to achieve) and must involve a degree of personal risk (which the doctors do not face) (Santas, p. 188).

Socrates has not finished, however; he now offers examples which will refute the definition. These examples concern situations where a person has knowledge of a situation which affects his action (at 193A-C). A soldier who stands fast in battle, for example, because of special knowledge of the enemy or of the position, is not truly courageous. Instead, those who do not have special knowledge but go ahead and face the danger anyway are those who are seen as courageous. But this means that it is foolish endurance which would be identified as courage, and the definition has been defeated.

Analyzing this argument, however, reveals more information concerning Socrates' own view of courage. There are two distinct types of knowledge concerning a situation: knowledge concerning the specific alternative available, and knowledge concerning the value of each alternative (Santas, pp. 192-93). The examples which Socrates has used to refute the definition point only to the first of these types of knowledge, while it is the second type which allows one's endurance to be described as either wise or foolish (Santas, p. 193). Laches' suggestion that wise endurance is necessary may not be entirely wrong, since Laches has missed this distinction.

Additionally, Socrates has not, in refuting Laches' second definition, responded to the idea that endurance is important to the definition of courage. He states that "we should agree with our statement to a certain extent," suggesting that endurance of some sort is vital to the definition of courage [193E-194A]. The definition that now seems to be emerging from the dialogue states that courage is action performed in situations involving personal risk which are endured for noble ends and is which the agent does not have too much circumstantial knowledge (to strengthen his confidence), but in which the agent does have knowledge concerning the values associated with the various alternatives, allowing him to endure for properly noble ends.

Nicias enters the dialogue at this point, and it is toward the types of wisdom that he steers the discussion. Nicias begins by stating that courage is the knowledge of what is to be feared or dared (at 195A). The distinction that Nicias is asking is precisely that which we have seen in Socrates' refutation of Laches' second definition: a distinction is made between (1) knowledge of particular circumstances and (2) knowledge of the associated values (i.e., what is truly to be feared or hoped for).

Nicias eventually finds that he must distinguish between courage and rashness (at 197A-C), and this distinction is one between the two types of knowledge. One who performs an action due to ignorance cannot be courageous, since courage requires a certain degree (and type) of knowledge. Instead, such people act out of "boldness and audacity and rashness and lack of foresight" [1978]. The rash agent is acting out of ignorance of the particular facts of the situation; it has nothing to do with the knowledge of values.

Plato has also used the term "rashness" in one other passage. Laches suggests, during his opening speech, that cowards who believe that they have mastered an art (such as fighting in armor) act with rashness [184B]. This implies that rashness is over-confidence, a confusion of particulars (not of values) where the rash agent does not understand the situation with which he is faced. This definition of rashness fits Nicias' later definition. After all, Nicias does not want to call the doctor who heals his patient (possessing knowledge of the particular circumstances) courageous, since he does not possess adequate knowledge of the values of the patient's life; but neither does he want to call him rash. This definition allows such a Catch-22 to be avoided. Rashness is bold action due to over-confidence which is performed when the agent does not possess adequate knowledge concerning the circumstances.

Nicias' actual definition is not disputed by Socrates except in the final argument of *Laches*, where Socrates shows that this definition cannot stand by itself. But the undisputed portions of the definitions offered by both Laches and Nicias paint a picture of courage which is what Socrates is seeking, and Nicias' distinction between courage and rashness helps to confirm this definition. According to Socrates, courage refers to actions performed in situations involving risks which are endured for noble ends. The courageous agent cannot have additional knowledge concerning the circumstances which bolsters his confidence and lessens his fear, but the agent must have knowledge about values and priorities so that he will know which alternatives are desirable.

II

To Aristotle, all of the virtues represent a mean between two extremes, where each of the extremes is a vice. Thus, courage (being a virtue) is identified as a balancing point between excesses on a continuum. Yet courage is special in a way as well, for Aristotle explains that this virtue is a mean regarding two different sets of extremes: courage is a mean with respect both to fear and to confidence (at 111a7). Both of these aspects are involved in the definition of courage.

The interplay between these two realms can be seen as Aristotle describes the ways in which one can go wrong with respect to courage. First, one may exceed in fearlessness; second, one may exceed in confidence toward things that truly ought to be feared; third, one may

exceed in fear and in the lack of confidence [1115b24-1116a4]. One who exceeds in fearfulness, Aristotle explains, is a coward; further, a coward who is over-confident is rash. This is an important part of the definition, since this means that all rash agents are cowards. The rash agent is, therefore, a coward who attempts to overcome that cowardice by becoming over-confident.

In identifying the proper object(s) of fear and confidence, Aristotle claims that courage is only properly applied to the greatest of things, that being things which are noble. And the greatest of the noble is death in battle [1115a24-34]. Therefore, the brave man is he who is fearless in the face of a noble death and in the face of all emergencies that involve death (of which the emergencies arising in war rank the highest). But Aristotle goes on to say that courage is shown only in situations where "there is the opportunity of showing prowess or where death is noble" [1115b5].

This last statement must be compared to Chapter 8, where Aristotle lists five situations in which courage is often but mistakenly thought to exist (at 1116a15-1117a27). These situations concern those who fight from a wrong motivation (not because it is noble to do so), those who have circumstantial knowledge or past experience which inspires their confidence, those who act from passion or emotion (rather than choice and motivation), and those who act in ignorance of the situation. In each of these cases, the agent is not courageous, although on-lookers might mistakenly think that the act was courageous.

Aristotle's definition of courage, then, focuses on the reason for the endurance of the fearful; in short, courageous acts are performed because it is noble to do so [1115b11-24]. The courageous man does have fear [1117a30], but he faces the fear as he ought to because it is noble to do so; he neither lacks fear nor fears to excess, but strikes a balance between these extremes.

III

Many have suggested that these two definitions are not compatible. In fact, Aristotle himself suggests a difference between the two definitions, stating in Chapter 8 that "experience with regard to particular facts . . . is indeed the reason why Socrates thought courage was knowledge" [1116b3-4]. This statement is found in the section where Aristotle is

explaining actions which appear to be representative of courage but are not actually so. The implication is that Socrates' definition of courage was misguided.[4] However, a close analysis of the definitions shows them to be quite similar.

The most pronounced difference between the definitions concerns the basis of courage. Socrates founds courage upon knowledge of the values associated with alternative lines of action; this means that courage is *not* concerned with knowledge of particulars, a distinction that is clearly seen in Nicias' definition. Laches states that doctors know what is to be feared in cases of illness (at 1958), a direct reference to knowledge of particulars. Yet Nicias' reply shows that it is not the particulars which are important in evaluating courage, but the values associated with the possible outcomes. The doctors, he claims, do not know when recovery is more to be feared than the illness; it is not always preferable to live, and the doctors are ill-equipped to determine when death would be better than recovery (at 195C-D).Nicias is clearly referring not to knowledge of particulars, but to knowledge of values and priorities. This is the type of wisdom that a courageous man must have under Socrates' definition.

Yet Aristotle denies that this type of knowledge is central to the concept of courage.[5] The essence of courage, in his definition, rests on choice and motivation. Throughout the first part of Book III, Aristotle argues that virtuous actions must be those that are chosen and performed voluntarily (see Chapters 1 & 2). If an act is not chosen by the agent, then it is not voluntary; only voluntary actions are accorded praise or blame (at 1109b31); so the virtues (which are accorded praise and blame) must be voluntary.

Motivation is the other key in Aristotle's description of courage. Courage is not exemplified under compulsion, so one who stands fast in battle because of fear of punishment is not courageous (at 116a30-1116b2). One is courageous when he performs a brave act because it is noble to do so. True courage, therefore, must be motivated by the nobility of the action.

Under close inspection, these two definitions seem to be pointing to the same idea in slightly different ways. Aristotle's courageous agent must be acting out of a motivation to do a noble act, and he must choose to perform that action. Yet it seems that he would not be able to choose the noble action without possessing a knowledge of values and priorities

(what Aristotle refers to as practical wisdom).[6] In order to know that an act is noble, to know that the act is worthy of performance simply because it is noble, the agent must look at the possible courses of action and determine which of them has the most noble end. Yet this is precisely the fact that Socrates is referring to in his own definition of courage.

When the definitions are compared in other respects, their similarities are compounded. Socrates' definition states that courage is displayed in situations involving risk,where pain or loss is endured for noble ends; Aristotle's states that courage is exemplified when facing a noble death in the emergencies of war, and death is certainly a situation involving risk of personal harm.[7] And both Socrates and Aristotle see courage acting for the cause of nobility.

Socrates also maintains that courage cannot involve circumstantial knowledge that bolsters the agent's confidence. One who has special knowledge about a situation is not thought to be courageous, but the agent who stands fast despite his lack of such knowledge (or skill) is. Aristotle maintains this distinction. When describing the five cases of mislabelled courage, he states that those with experience in war seem brave simply because they are more knowledgeable about the situation at hand. Their lack of courage is evident when real danger is present, however, for these soldiers are the first to flee and exhibit their true cowardice. Once again, the definitions agree.

But Aristotle's statement concerning Socrates' belief that courage was knowledge must be explained in light of these similarities. Socrates wanted to exclude circumstantial knowledge from the realm of courageous actions, yet it is in precisely this context that Aristotle mentions this distinction between their definitions. It seems that this can only be resolved by looking to the definitions of rashness provided by the two.[8]

The definition of rashness found in *Laches* shows that rash individuals are those who are unaware of the dangers involved in a situation. Therefore, they appear courageous, but were they to realize the danger of the situation, they would prove to be cowardly (at 197A-C). This explains why courage, to Socrates, requires knowledge of particulars, since without such knowledge, so-called "brave" behavior is actually rash. Aristotle, on the other hand, describes rashness as an over-

confidence arising from an attempt to overcome cowardice, and the cowardice will be seen in true danger (at 1115b28-34).

So Socrates' distinction relies primarily on knowledge of particulars; one must possess such knowledge in order to avoid rash behavior. Yet Socrates' agent cannot have too much knowledge of specific facts, for too much knowledge will serve to bolster his confidence, destroying the courageous aspect once again. The courageous agent for Socrates must be akin to that for Aristotle, lying in a median position between too little and too much knowledge of the situation in order for courageous action to be possible.[9]

Remember that the term "rashness" occurred in one other passage of *Laches*, during Laches' opening speech. In this passage, Laches suggested that a coward who masters the art of fighting in armor will, "because of his increasing rashness," show himself to truly be cowardly (184B). This suggests that rashness is a type of boldness or over-confidence which is exactly in line with the definition of rashness found in Aristotle's text.

This appears to be the bridge between the two definitions of courage. Socrates would say that the coward, while better understanding how to fight in armor, still lacks the particular knowledge needed to fight well in a specific situation; thus his action is still rash because there are other facts that one must know in order to avoid acting rashly. Aristotle, on the other hand, would say that such an agent was rash because he presumed that learning to act more confidently in battle situations (through a knowledge of fighting in armor) would not overcome his underlying cowardice. Both would see the same agent as a rash coward, although their explanations of what made the agent a rash coward would be based upon their views of what makes an act courageous.

Conclusion

Socrates and Aristotle have both provided definitions of courage, and they have distinguished courage from rashness. Many suggest that these definitions conflict; Aristotle himself maintains that Socrates' definition of courage is misguided. Yet under inspection the two definitions are strikingly similar, as are the distinctions drawn between courage and rashness. Socrates' reliance upon the knowledge of good and evil does, in fact, seem to be the same as what must be underlying the choice and

motivation of Aristotle's agent. These two philosophers have simply approached this basic fact from different angles, making similar definitions appear to be incompatible.

NOTES

1. There are very clear differences between the definitions of courage offered by Aristotle and Socrates, perhaps the most crucial being that Aristotle limits courage to the battlefield while Socrates sees courageous actions as possible in a wide rage of contexts. I am not, therefore, attempting to show the definitions to be identical. My thesis is that the definitions offered by these two philosophers are quite similar, more so than one might be led to believe by the literature.

2. There is no certainty that Socrates' definition of courage (or any other virtue) can be reconstructed in this manner. However, this is one line of interpretation which can be applied to the dialogue. Indeed, Plato seems to invite such speculation, as when Socrates suggests that Laches' definition is correct to a certain extent (at 193E-194A), or "You could tell me in far fewer words, if you were willing, the sum of what I asked, . . . You were on the point of doing so, but you turned away. If you had given that answer, I should now have acquired from you sufficient knowledge of the nature of piety" (from *Euthyphro* 14b-c). So, while it is not certain that Socrates' own definition can be gleaned from the unrefuted points of the definitions offered, this does seem to be a way of gaining insight into what Socrates thought.

3. As Santas suggests, the expansion that Socrates has made in the definition obscures the distinction between courage and temperance (p. 187).

4. Again, I must admit to some speculation. Aristotle's comment may have been directed at the *Laches*, at some other text (which we might not have access to), or comments passed on through Plato that were never written down. In this paper, I am taking Aristotle's comment to be directed to the definition that we have found in the *Laches*, and trying to explain his comment in terms of what Socrates seems to be suggesting in that dialogue.

5. Knowledge of values is part of the definition; Aristotle does not ban it entirely. My point is that knowledge is not the central-most element of the definition, where Aristotle puts choice and motivation.

6. Here is where Aristotle brings in the idea of knowledge: the need for practical wisdom in the choice of actions.

7. Aristotle has stipulated that "death is the most terrible of all things" [1115a16], so one cannot argue against this that death might be beneficial rather than harmful. Aristotle has defended himself against such a criticism before it could be mounted.

8. One could suggest that Aristotle makes this comment in order to clearly distinguish his theory from that of Socrates. Socrates saw all of the virtues as concerned with the knowledge of good and evil; Aristotle saw virtues as essentially involving voluntary choice and proper motivation. By making his comment as he did (and where he did), Aristotle was clearly distinguishing his theory from Socrates' suggestion.

While this reading could be accepted, it doesn't seem terribly interesting; indeed, it seems to be an attempt to avoid discovering the true meaning behind Aristotle's comment. In order to find what Aristotle really meant, I feel that it is necessary to go deeper into their definitions, and the distinctions which they each draw between courage and rashness seems the most promising direction.

9. This is an area that needs further research. Socrates' agent does seem to be in a median of some sort, yet I must further delineate the two types of knowledge before this can be spelled out clearly. For example, what types of particular knowledge remove the courageous aspect of a situation? And how much such knowledge can one possess before the courageous aspect is lost?

Admittedly, it may be best to interpret Socrates as suggesting that courage is not an all-or-nothing thing; there are varying degrees of courage. This would lend his definition even more to the median-position interpretation and would make his definition even more like Aristotle's.

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