

Courage and Shame: Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics III.6-9

David Roochnik
Department of Philosophy
Boston University
roochnik@bu.edu

ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the intricate relationship between courage and shame as presented in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* III.6-9. To cite the most pressing example: citizen-soldiers endure in the face of deadly risk in the hope of gaining honor and avoiding what is "shameful" (1116a29). They act "on account of virtue" and "a desire for what is noble" (1116a27-29). Nevertheless, Aristotle insists that such citizen-soldiers, however admirable, are not truly courageous men. In order to understand both the distinction between, as well as the proximity of, shame and courage, this paper draws on Bernard Williams's account of shame offered in his *Shame and Necessity*.

KEYWORDS

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, shame, courage, Bernard Williams.

Describing the courageous man in NE III.7, Aristotle says that he will "fear such things as he should, as reason (*logos*) maintains and for the sake of the *kalon*" (1115b12-14).¹ By contrast, in NE II.4 he says that in order for agents to qualify as genuinely virtuous they must "act by choosing and choosing [the virtuous actions] for their own sake (*di' auta*)" (1105a33). Terence Irwin thinks that "Aristotle takes these two descriptions of the virtuous person's motive to be inseparable."² Although I believe his statement to be true, his reconstruction of Aristotle's argument on its behalf is unsatisfying. For Irwin, the *kalon*, at least as used in the NE, is "necessarily connected to the good of others,"³ and a virtuous action is *kalon*. Hence, acting for the sake of the *kalon* is inseparable from acting for the sake of the virtuous action itself. Part VI will argue against this view on the grounds that it excessively "moralizes" Aristotle's conception of virtue.

¹ *Kalon* will be left untranslated. It is typically rendered as "beautiful," "fine" or "noble" and is regularly used to describe that "for the sake of which" a virtuous person acts. So, for example, The "liberal" person (*eleutherios*) "will give [money] for the sake of the *kalon*" (1120a24). Translations from the NE are my own.

² Terence Irwin, "Beauty and Morality in Aristotle," in J. Miller (ed.) *Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics: A Critical Guide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 241.

³ *Ibid.*, 251.

In order to narrow down the vast (and treacherous) terrain of the NE, this paper will focus only on courage as explicated in NE III.6-9. Parts I-IV will analyze these chapters. Part V will investigate another pair of closely related descriptions. In NE III.7 Aristotle says that the courageous man acts for the sake of the *kalon*. In NE III.8 he states that the citizen-soldier who, while similar to is not a genuinely courageous man, acts from a desire for the *kalon*. Once again, I will argue that Irwin's moralizing interpretation of the *kalon* will not suffice to explain the proximity of these phrases.

1. NE III.6

Aristotle announces that in taking up each of the "moral" (*êthikê*: 1103a15) virtues, "we should state what they are, concerning (*peri*) what sort of things they are, and how (*pôs*) they are" (1115a4-5). He begins with courage (*andreia*: 1115a6), defined as the "mean concerning (*peri*) fear and confidence" (1115a7). Strikingly, however, he quickly shifts focus away from courage and toward the person who possesses it: "the courageous man" (*ho andreios*: 1115a11).⁴ For reasons unstated, understanding the "who" seems to precede understanding the "what."

NE III.6 then asks, with what is the courageous man concerned? This move reveals an important feature of Aristotle's treatment of the moral virtues (with, arguably, the exception of justice). Understanding what a virtue is first requires concretization or personalization - the virtuous person must be studied - which in turn requires identifying the area of concern, the field or region of human life, in which that person activates his virtue.⁵ This procedure can be likened to cartography. Throughout his discussion of the moral virtues, Aristotle demarcates various regions of concern on a conceptual map of the ethical life. In these bounded areas the virtues, manifested in the people possessing them, will appear.⁶ In this sense, his procedure can also be likened to a phenomenology of the ethical life.

The region of concern in which courage appears is constituted by the two emotions or passions (*pathê*) of "fear and confidence" (*phobous kai tharrê*: 1115a7). As he explains in III.9, the former is decisive, and so Aristotle begins here by discussing fear and its objects. He seems to approve of the definition of fear as "the expectation of a bad thing" (*kakou*: 1115a9). This is, at least, compatible with his more detailed discussion in *Rhetoric* Book II, where he says that "fear is a

⁴ For reasons that soon should be obvious, the masculine will be used throughout this paper. It is meant to reflect Aristotle's thinking, not my own.

⁵ Compare NE VI.5: "concerning practical wisdom, we could grasp it by studying (*theôrêsantes*) those whom we say have practical wisdom" (1140a24-25).

⁶ The mapping of the moral virtues in NE III.6-IV.11 thus develops or fleshes out the "outline," "sketch" or "diagram" (*diagrapê*: 1107a34) presented in NE II.7.

pain or disturbance that comes from the image of an imminent bad thing that causes destruction or pain” (1382b14) and is accompanied by “an expectation of experiencing a suffering that will be destructive” (1382b22).

Human beings fear many things, including “disrepute, poverty, illness, friendlessness, and death” (1115a10-11), but not all of them belong in the region in which the appears. Aristotle must thus narrow the sprawl. Although, for example, a reasonable person should fear disrepute - in fact, it is, “*kalon* to do so, and *aischron* not to do so” (1115a12-13) - doing so does not manifest courage.

To make the region in which courage is manifested more precise (and thus visible), Aristotle restricts the proper objects of the courageous man’s fear to the “greatest” (*megista*: 1115a25) of the fearful things; that is, to the worst of the bad things. This is death. Again, however, since most human beings fear death, and many comport themselves admirably in the face of it, this determination is inadequate. Facing death “on the sea or from disease” (1115a29), for example, does not qualify as a proper occasion for courage. Aristotle does not elaborate, but he does give a clue. He asks whether courage is only manifested in the face of “the most *kalon*” (*kallistois*: 1115a30) of circumstances, and then states that “such circumstances would be found in war, for here there is the greatest and most *kalon* of dangers” (1115a30-31). It follows, then, that “the one who is fearless (*adeês*) in the face of a *kalon* death could authoritatively said to be courageous” (1115a33-34). At this stage of the analysis, Leighton thus seems quite right in saying that “the paradigm of courage...courage in its most perfect and noble form...is to be found upon the battlefield.”⁷ As we shall see in Part III below, however, this will not be Aristotle’s final say on the matter.

Several difficulties in Aristotle’s ethical mapping of courage emerge from these brief remarks. Most basically, many people who are not courageous will look like they are. As just mentioned, since it is *kalon* to fear disrepute, it is tempting to include the person doing so (properly) among the courageous. This, however, would be a mistake. Another example, to expand (considerably) the sparse language Aristotle himself employs (in 1115b1-6), can be generated by imagining two people on a ship during a storm. One is an experienced sailor. When the waves get bigger, he remains unperturbed since he knows they do not actually threaten the safety of the ship. Another, however, is a passenger who has never sailed before. Seeing the waves grow he “despairs of his survival and the prospect of such a death upsets him” (1115b2-3). Nonetheless, he does not capitulate to his fear and so, like the sailor, appears “fearless” (*adeês*: 1115b1). To a third person who knows neither of the two men and can only observe their behavior, they appear indistinguishable even though they are, in fact, quite different.

⁷ Stephen Leighton, “Aristotle’s Courageous Passions,” *Phronesis* 33(1988), 76. Alessandra Fussi alerted me to this excellent article.

NE II.4 prefigured this difficulty. There Aristotle asserted that it is impossible to determine whether people are virtuous simply by witnessing their actions. Even if an action “holds in a certain way (*pôs echêi*)” - that is, “is in accord with the virtues” (*kata tas aretas*) - it must be performed by an agent who “holds in a certain way (*pôs echôn*) as well” (1105a28-31). In short, the agent must be virtuous if the action is to be counted as genuinely virtuous. Specifically, he must meet three conditions: (1) he acts “knowingly (*eidôs*);” (2) he “acts by choosing and choosing [the actions that accord with the virtues] on account of themselves (*di' auta*);” (3) he “holds (*echôn*) in a stable and unwavering manner” (1105a31-34); that is, he reliably and consistently possesses a virtuous character trait. Obviously, a deep knowledge of the agent, rather than a mere observation of his behavior, is required in order to determine whether he meets these criteria.

A second and related difficulty raised by Aristotle's exploration of the courageous man in NE III.6 is that it seems to identify courage with fearlessness. Consider this passage, parts of which have already been mentioned.

One should fear some things, like disrepute, and it is *kalon* to do so and *aischron* not to do so. For the person fearing [disrepute] is decent and modest (*aidêmôn*), while the one not doing so is shameless (*anaischuntos*). He is said by some to be courageous metaphorically, since he does bear some similarity to the courageous man. For the courageous man is someone fearless (*aphobos*) (1115a12-16).

Aristotle's thinking here is expressed in typically sparse language. Perhaps it is this: disrepute is bad, and as such is a reasonable object to fear in a *kalon* manner. So, for example, a decent person may assist people who are trapped in a fire because of his fear of what others would say about him if he failed to act, and it will be *kalon* for him to feel such fear. Entering the burning house, then, he appears fearless. He is not, however, genuinely courageous. After all, he is motivated by fear of disrepute. At best, he is similar to the courageous man.

The big problem here is located in the last sentence of the passage: the courageous man is said to be someone fearless, a point Aristotle reiterates later when he says that “the one who is fearless (*adeês*) in the face of a *kalon* death could authoritatively said to be courageous” (1115a33-34).⁸ But on Aristotelian terms this cannot be. After all, courage is the “mean concerning fear and confidence.” By definition, then, it requires some measure of fear.

On the one hand, this problem can be eliminated by noting that NE III.6 is a preliminary stage of Aristotle's analysis, and that in it he is exploring widely held opinions that he may not share. Note, for instance, the optative at 1115a33: someone “could say” (*legoît*) that the fearless man is the courageous man.

⁸ There does not appear to be a difference in the meanings of *aphobos* and *adeês*.

Presumably, though, he would be wrong. For the reasons mentioned above, however, this is an easy mistake to make. Recall the earlier example: to an external observer the experienced sailor and the passenger - both of whom look calm and composed and behave accordingly - seem indistinguishable, even though one understands that the waves are not dangerous, while the other believes the ship will be swamped and that he will suffer an unbecoming death. It is impossible to detect courage through a glance.

NE III.6 provokes another challenge. Aristotle says courage is “authoritatively” instantiated only in facing a “*kalon* death.” Furthermore, it must occur in the face of “whatever may bring sudden death, and this occurs especially in war” (1115a33-34). Recall Leighton’s comment that “courage in its most perfect and noble form...is to be found upon the battlefield.” But does it matter on which side the good soldier is fighting? Can one who is fighting in a war that is not *kalon* be courageous? What about the Persian soldier who in every observable way appeared indistinguishable from his Athenian counterpart when Xerxes invaded Greece? Did he not have the opportunity to be courageous because his cause was unjust? Could he not have met the three conditions Aristotle lists for genuine virtue in NE II.4?

Aristotle’s mapping of this virtue in NE III.6 is not yet perspicuous. Its various difficulties can be encapsulated under the heading of “the recognition problem.” How is it possible to distinguish the courageous man from those who merely appear courageous?

2. NE III.7

In NE III.7 Aristotle advances beyond the preliminary reflections of NE III.6 and seems to speak in his own voice. First and foremost, he maintains that courage does require the agent to feel fear. Indeed, there are some fears that would require a “super-human” (*huper anthropon*: 1115b8) capacity not to feel and courage, a human virtue, cannot possibly require that. It is thus in facing normal fears that “the courageous man is, as a human being, imperturbable” (*anekplêktos*: 1115b11). He will “fear such things as he should, as reason (*logos*) maintains, and for the sake of the *kalon*” (1115b12-14). To reiterate, the underlined phrase differs from that required of the virtuous agent in NE II.4, where he must choose virtuous actions for their own sake. Before confronting this apparent discrepancy, another issue, also related to the recognition problem, must be addressed.

Aristotle states that the courageous man “endures” (*hupomenei*: 1115b23). He “experiences” (*paschei*: 1115b20) fear, presumably in facing a *kalon* death, but does not get shaken by it. As such, he is not fearless. But if that is so, then how can he be distinguished from someone who has “self-restraint?” (*engkrateia*: 1145a18); someone who knows what he should do, feels a desire or passion to do

otherwise, but then resists that temptation? The ethical typology of NE VII.1 makes it clear that even though the self-restrained person (the *engkratês*) is praiseworthy, he is inferior to the genuinely virtuous person. (Analogously, the *akratês*, the person characterized by “lack of self-restraint” [*akrasia*], is blameworthy, but superior to the genuinely vicious person.) The principal difference between the virtuous and the self-restrained is that the former suffers no conflict between reason and desire or passion. As Aristotle says, for example, about the moderate person (*ho sôphrôn*), “the desiring part” (*to epithumêtikon*) “ought thus to be in harmony with (*sumphônein*) reason (*logos*)” (1119b15-16). This person wants to do what he should do, and in fact enjoys doing it. As a result, he experiences no internal struggle. By contrast, the *engkratês* fights a battle against himself, against his *pathê*, and wins. He does what he thinks he should even though his desires sorely tempt him.

If the courageous man is required to feel fear, and endure in the face of it, then how does he differ from the *engkratês*? Leighton is helpful in tackling this question. He argues that, yes, the courageous man does indeed feel fear, but he does so in a uniquely virtuous manner. Most important, he does not experience it, or any other emotion, as a force that needs to be “whipped into line.”⁹ In other words, instead of being enemies that must be subjugated, the *pathê* of the virtuous man are potentially useful friends or allies. Describing the fear experienced by the courageous man, Leighton explains:

What Aristotle claims for fear, then, is a mechanism sensitive to and focusing upon certain sorts of information, leaving persons moved to fear with very specific conceptions of how their surroundings relate to them. To use a contemporary way of speaking about this, fear identifies certain features of our world as salient ones.

Viewed in these ways, fear is not something to be struggled with or overcome, but something to be sensitive to and exploited. The prospect of imminent, destructive or painful evils that fear embodies is particularly important to a creature whose ultimate aim is to live and do well. Fear on a battlefield then involves an awareness of the situation with which one has to deal, and does so in a way that allows one to prepare to deal with the situation. Feeling fear enables one to act courageously.

On this understanding of fear, not only is there little wonder that Aristotle should think that the courageous fear, but also little surprise that this passion should help define the state as an excellence rather than a form of self-control

⁹ Leighton, “Aristotle’s Courageous Passions,” 88.

[*engkrateia*]. Fear, so conceived, is not like [the *engkratês*'] bodily appetites with which one must struggle and overcome, but rather something that is of great assistance to the courageous, something to be sensitive to and exploited [...]. So understood, fear is a sign of virtue, not [*engkrateia*]."¹⁰

To illustrate by means of an innocuous example: when riding a bicycle on a busy city street, especially one that does not have dedicated bike lanes, it is useful to feel some measure of fear. It is vital for the cyclist to be alert to the possibility of a parked car veering suddenly to the left or a car on the left abruptly turning to the right. The appropriate measure of fear, just as Leighton describes, heightens the cyclist's sensitivity to his surroundings and helps him identify those features of it that might get him killed. Strikingly, this sense of keen alertness, this bit of excitement, is attractive, which is why the cyclist returns to it day after day. His doing so illustrates (only by analogy, since cycling is not a virtue) an Aristotelian principle: "what accords with virtue is pleasant, or not painful, or minimally painful" (1120a27). The virtuous person enjoys, or at least is not pained by, being virtuous. Aristotle makes the same point in stronger terms in NE I.8: "the person who does not enjoy *kala* actions is not good (*agathos*). For no one would say that the person who does not enjoy acting justly is just....if this is so, then actions according to virtue are pleasant in themselves" (*kath' hautas*) (1099a17-21).

Consider the moderate person: he is "not pained by the absence of pleasure and for holding himself away (*apechesthai*) from it" (1118b32-33). At first blush, this seems odd. If, for example, the beautiful body of his neighbor's wife becomes available to him, and he is attracted to her but knows adultery is wrong, how could "holding himself away" from his passion not be a kind of pain? On Leighton's model, it is because the passion has been integrated into the agent's whole being. Yes, the woman is attractive and so, yes, he is drawn to her. But acting on this desire is inconceivable to him and so the passion he feels is, once again, not a wild beast that needs to be tamed, but a source of energy that can be successfully sublimated. While it may not be pleasurable for him to hold himself away from the woman's body, it is not a struggle nor does it hurt to do so. This notion will prove to be pivotal in Part VI below.

To sum up so far: Leighton successfully differentiates, at least conceptually, the courageous man from the one who exhibits self-restraint. The latter must struggle hard to contain the fear that is exploding in his chest. The former feels fear, but instead of having to fight it, he welcomes it as an energy source. For an external observer, however, it remains difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish the two. Like the experienced sailor and the passenger on the ship, they may appear to be identical in the face of danger. Internally or psychologically, however, they are not. In fact, we can easily imagine (today) a device that

¹⁰ Ibid., 91.

measures the physiological fluctuations that accompany fear and pleasure in a human body. By using it we could detect differences in the courageous man and the *engkratês*. Even as the two appear identical on a casual glance, the latter would measure low on the pleasure scale, and high in fear, while the former would be the reverse.

(Aristotle would support this thought experiment, since he identifies courage as a virtue of the “non-rational parts” (1117b22). As such, either its presence or absence could be accompanied by physical symptoms. So for example, someone fearing death “turns pale” (1128b14).)

Unfortunately, even if Leighton provides us with significant resources to differentiate the courageous man and the *engkratês*, the recognition problem is, as we shall next see, far from resolved.

3. *NE III.8*

“Courage is this sort of thing,” Aristotle says at the outset of III.8, “but others (*heterai*) are said in five ways” (1116a15-16). He does not specify to what “others” he refers and so, not surprisingly, translations vary. Bartlett and Collins attempt to assist the reader by supplementing the Greek: “but there are also other kinds of courage, spoken of in five ways.”¹¹ This is not impossible, but it is misleading. Because *heterai* is feminine plural it could refer to “couragees” (*andreiai*), which in turn could be taken as shorthand for “kinds of courage.”¹² However, as will soon become clear, this chapter describes five kinds of people who only “seem” (*dokousi*: 1116a20) to be, or are “similar to” (*hômioîtai*: 1116a27), or “appear” (*phainontai*: 1116b8) courageous, but in fact are not. This chapter, then, is not articulating five kinds of courage. Crisp, who also supplements the *heterai*, captures this by translating thus: “Courage, then, is something like this. But the name is applied to five other states of character as well.”¹³

The order in which the five “others” will be examined below differs from that presented by Aristotle himself. It begins with the cases that are more easily distinguished from courage, and concludes with the most difficult.

1. “Those who are ignorant also appear to be courageous” (1117a22). Such people are oblivious to the dangerous reality that faces them and so, even if they

¹¹ Robert Bartlett and Susan Collins, *Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics: A New Translation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

¹² Sarah Broadie and Christopher Rowe, in *Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics: Translation, Introduction, and Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), follow this reasoning strictly when they render the phrase, “but there are also other ‘couragees,’ so called.”

¹³ Roger Crisp, *Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). Terence Irwin, in *Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics* (Indianapolis, Hackett, 1985) translates the line as follows: “but other states, five of them, are also called bravery.”

seem as unperturbed as a courageous man would be, they do not feel the fear that is requisite in order to possess the virtue. As Leighton puts it, such virtuous fear has cognitive value since it “identifies certain features of our world” - namely, those that immediately threaten us - “as salient,” and ignorant people fail to detect these.

2. “Nor are men of good hope (*euelpides*) courageous, since they are confident in the face of risks because they have often been victorious over many. They are much like (*paromoioi*) the courageous because both are confident” (1117a9-12). In fact, however, they are “not far” (1117a23) from the ignorant; that is, they are unaware of salient features of their surroundings; namely, the ones that are really dangerous. For this reason, they are like those who are “drunk” (1117a14).

3. The person of “experience” (*empeiria*: 1116b3), such as a professional soldier (or the sailor on the ship mentioned in NE III.6), will also appear courageous. Well-versed in things military, he knows what events are actually life-threatening, and what are merely “false alarms” (*kena*: 1116b7).¹⁴ Since the latter are common, most of the time he will seem unafraid or imperturbable, and so he is easily confused with the genuinely courageous soldier. In fact, Aristotle says, such men typically flee when their lives are seriously at risk. For this reason they are quite unlike “citizen soldiers” (*politika*: 1116b18), who keep their post even in the face of likely death (and who will be discussed in 5. below.)

4. Men energized by “spirit” (*thumos*: 1116b31) are ready, even eager, to face real danger. Driven by anger, or the desire for revenge, or brute love of the fight, they enter the battle and face death with fierce joy. As such, they too will appear courageous. But they are not because “courageous men act on account of (*dia*) the kalon” (1116b30-31), while spirited men, driven by their “passion” (*pathos*: 1117a9), act impulsively. Nonetheless, the character described here (1116b24-1117a9) is easy to mistake for the genuinely courageous because “the courageous are spirited” (*thumoeideis*: 1116b26). As Aristotle puts it, in them spirit “works together” (*suergei*: 1116b31) with other psychological components. This seems to mean that, similar to fear, this potentially lethal passion will be integrated into the totality of their being, specifically their “reason” (*logos*: 1117a9). To apply Leighton’s terminology again, spirit will be “something to be sensitive to and exploited” rather than struggled against. In fact, Aristotle says that if *thumos* is supplemented by “choice and the for the sake of which” it will actually become “courage” (1117a4-5). Presumably the “for the sake of which” is the *kalon*.

To sum up again: it now seems that the courageous man must face a *kalon* death in battle, must energetically try to kill his enemies while feeling either pleasure or at least no pain in doing so, and yet not be driven by rage or an exuberant lust for blood, but instead be guided by a deliberate choice and for the

¹⁴ “False alarms” is from Bartlett and Collins, *Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics: A New Translation*.

sake of the *kalon*. As the final (albeit Aristotle's first) example makes clear, such a person is terribly difficult to recognize.

5. "Political" (*politikê*) courage - or rather the political inflection of apparent courage - "seems most like" (1116a17) real courage. Citizen-soldiers "seem to endure" (1116a18) in the face of deadly risk on account of both the punishment they would suffer were they to desert their post and "the honors" (1116a19) they will receive should they prove heroic. The first motivation is not impressive, since such soldiers are "compelled" (1116a30) to fight. The second, however, is. As Aristotle puts it, those who face death in battle in the hope of gaining honor and avoiding what is *aischron* (1116a29) do so "on account of virtue (*di' aretên*). For they do so on account of shame (*aidô*) and a desire (*orexin*) for the *kalon*, since they have a desire for honor, and in order to avoid blame, which is *aischron*" (1116a27-29).

These lines bring the recognition problem to a head. First, both the courageous man and the citizen-soldier act "on account of virtue." Second, both their actions are propelled, in some fashion, by the *kalon*. The courageous man acts "for the sake of the *kalon*" (1115b13) or "on account of the *kalon*" (1117a8), while the citizen-soldier has a desire for honor, which translates into a "desire for the *kalon*." Both will appear fearless and either enjoy or at least not be pained in facing death. How can they possibly be differentiated?

4. *NE III.9*

This chapter begins by asserting that courage is far more concerned with fear than with confidence. As such, "courage is in fact painful" (1117a33). This is odd, since the exercise of virtue should be pleasurable, or at least not painful, so Aristotle elaborates. "The end (*telos*) that relates to courage would seem to be pleasant" (1117a35). He illustrates with a comparison to a boxer who endures painful blows "for the sake of" (*hou heneka*: 1117b3) sweet victory. Similarly, a courageous man endures death and wounds "because (*hoti*) it is *kalon* to do so and *aischron* not to" (1117b9). This phrase is similar to the description in *NE III.6* (1115a12-13) of the "modest" (*aidêmôn*) person. It is *kalon* for him to fear disrepute and would be *aischron* for him not to. The difference seems to be that, as stated in *NE II.4*, the courageous man "knowingly" (*eidôs*: 1117b13) "chooses (*hairetai*) what is *kalon* in war" (1117b14-15), while the person animated by *aidôs*, principally the citizen-soldier, desires honor, which is *kalon*, and seeks to avoid disrepute. The difference in these formulations is subtle, to be sure, and needs to be elaborated.

5. *For the Sake of the Kalon v. Desire for the Kalon*

In NE IV.9 Aristotle presents two reasons why the agent driven by *aidôs* is not genuinely virtuous. First, *aidôs* “seems to be more of a *pathos* than a characteristic” (*hexis*: 1128b9). As stipulated in NE II.4, for an action to be virtuous it must be performed by an agent who “holds (*echôn*) in a stable and unwavering manner” (1105a31). Because the person energized by shame is driven by a *pathos*, and so acts impulsively, he does not qualify. This is reinforced by the fact that *aidôs*, like fear, manifests itself in physiological symptoms such as “blushing” (1128b13). Second, while it is appropriate for the “young” (1128a16) to be moved by *aidôs*, it would not be suitable in an older, genuinely virtuous person.¹⁵ Such a person “will never voluntarily do base things” (1128b30) nor (unlike the *engkratês*) even be tempted by doing so. Therefore, *aidôs* is simply not part of his psychological repertoire. By contrast, the young person, impelled by *orexis* for the *kalon*, strives to be, but has not yet actually become, a good man. At his age, then, the best he can do is take his bearings from what others think of him. As such, shame is his appropriate motivator. When he fights as a citizen-soldier he holds his ground even when facing the threat of imminent death because he fears looking bad, and hopes to look good, in the eyes of his comrades and elders, through which he sees himself.¹⁶

By contrast, a mature and genuinely virtuous person no longer needs such external motivation. As Aristotle says in NE I.6, because honor “seems to reside more with those who bestow it” (1095b25) than with the agent himself it does not qualify as the highest good, which of course turns out to be “an activity of the soul in accord with virtue” (1098a17). Furthermore, he continues, “people seem to pursue honor so that they may be convinced that they themselves are good” (1095b28). In other words, the desire for honor manifests an internal insecurity, which younger people are naturally prone to feel, and consequent need for validation. Because the highest good must be “complete” (*teleion*: 1097a29) and “self-sufficient” (1097b7), being motivated by either the desire for honor or the fear of disrepute eliminates someone from the ranks of the genuinely virtuous.

It must be remembered, however, that the mature man was once young. In his youth he too was guided by what others thought of him. Through experience and reflection he somehow outgrew this need. He became able to see himself for what he is rather than needing the eyes of others. Alternatively formulated, he internalized those others. This notion will be elaborated in Part VI below.

¹⁵ Note that shame plays an important role in the educational scheme Aristotle sketches in X.9. A young person is habituated so that he regularly “feels pleased by (*stergon*) the *kalon* and displeased by the *aischron*” (1179b30).

¹⁶ My colleague, the ancient historian Loren J. Samons, tells me that although Athenians were liable for service into their 50s, and the average age of the Athenian soldier is unknown, it is likely that most were rather young; that is, between twenty and thirty-five.

Aristotle now seems to have mustered the conceptual resources needed to distinguish between the apparently courageous citizen-soldier and the genuinely courageous man, and not simply on the basis of age differences. The former, driven by *aidôs*, acts from a desire for the *kalon*, understood as some sort of public visibility and affirmation, and the latter for the sake of the *kalon* understood...understood as what?

This is a problem since, as many commentators have noted, “Aristotle never explains in the NE what *to kalon* is.”¹⁷ Furthermore, as Irwin notes, throughout the corpus in different contexts it clearly refers to different properties. He cites as examples things that are “pleasant through sight and hearing,” those that exhibit “teleological order” or “symmetry, definiteness and greatness,” and those that are “appropriate and admirable.”¹⁸ But he also argues that there is “one recurrent point” when the word is used in the context of ethics: something *kalon* is “admirable insofar as it extends to the common good.”¹⁹ He reformulates: there is “good reason to believe that the property [Aristotle] picks out in moral contexts through his use of ‘kalon’ is moral rightness,”²⁰ understood as acting for the good of others.

On Irwin’s view, then, the genuinely courageous soldier who endures in war would be driven by a non-selfish imperative, which could be formulated roughly as follows: ‘I must stay at my post and risk my life because doing so will benefit others and as such is morally right.’ Another clause can be added in order to distinguish it from the imperative that would guide the citizen-soldier: ‘Even though honor is *kalon*, whether I am recognized for my actions or not is irrelevant to me.’

There is textual support for Irwin’s thesis. In the *Rhetoric*, for example, *Aristotle* states “those actions are *kala* that a man does not for the sake of himself. Actions that are simply good (*agatha*) are ones that someone does for the sake of his city, while neglecting his own interest” (*to hautou*)” (1366b35-67a5). Nonetheless, Irwin’s account is unsatisfying for at least two reasons. Crisp marshals one. Simply stated, “the virtuous person’s only object of concern is his own happiness,” not the well being of others. This is true even if the agent does care about the well being of others, and acts (virtuously) on their behalf. As Crisp puts it, the Aristotelian agent “may be moved by a genuine non-instrumental concern for the good of a friend. But he knows that action on such concern is part of what constitutes the best life for him.”²¹ If Crisp is right - and whether he is or not is obviously a complicated question - then Irwin is wrong in his interpretation

¹⁷ Gabriel Richardson Lear, “Aristotle on Moral Virtue and the Fine,” in Richard Kraut (ed.) *Blackwell Guide to Aristotle's Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 118.

¹⁸ Irwin, “Beauty and Morality in Aristotle,” 241.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 243.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 241.

²¹ Roger Crisp, “Nobility in the *Nicomachean Ethics*,” *Phronesis* 59(2014), 241.

of what it means to act “for the sake of the *kalon*.” The phrase would not signal moral rightness understood as acting essentially for the benefit of others.

Irwin’s account is problematic for other reasons, which come to light in returning to the genuinely courageous man (or soldier) of NE III.6-9, the one who acts for the sake of the *kalon*. On Irwin’s view this person is willing to risk death on the battlefield for a moral reason; that is, the good of others. Since Aristotle explicitly contrasts him with the citizen-soldier who is prompted by desire for honor or fear of disrepute, he is unconcerned with what those others will think of him. He wants to benefit them but does not need to be noticed by them. He is willing to act even if his agency becomes invisible. This, however, violates a primary feature of “*kalon*.” As Lear puts it, “visibility or ‘showiness’ is essential to” Aristotle’s conception of the *kalon*, which is why she translates it as “fine.”²² If she is right, then by moralizing “for the sake of the *kalon*” Irwin strips it of its connection to visibility. In other words, he too sharply distinguishes “*kalon*” from “beautiful.”

To elaborate: Aristotle says that “political courage” as embodied in the citizen-soldier “seems most like” real courage. But if Irwin were right, then the two would in fact be fundamentally different. The genuinely courageous man, on his view, is guided by a moral imperative and is animated by concern for others, while the citizen soldier is animated by *aidôs* and therefore a kind of self-concern. He desires the *kalon* for himself, and so seeks honor and avoids disrepute. Nonetheless, Aristotle states that even the young soldier acts “on account of virtue.” Now, with this phrase he may be referring to an immature version of virtue, but his use of the word suggests that far from being fundamentally different as Irwin’s account would imply, there is continuity between the young self-regarding soldier and the mature virtuous man.

Furthermore, recall that the mature man was animated by, even educated by, *aidôs* when he was young. But if Irwin were correct that acting “for the sake of the *kalon*” means acting for what is morally right and the betterment of others, then a youth spent driven by *aidôs* would not prepare someone for a morally virtuous life. Instead, a youth spent in the army, surrounded by (mostly young) fellow soldiers who aspire to glory, who take their bearings from what others think of them, would prepare him to become supremely self-concerned. A genuinely “moral” education would somehow inculcate selflessness in the agent, not a desire for honor. On Irwin’s moralizing interpretation of the phrase “for the sake of the *kalon*” a mature (virtuous) person should repudiate his own youth, for he would see himself then as having been far too oriented to others. By contrast, Aristotle states that it is “fitting” (*harmozei*: 1128b16) for a young person to feel, and for an older person to have felt, *aidôs*. The mature man should thus appreciate, even admire, who he was. After all, even back then he acted “on account of virtue” and

²² Lear, “On Moral Virtue and the Fine,” 122.

on a desire for what is *kalon*.

A quick rebuttal is available to Irwin here. He could follow Korsgaard in arguing that a young soldier's desire to look good in the eyes of his comrades and superiors - that is, his desire for the *kalon* in the form of honor - prepares him for true virtue insofar as it makes him "receptive to the more mature state of autonomy."²³ This is just one element in her argument that Aristotle and Kant, the moralist *par excellence*, are actually closer than is usually thought. As she puts it, both "think that what gives an action more value is the fact that it is chosen for its intrinsic rightness."²⁴ Furthermore, she quotes Kant in saying that "the love of honor is 'the constant companion of virtue'" and thereby helps teach a young person to act morally; that is, unselfishly. She does not explain how this educational process would work. In any case, by her lights, "Kant and Aristotle need have no disagreement about this kind of case [aiming for honor] at all."²⁵

While this line of thought is plausible, it does not adequately address the startling proximity into which Aristotle brings the citizen soldier and the genuinely virtuous man. The former acts from a desire for the *kalon* while the latter for the sake of the *kalon*. If, as Irwin has it, the property to which Aristotle refers in using "*kalon*" in the ethical works is "moral rightness," then both would be acting for the sake of others. But this is manifestly untrue of the (young) citizen soldier who is driven by *aidôs* and the self-regarding desire for honor. Another account of how the *kalon* enters the life of the virtuous is needed.

6. *For the Sake of the Kalon and For the Sake of the Virtuous Actions Themselves*

Recall that Irwin claims that acting "for the sake of the *kalon*" (NE III.7) and "choosing [the actions that accord with the virtues] on account of themselves (*di' auta*)" (NE II.4) are "inseparable." As he puts it, "to say that it is *kalon*" - which for him means morally right and for the benefit of others - "is simply to say that it is to be chosen for its own sake."²⁶ The two formulations are inseparable indeed, but not because both share a similarly moralized conception of the *kalon*. To explain, consider the following hypothesis.

The genuinely courageous man, the one who acts both for the sake of the *kalon* and on account of the virtuous actions themselves, is guided by the following sort of imperative: 'I must stay at my post because that is what I do; that is who I am. Not to do so would be to fracture or betray myself, and as such would be

²³ Christine Korsgaard, "From Duty and For the Sake of the Noble: Kant and Aristotle on Morally Good Action," in Engstrom S. and Whiting, J. (ed.) *Aristotle, Kant and the Stoics: Rethinking Happiness and Duty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 220.

²⁴ Ibid., 205.

²⁵ Ibid., 220.

²⁶ Irwin, "Beauty and Morality in Aristotle," 248.

aischron.’ In this formulation, *aischron* will come closer to “ugly,” and *kalon* to “beautiful” than Irwin would allow. For the genuinely courageous soldier acts for the sake of maintaining himself, of presenting himself to himself as a coherent, well ordered being; one who is *kalon*. Hence, he acts for the sake of the *kalon*. He acts on account of the virtuous actions themselves insofar as he does not look beyond them to consequences or for any reason other than their worthiness; that is, they are *kala*.

This hypothesis helps account for the proximity between the citizen-soldier who is driven by *aidôs* and so is self-regarding (and who is the younger self of the mature man), and the genuinely courageous man. The *kalon* figures prominently in the souls of both. In order to clarify how it does so, a deeper understanding of *aidôs* is needed. For this I turn briefly to Bernard Williams’s well-known discussion of shame.

Williams argues against the “progressivist” view that the Greeks, specifically Homer and the tragedians, whose characters are indeed often driven by *aidôs*, lacked a sophisticated concept of ethical responsibility.²⁷ Thinking this results from the pernicious identification of the ethical with the “moral.” For the moralist, “I am provided by reason, or perhaps by religions illumination... with a knowledge of the moral law, and I need only the will to obey it.”²⁸ While a shame-based system is not that, neither is it shallow or crudely heteronomous.

Consider what Williams has to say about Sophocles’ Ajax. Having been tricked by Athena into thinking that the animals in the pen are actually the leaders of the Greek forces who have humiliated him, he slaughters them. When his madness subsides and he realizes he is surrounded by the bloody entrails of dead sheep, he feels an overwhelming sense of shame. He can no longer live with himself and so resolves to commit suicide. He expresses his conviction in the form of an imperative: “now I am going where my way must go.” This is not a moral imperative but nonetheless, according to Williams, it is categorical. As he puts it, Ajax’s words mean “that he must go: period.”²⁹

From a Kantian or moral perspective, Ajax’s imperative does not deserve to be counted as categorical. On this view, it is merely hypothetical in that it represents an action chosen “relative merely to what the agent wants to do...or to avoid what he fears.” Even worse, it takes its bearings from what others will say of the action, and as such is ethically shallow and bound by convention. Williams disagrees. While it is true that shame is fundamentally related to being seen, it is not true that this makes an *aidôs*-driven action superficial or crudely heteronomous. As he puts it, even if shame does require an other, that “other may be identified in ethical terms. He...is conceived as one whose reactions I would

²⁷ Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 64.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 95.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 76.

respect.”³⁰ In this, its most developed form, where it no longer is dependent on an actual audience (and therefore on mere convention), shame incorporates an internalised other capable of holding an “inner personal conviction.”³¹ And this makes possible the sort of categorical imperative, or necessity, that drives Ajax. As Williams puts it,

This sense of necessity lies in the thought that one could not live and look others in the eyes if one did certain things: a thought which may be to varying degrees figurative but can also be in a deadly sense literal, as it was with Ajax. These necessities are internal, grounded in the *êthos*, the projects, the individual nature of the agent, and in the way he conceives the relation of his life to other people's.³²

For Williams, as for Aristotle, the person animated by shame can grow.

Shame looks to what I am. It can be occasioned by many things - actions...or thoughts or desires or the reactions of others. Even where it is certainly concerned with an action, it may be a matter of discovery to the agent, and a difficult discovery, what the source of the shame is, whether it is to be found in the intention, the action, or an outcome. Someone might feel shame at the letter he has mailed because it is ...a petty and stupid response to a trivial slight; and the shame is lightened, but only to some degree, when it turns out that the letter was never delivered. Just because shame can be obscure in this kind of way, we can fruitfully work to make it more perspicuous, and to understand how a certain action or thought stands to ourselves, to what we are and to what realistically we can want ourselves to be.³³

Williams's *aidôs*-driven agent advances beyond shame understood as seeing himself through the eyes of others and toward shame as seeing himself through an internalized other who holds ethical convictions he himself embraces. His agency deepens and he becomes more self-sufficient. The agent must act the way he does because that is who he is. As Williams so sharply puts it, “shame looks to what I am.”

Following Williams on shame helps explain why, according to Aristotle, *aidôs* is preparatory for a life of genuine virtue. To return to my hypothesis: as a youth, the genuinely courageous man was driven by *aidôs* and the desire for recognition by his comrades and elders. As he developed, he internalized these others. He

³⁰ Ibid., 84.

³¹ Ibid., 95.

³² Ibid., 103

³³ Ibid., 93.

came to think for himself. But he never lost his desire for the visibility of the *kalon*. In acting on account of virtuous actions themselves, he seeks this visibility in the form of a self-image or representation. In short, the virtuous person is prompted to act by the desire to see himself as *kalon*.

To clarify this interpretation of Aristotle, which I am not attributing to Williams, consider Lear's argument concerning the relationship between moral virtue and "the fine." Pace Irwin, who is adamant that Aristotle's "use of [kalon] does not express a conviction about morality and beauty,"³⁴ Lear thinks Aristotle has "good reason to make beauty central to his account of virtue."³⁵ For her, the key ingredients of the *kalon* are "effective teleological order, visibility and pleasantness."³⁶ The latter two items are particularly important here. As she says, "the experience of one's actions as beautiful is, we might say, the mode of the virtuous person's apprehension of their goodness."³⁷ In turn, this apprehension is the source of the pleasure that Aristotle stipulates that the virtuous person must feel. As Lear puts it, "acting well is a proper source of self-regarding pleasure."³⁸ It is a pleasure that comes from apprehending oneself, not simply as someone who acts to benefit others (although of course one may do so), but as *kalon*...as beautiful to behold.

To suggest reasons why Lear may be right here, consider the following three passages from the NE.

1. In NE III.4, Aristotle asks whether the object of "wish" (*boulêsis*) is the good or "what appears to be good." If it is the former, then the wish of someone who "chooses incorrectly" - that is, pursues a bad end - in fact does not have an object and so is no real wish at all. If it is the latter, then a pernicious relativism sets in: whatever "seems so to individual" would have to be counted as good. Aristotle resolves this dilemma by stating that "to the ethically serious person (*spoudaios*) the object of wish is what is truly [good], while to the base person it is whatever happens [to appear good]...for the ethically serious person judges each situation correctly, and in each of them what is true appears to him."

On the one hand, Aristotle's reasoning here may seem uninformative or even circular. The true good is what appears to be good to the virtuous person, who in turn is identified by having the capacity to discern the true good. But this offers no independent specification of what the true good is, and so provides no guidance. On the other hand, Aristotle's reasoning here is illuminating, at least given his own standards of philosophical adequacy in the NE, whose project (as argued in Part I) is a kind of phenomenological mapping of the ethical life. While it does not disclose criteria of the true good, it does tell much about the character

³⁴ Irwin, "Beauty and Morality in Aristotle," 253.

³⁵ Lear, "On Moral Virtue and the Fine," 117.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 117.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 117.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 128.

of virtuous agency. Simply put, the virtuous person can trust himself. He can rely on himself to determine what is good. He is supremely confident and needs only look to himself in order to determine in what direction he should go.

The above is compatible with the hypothesis offered earlier: the courageous man acting for the sake of the *kalon* is driven by his sense of himself as a *kalon* being who strives to be, first and foremost, himself. He acts on account of virtuous actions themselves because he issues to himself the categorical imperatives governing them: “this I must do: period. For this is who I am. Not to do so would be *aischron*; ugly, ill-becoming, ill-fitting. It would be a betrayal of myself.”

2. My hypothesis is supported by the results of Part II above. There the virtuous agent was distinguished from the *engkratês*. The latter struggles against his passions or desires, and is finally victorious. The former experiences no internal conflict and is instead a harmonious being. As Aristotle says, the knowledge of what good actions are “has grown into him” (*sumphuênai*: 1147a22) such that he is a fully integrated and harmonious being.

In this context, Williams’s characterization of the Kantian-moral view provides a useful contrast: “what I am, so far as it affects the moral, is already given, and there is only the matter of discerning among temptations and distractions what I ought to do.”³⁹ In other words, on the Kantian view *engkrateia* is the highest moral achievement. Fighting temptation simply is the moral life. By contrast, for Aristotle, while fighting temptation (and winning) is admirable, it pales in comparison to true virtue. For this is a kind of wholeness. The virtuous agent acts for the sake of the *kalon*. He acts for the sake of maintaining and presenting to himself his wholeness, which is *kalon*.

3. In NE II.4 Aristotle states the virtuous agent “acts by choosing and choosing [the actions] on account of themselves (*di’ auta*).” But it is important to note that this is only the second of the three requirements for virtuous agency. The first is that the agent acts “knowingly (*eidôs*),” the third is that he acts from a “stable and unwavering manner” character trait. All three relate to the kind of person he is. He is a unified being who trusts in his own judgment and as such confidently engages in certain actions simply because he thinks they must be done. Hence, the self-generated imperative of the genuinely courageous soldier is, ‘I must stay at my post: period. That is what I do. That is who I am. Not to do so would be *aischron*, which I am not.’

³⁹ Williams, *Shame and Necessity*, 95.

8. *Conclusion*

The complications of the NE are legion. Indeed, sometimes the book feels like a vast and churning sea, in which a reader, at least one attempting to make sense of it as a whole, will surely drown. A sterling example of this is the problem, raised by Crisp and Irwin (and many others), of how to reconcile Aristotle's conviction that happiness is the ultimate human good, which implies that self-concern drives the ethical life, with his discussion of the virtues, at least some of which are other-oriented. This paper makes no pretense at a comprehensive reading of the NE or a solution of this problem. It does, however, suggest, that trying to determine and distinguish the meaning of three of Aristotle's descriptions will be useful in the attempt to do so.

1. The courageous man acts for the sake of the *kalon*.
2. The virtuous person acts on account of the virtuous actions themselves.
3. The person driven by *aidôs* and a desire for the *kalon* in the form of honor is most similar to the courageous man.

As Irwin says, the first two are inseparable. They are not identical. An agent acts for the sake of the *kalon* insofar as he insists on maintaining his identity and sense of self as *kalon*. He acts on account of the virtuous actions themselves insofar as he is driven by categorical imperatives. He must remain at his post even if his life is at risk: period. Not to do would destroy himself. When he was a younger soldier he also remained at his post, but he did so because he would have been ashamed to do otherwise. As a mature man he no longer feels this way. But he is still driven by the *kalon*, with its essential feature of visibility, even if he fundamentally concerned with how he appears to himself.