

Aristotle and Protagoras against Socrates on Courage and Experience

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Introduction: Aristotle on Socrates and the Courage of the Skilled Soldier

In *Nicomachean Ethics* (*EN*) III 8—and again, in *Eudemian Ethics* (*EE*) III 1—Aristotle makes a puzzling comment about Socrates: he associates Socrates with those who think that courage is a kind of experience (*empeiria*), and suggests that precisely the mistaken connection between courage and experience is what led Socrates to claim that courage is knowledge (*epistēmē*).

Experience of particulars is also thought to be courage. This is, indeed, the reason why Socrates thought that courage was knowledge. Soldiers exhibit this quality in the context of war, and other people exhibit it in other circumstances. For there seem to be many groundless alarms in war (*kena tou polemou*), of which soldiers have had the most comprehensive experience. They thus seem courageous because other people do not know that the alarms are groundless. In addition, their experience makes them most capable (*malista dunantai*) in attack and defense, because they are able to use their weapons and have the kind of weapons that are likely to be best for both attack and defense. Therefore, they fight like armed people against unarmed people or like trained athletes against amateurs. For in such contests it is also not the most courageous people that fight best, but those who are strongest and whose bodies are in the best condition.¹ (*NE* III 8, 1116b4-15)

Commentators have often been disconcerted by this apparent attribution to Socrates of the view that courage is a kind of experience-based knowledge similar to that possessed by professional soldiers. Some, like Taylor (2006) and Burger (2008), complain that Aristotle is being careless by attributing to Socrates a view that is very different from the one we see him holding in Plato's dialogues, especially *Laches* and *Protagoras*.² Their claim—which initially seems reasonable—

1 Unless otherwise indicated, translations of the *EN* are based on the translation by Ross (1985), with modifications, and for the Greek, I use Bywater (1890).

2 Taylor (2006, 187) claims that Aristotle's reference to Socrates in *NE* III 8 is 'careless', and Burger calls it 'a kind of caricature' (2008, 78). Broadie (2002), in contrast, does not see any conflict between Aristotle's characterization and Socrates' actual position:

is that when, in those dialogues, Socrates argues that virtue (and specifically courage) is knowledge, the kind of knowledge that Socrates identifies with virtue is very different from the knowledge that Aristotle claims is relevant to his view in *NE* III 8 and *EE* III 1. It is as if Aristotle is so focused on disparaging Socrates' brand of intellectualism that he mistakenly links the knowledge about good and evil that Socrates identifies with courage to the significantly different expertise of the skilled soldier.

The goal of this paper is to evaluate Aristotle's interpretation of Socrates' view and to explore whether (and if so, how) his criticism of Socrates is warranted. I argue that, although Socrates' claim that courage is knowledge might differ in interesting ways from the view that Aristotle attributes to him, Socrates makes assumptions about the relationship between expertise and courage in Plato's *Protagoras*, as well as in Xenophon's *Memorabilia* and *Symposium*, that make his view vulnerable to the objections that Aristotle raises against him. Interestingly, as I show, Aristotle's objections pick up on some of Protagoras' complaints against Socrates' view in Plato's *Protagoras*.

Both Aristotle and Protagoras are concerned with the gap that exists between the kind of preparation required for having the art of war and the conditions for having true courage. Both would agree with the author of the *Magna Moralia* (*MM*) that, contrary to what Socrates' view implies, 'of those who stand at their posts due to experience we do not say, nor would people in general say, that they are courageous' (*MM* I 20.4, 1190b30-2).³ They worry that Socrates' strategy to establish that courage is knowledge leans too heavily on some aspects of the analogy between the effects of the expertise of the soldier and the effects of the knowledge of the courageous person. If Socrates' view is that courageous people only go towards things that seem dangerous but that are not really so (i.e. 'groundless alarms'), then he is missing the point of courage altogether. For courage, they insist, is the virtue that enables people to confront *real* dangers, and to confront them *as* dangers.

The first problem that both Aristotle and Protagoras raise is, then, that Socrates' view makes expert knowledge about dangers too central for courage. As Aristotle puts it in his main example in *NE* III 8, while expert knowledge about the dangers of war might make soldiers more able to identify

'That courage is expert knowledge (*epistēmē*) is Socrates' position at *Laches* 194dff and *Protagoras* 360b-361b.' See also the similar note in Inwood and Woolf (2012) regarding the parallel passage in *EE* III 1, 1229a14-16. For a discussion of the *NE* and *EE* passages in the context of Aristotle's views of the role of *empeiria* in moral development see Jimenez 2019 and 2020, ch. 3, and for relevant discussions of Protagoras' response to Socrates see e.g. Devereux 1975, Weiss 1985, and Wolfsdorf 2006.

³ Translations of the *MM* are based on St. George Stock's translation in Barnes 1985. The Greek quotations of the *MM* follow Susemihl 1883.

groundless alarms and more capable of handling dangers, it does not make them more courageous. And this point, he thinks, is applicable to expert knowledge about dangers in general. A second, related problem is that Socrates' focus on knowledge results in leaving out relevant components of courage that are ultimately responsible for the courageous person's *readiness* to endure evils despite knowing them evil.

A central insight of their critiques of Socrates' view is that both Aristotle and Protagoras suspect that the problem arises from Socrates' commitment to a radical thesis about the unity of value, namely that the advantageous is identical with the noble and with the pleasant. Both Aristotle and Protagoras see this unity of value as incompatible with the standard conception of courage where true courage requires being ready to endure evils—such as physical harms and even death—as evils, because it is noble to do so, even if it is not beneficial. That is, they hold, *contra* Socrates, that in cases of courage, the noble, the advantageous, and the pleasant come apart in some way.

In Section 1 of this paper, I present the general lines of Aristotle's interpretation and criticism of the Socratic position. In Section 2, I show that, at least in the main passages about courage in *Protagoras*, Socrates does hold the kind of intellectualist view that Aristotle imputes to him. Moreover, as I show briefly in Section 3, in Xenophon's work Socrates expresses a similar assumption about the relevance of technical skill for courage. In Section 4, I return to Plato's *Protagoras* to show that Protagoras' reaction to Socrates' position is very similar to Aristotle's criticism. I conclude, in Section 5, by arguing that Aristotle's and Protagoras' complaints about Socrates' notion of courage are grounded on their rejection of Socrates' monolithic vision of the good as a single, uniform value. I conclude, therefore, that Aristotle's verdict about the limitations of Socrates' view is better motivated than some modern commentators believe.

1. Aristotle's Claim that Socrates Thought Experience-Based Knowledge was Courage

It is easy to sympathize with those who find the references to Socrates in *NE* III 8 and *EE* III 1 puzzling in light of Plato's *Laches* and *Protagoras*. Socrates' conception of the relevant knowledge of 'what is terrible' (*ta phobera*) or 'what is dangerous' (*ta deina*), and of 'the resources to deal with it' (*tas boētheias tōn deinōn*), in those dialogues is clearly very different from the knowledge-how needed, for example, to climb masts or fight in armor. In fact, in those dialogues, Socrates clearly does not define courage simply as the recognition of life-threatening situations and the skill to handle those dangers—the narrow kind of expertise that one acquires by, say, learning how to fight in armor or use spears—but

instead as a broader and more fundamental knowledge of good and evil, and specifically of potential future evils—true dangers or terrible things.⁴

For Socrates, at least in the definition given in *Protagoras* at 360d (cf. *Laches* 198c), courage is overall knowledge of future goods and evils, and all cases of cowardice are cases of ignorance about what things count as future evils. In *NE* III 8 and *EE* III 1, however, Aristotle seems to attribute to Socrates the view that courageous people are those who possess a narrower kind of knowledge about dangers, akin to the knowledge possessed by skilled soldiers in that it enables them to successfully assess and handle dangerous situations. An indication that Aristotle attributes to Socrates this view is that he presents professional soldiers as his main example, and aims to refute Socrates by explaining why professional soldiers are not necessarily courageous and by arguing that those who are best able to assess and handle dangers (those with trained expertise in such dangers) are not necessarily the most courageous. As Aristotle puts it, professional soldiers, like professional athletes, might be better prepared to win, but they are not more courageous than those who risk their lives in situations which they find frightening and do not fully know how to handle successfully—situations in which they risk physical harm and even death.

Is Aristotle's understanding of Socrates' view unfair or careless? If we take him to be attributing to Socrates the assumption that the expert knowledge of the skilled soldier is equivalent to the knowledge of the courageous person, then he is misinterpreting Socrates' view. But if instead we take Aristotle to be making a finer point about Socrates' use of the analogy between expert knowledge and the knowledge of the courageous person, then he might be raising an interesting concern about Socrates' understanding of the relationship between courage and the expert's ability to assess and handle dangers.

In the corresponding passages about pseudo-courage from *Eudemian Ethics*, at *EE* III 1, Aristotle's criticisms of Socrates, although still cryptic, give a clearer sense of what he thinks the problems are:

4 See, for example, Taylor 2006, 187: 'Socrates defines courage at *Lach.* 199a-b as knowledge of what is frightening and confidence-inspiring (*tōn deinōn epistēmē ... kai tharaleōn*) and at *Prt.* 360d as wisdom concerning what is frightening and not (*sophia ... tōn deinōn kai mē deinōn*). These formulae express the Socratic thesis that courage is identical with knowledge of what is good and bad for the agent overall. That knowledge is explicitly in the *Laches* and implicitly in the *Protagoras* distinguished from technical expertise, which is relative, not to the overall good of the agent, but to the performance of a specific task. In the former dialogue (193a-d) people who undertake dangerous activities without technical knowledge are said to be more courageous than the corresponding experts. Aristotle's citing the Socratic thesis as supporting the identity of expert courage with true courage is therefore careless.'

The second [apparent courage] is military courage, which is the result of experience (*empeiria*) and knowledge (*to eidenai*), not (as Socrates said) of what is dangerous, but of the resources they have to deal with what is dangerous.⁵ (*EE* III 1, 1229a14-6)

Similarly, those who are able to confront dangers because of their experience are not really courageous. This is, perhaps, what most soldiers do. The truth is the exact opposite of what Socrates thought when he took courage to be knowledge. Those who know how to climb masts are not confident because they know what is fearful (*dia to eidenai ta phobera*) but because they know how to protect themselves from dangers (*isasi tas boêtheias tôn deinôn*). Nor is all that makes people fight more confidently courage. If it were, then, as Theognis puts it, strength and wealth would be courage—‘every man,’ he says, ‘is daunted by poverty’. Obviously some people, despite being cowards, nonetheless stand their ground because of their experience, because they do not think they are in danger given that they know how to protect themselves. An indication of this is that such people do not stand their ground in the face of danger when they think that they have no protection. (*EE* III 1, 1230a4-16)

I would like to highlight two aspects of Aristotle’s criticism in these passages. First, he suggests that Socrates conflates knowledge of what is dangerous (or fearful) with knowledge of how to handle dangers—and that the knowledge of the skilled soldier is of the latter kind, i.e. knowledge about how to protect themselves from dangers. Second, he suggests that Socrates wrongly assumes that experience makes people courageous because it generates confidence by making them more able to protect themselves from danger.

The first important aspect of his objection (at *EE* III 1, 1229a14-6) is, I think, that the art of war does not equip professional soldiers with the relevant knowledge of how to think about danger and harm; instead, it merely equips them with the skills needed to identify and successfully respond to potentially dangerous or harmful situations (generally understood as those that are life-threatening or physically damaging).

To put it differently, Aristotle suggests that Socrates is conflating different kinds of knowledge under the label of ‘knowledge of what is frightening’ or ‘knowledge of what is dangerous’: first, the overall knowledge of what is truly evil; second, the narrower knowledge of what is life-threatening, potentially physically harmful, or conducive to losing in battle; and third, the related narrower knowledge of how to handle those situations. Only the latter two (narrower) kinds of knowledge—the skills to identify and properly handle dangers—are provided by the skilled soldier’s expertise, but Aristotle thinks that those kinds of knowl-

5 Translations of the *EE* are based on Inwood-Woolf 2012. The Greek quotations of the *EE* follow Susemihl (1884).

edge do not help with the first kind of knowledge of what is truly evil. Socrates, Aristotle seems to indicate, makes the mistake (guided by the *technê* analogy) of assuming that the skilled soldier's knowledge of what is dangerous and how to handle it contributes in some way to the courageous person's knowledge of what is truly dangerous.

The second, related, aspect of the problem (expressed in *EE* III 1, 1230a4-16) is that Socrates was wrong to think that the kind of expertise that enables one to identify and handle what is dangerous would equip one with the right kind of confidence to endure truly dangerous or fearful situations. In the case of professional soldiers, their expertise only enables them to identify which situations seem dangerous but are not truly so, and so only enables them to handle situations that merely appear to be dangerous insofar as these situations do not seem to them to be truly dangerous. This is what Aristotle refers to in *NE* III 8, 1116b4-15, as the "groundless alarms of war" (*kena tou polemou*): people with expertise in the art of war can identify the groundless alarms and handle them, while others (without experience) think that such groundless alarms are true dangers. Aristotle's point is, I think, that it would be strange to think that courage consists in identifying and successfully dealing with groundless alarms and that such a conception of courage is in tension with our normal understanding of courage, where the point is to endure things that are *in fact* dangerous and not merely apparently so.

Aristotle's second point is, then, that Socrates' emphasis on expertise misses what is essential for courage, namely the *readiness* to put one's life at risk with an awareness that things might go wrong, that one might die or be harmed. Aristotle's objection—just like Protagoras's objection at *Protagoras* 349e (cf. 359b-c), as we will see below—is that such readiness is essential for true courage and that it is not susceptible to being taught through professional training. (In Aristotle's view, just as Protagoras seems to suggest, the readiness to endure evils is acquired, instead, by a different kind of cultivation that he calls habituation.)

Aristotle's objection is, in sum, that skilled soldiers seem to be courageous because they have been trained to identify and deal with dangers, but, in reality, they only deal with dangers insofar as they do not consider them to be dangers, and as soon as they realize that they are *real* dangers and that they may indeed lose their lives or suffer physical harms, they flee, and their lack of courage is revealed. The case of the skilled, yet cowardly, soldiers leads Aristotle to think that the skilled soldier's expertise is insufficient for courage. He thinks, instead, that true courage must prepare agents to deal with and to endure dangers *as dangers*—while seeing them as genuine future evils.

2. *Socrates on Knowledge and Courage in the Protagoras*

Does Socrates have the position that Aristotle attributes to him? I think not only that Socrates adopts this position in Plato's *Protagoras*, but also that this view about courage accords well with his more general commitments to the *technē* analogy and to the claim that nobody chooses something bad or harmful for themselves willingly.

In Plato's *Protagoras*, at 349e-350c, Socrates explicitly uses the *technē* analogy to make a point about the relevance of knowledge for courage, and makes an analogy between the role of knowledge in the confidence of the skilled soldier and the role of knowledge in the confidence of the courageous person. Moreover, at 359c-360c, Socrates offers a long argument that all cases of cowardice are ultimately cases of ignorance, embracing what I call, following Aristotle, the groundless-alarms view. His conclusion is that courageous people do not go towards dangerous things thinking them dangerous, but thinking them good, and he embraces the consequence that courageous people cannot properly be said to endure dangers as real evils.

At *Protagoras* 349e8-350b1, Socrates offers a general inductive argument to support his claim that those who are confident (*tharraleoi*) in the proper way are confident because they have the relevant knowledge. His examples include a list of different kinds of knowledge-how and experience-based knowledge. Socrates inductively infers from, among others, the cases of divers, horse riders, and soldiers that there is a direct relationship between knowledge of the dangers in each situation and proper confidence: those who have acquired the relevant knowledge are more confident than those who have not.

‘Do you know who dives confidently into wells?’ ‘Of course, divers.’ ‘Is this because they know (*dioti epistantai*), or for some other reason?’ ‘Because they know (*hoti epistantai*).’ ‘Who are confident in fighting from horseback? Riders or nonriders?’ ‘Riders.’ ‘And in fighting with shields? Shieldmen or nonshieldmen?’ ‘Shieldmen, and so on down the line, if that is what you are getting at. Those with the right kind of knowledge (*hoi epistēmones*) are always more confident than those without it, and a given individual is more confident after he acquires it than he was before.’⁶ (*Prot.* 349e8-350b1)

The argument continues at 350b1-c6, where Socrates claims that those with the proper knowledge are rightly confident because their confidence arises from knowing how to identify the dangers and how to handle them, unlike those who

6 Translations of the *Protagoras* are based on the translation by Lombardo and Bell in Cooper and Hutchinson 1997. The Greek quotations of the *Protagoras* follow Burnet 1901.

have confidence due to their ignorance of the dangers, who are not courageous but simply out of their minds:

‘But haven’t you ever seen some people lacking knowledge of all of these things yet confident in each of them?’ ‘I have, all too confident.’ ‘Is their confidence courage?’ ‘No, because courage would then be contemptible. These people are out of their minds.’ ‘Then what do you mean by courageous people? Aren’t they those who are confident?’ ‘I still hold by that.’ ‘Then people who are so confident turn out to be not courageous but mad? And, on the other side, the wisest (*hoi sophōtatoi*) are the most confident and the most confident are the most courageous? And the logical conclusion would be that wisdom (*sophia*) is courage?’ (350b1-c6)

Socrates first establishes that courage is not just any kind of confidence, but rather the kind of confidence that arises from knowledge of how to handle a situation because dealing confidently with dangers that one does not know how to handle is not courageous but irrational. On those grounds, he concludes that courage is knowledge.

In his final argument about courage at 359c-360c, Socrates adopts something very close to the groundless-alarms view that Aristotle rejects. Indeed, Socrates’ approach to the problem of courage involves denying that the things towards which courageous people go with confidence are true dangers or, at least, that the courageous person thinks that these things are potentially harmful. The things towards which courageous people go might threaten life and limb, but they are not truly harmful or true evils.

Socrates first establishes that courageous people are similar to cowardly people in that they do not go towards dangers that they consider dangerous or potentially harmful. Instead, they only go towards things that they do not consider to be frightening:

‘Well, then, tell us, for what actions are the courageous ready? The same actions as the cowardly?’ ‘No.’ ‘Different actions?’ ‘Yes.’ ‘Do the cowardly go forward to things which inspire confidence, and the courageous toward things to be feared?’ ‘So it is said by most people.’ ‘Right, but I am not asking that. Rather, what do you say *the courageous go boldly toward: toward things to be feared, believing them to be fearsome, or toward things not to be feared?*’ ‘By what you have just said, the former is impossible.’ ‘Right again; so, if our demonstration has been correct, then *no one goes toward those things he considers to be fearsome*, since not to be in control of oneself was found to be ignorance.’ He agreed. ‘But all people, both the courageous and the cowardly, go toward that about which they are confident; both the cowardly and the courageous go toward the same things.’ (*Protagoras* 359c2-e1)

If Socrates truly holds the position expressed in this passage, then the knowledge that Socrates defines as true courage is the knowledge that life-threatening circumstances are not what we should consider real dangers—true knowledge of goods and evils in general. Therefore, the Socratic expert-courageous person can deal properly with future evils by coming to see that they are not actually evils at all.

This move is the one that Aristotle criticizes by appealing to the notion of groundless alarms: just as those things that look like dangers to those who are ignorant of the craft of war look like non-dangers to expert soldiers, so those things that look like dangers to people ignorant of good and evil look like non-dangers to the generally courageous person. Socrates is committed to this view at least in part because he is committed to the claim that nobody would willingly choose to do potentially harmful things, so the courageous person must regard the dangers of war (such as physical harm and death) as only apparently harmful, but not truly so.

If this is Socrates' move, then Protagoras' suspicion (similar to Aristotle's) that Socrates is missing something important about courage seems justified, as his Socrates goes against the common-sense view that the courageous person is good at handling things that are truly fearful or dangerous.

3. Socrates on the Expertise of the Skilled Soldier in Xenophon

Before we turn to Protagoras' responses to Socrates, I want to briefly discuss some passages from Xenophon where Socrates also seems to suggest that the experience of dealing successfully with dangerous situations contributes to courage.

First, at *Mem.* 3.9.1-3, where Socrates is addressing the classic question of whether courage is something we have by nature or acquire through teaching, he argues that training and acquired skills can make a person much braver:

I think that just as one person's body is naturally (*phuetai*) stronger than another's for labor, so one person's soul is naturally more courageous than another's in danger (*pros ta deina*). For I notice that people brought up under the same laws and customs differ widely in daring (*tolmê(i)*). [2] Nevertheless, I think that every one's nature acquires more courage by learning and practice (*mathêsei kai meletê(i)*). Of course, Scythians and Thracians would not dare to take bronze shield and spear and fight Lacedaemonians; and of course, Lacedaemonians would not be willing to face Thracians with leather shields and javelins, nor Scythians with bows for weapons. [3] And similarly in all other points, I find that human beings naturally differ from one another and greatly improve by application (*epimeleia(i)*). Hence it is clear that all

people, whatever their natural gifts, the talented and the dullards alike, must learn and practice (*manthanein kai meletan*) what they want to excel in.⁷

We might expect Socrates to provide, as examples of good training, cases of people brought up with good values and properly taught what kinds of things are good and noble. However, in this passage, he instead gives examples of things that one acquires ‘by learning and practice’, such as fighting with a bronze shield and spear, fighting with leather shields and javelin, and knowing how to use bows. Practicing such skills, he seems to suggest, contributes to those soldiers’ courage, and thus the sort of expertise that they acquire in the army seems to be at least part of what makes them courageous.

Moreover, this general view is confirmed by the analysis he offers at *Mem.* 4.6. 10.10-11.13, where he claims that those who have the know-how to deal with dangers are courageous:

‘Then do you think that those who are good in the presence of frightening things and dangers are courageous, and those who are bad are cowards?’ ‘Certainly,’ he said.’ [11] ‘And do you think that any are good in the presence of such things, except those who can deal with them well (*tous dunamenous autois kalôs chrêsthai*)?’ ‘None but these,’ he said.’ ‘And bad, except such as deal badly with them?’ ‘These and none others,’ he said, ‘Then do both classes behave as they think they must?’ ‘How can they behave otherwise?’ he said. ‘Then do those who cannot behave well know how they must behave?’ ‘Surely not.’ ‘So those who know how they must behave are just those who can (*eidotes hôs dei chrêsthai, houtoi kai dinantai*)?’ ‘Yes, only they.’ [...] ‘It follows that those who know how to deal well with frightening things and dangers are courageous, and those who utterly mistake the way are cowards?’ ‘That is my opinion,’ he said. (*Mem.* 4.6.10.10-11.13)

These claims are not only very similar to those in Plato’s *Protagoras* 349e8–350c6, discussed above, but they also resonate with the worries expressed by Aristotle in *EE* III.1. 1230a4-16, that Socrates tends to conflate knowledge of what is frightening or dangerous with the narrower kind of knowledge of how to deal with dangers.

Again, in Xenophon’s *Symposium* 2.12-14, Socrates, Antisthenes, and Philip seem to agree that acquiring certain physical skills contribute to one’s courage:

Then Socrates, drawing Antisthenes’ attention, said: ‘Witnesses of this feat, surely, will never again deny, I feel sure, that courage, like other things,

7 Translations of Xenophon’s *Memorabilia*, and of the *Symposium* quoted below, are based on Marchant 1923. The Greek quotations follow Marchant 1921.

admits of being taught, when this girl, in spite of her sex, leaps so boldly in among the swords!’

‘Well, then,’ asked Antisthenes, ‘had this Syracusan not better exhibit his dancer to the city and announce that if the Athenians will pay him for it he will give all the men of Athens the courage to face the spear?’

‘Well said!’ interjected Philip. ‘*I certainly should like to see Peisander the politician learning to turn somersaults among the knives; for, as it is now, his inability to look spears in the face makes him shrink even from joining the army.*’ (Symposium 2.12-14)

Xenophon’s texts, then, support the claim that Socrates did, at least some times, suggest that there is an analogy between the expertise of the skilled soldier and courage in that the kind of training and experience that is relevant to build the confidence in battle of a professional soldier is analogous to the experience and knowledge relevant to acquiring confidence and courage in general.

4. Protagoras’ Criticism of the Socratic View of Courage as Wisdom

In Plato’s *Protagoras*, Protagoras anticipates Aristotle’s concerns in two ways. On the one hand, Protagoras seems to think that the source of courageous confidence need not be knowledge, and like Aristotle, places great importance on the courageous person’s readiness to endure evils that they know to be evil. On the other hand, Protagoras believes that going towards dangers *as* dangers is a central feature of courage and resists Socrates’ expertise model because it fails to preserve this feature.

First, Protagoras resists Socrates’ conclusion that courage is knowledge, and specifically he opposes the view that knowledge can produce the right kind of confidence. As Protagoras puts it, confidence and courage are not the same, since not all those who are confident are courageous, although all courageous people are confident (*Protog* 350e). As Protagoras sees it, some people might seem courageous because they have a kind of confidence based on knowledge that enables them to endure what seems like dangers in battle, but that kind of confidence should not count as genuine courage. His argument is worth quoting in full here because it shows that his worries are aligned with those of Aristotle:

You have nowhere shown that my assent to the proposition that the courageous are confident was in error. What you did show next was that knowledge increases one’s confidence and makes one more confident than those without knowledge. In consequence of this you conclude that courage and wisdom are the same thing. But by following this line of reasoning you could conclude that strength and wisdom are the same thing. First you would ask me if the strong are powerful, and I would say yes. Then, if those who know how

to wrestle are more capable (*dunatōteroi*) than those who do not, and if individual wrestlers became more capable after they learn than they were before. Again I would say yes. After I had agreed to these things, it would be open to you to use precisely these points of agreement to prove that wisdom is strength. But nowhere in this process do I agree that the capable are strong, only that the strong are capable. Strength and ability are not the same thing. Ability derives from knowledge and also from madness and passionate emotion. Strength comes from nature and proper nurture of the body. So also confidence and courage are not the same thing, with the consequence that the courageous are confident, but not all those who are confident are courageous. For confidence, like ability, comes from skill (and from passionate emotion and madness as well); courage, from nature and the proper nurture of the soul.' (350d1-351b2)

In this passage Protagoras points out, like Aristotle in *NE* III 3 and *EE* III 1, that, while some people are confident simply because they have the practical skill to handle a danger or the experience to know that it is not a true danger, such confidence is not sufficient for courage. To illustrate this, Protagoras gives the example of strength, which, as we have seen, Aristotle picks up in the *NE* to support the same point: strength increases confidence insofar as it makes a person more capable of dealing with potential dangers and gives them a sense that they can handle dangerous situations, but nobody would confuse strength with the capability to handle things, nor confuse with courage the confidence that derives from that capability. As Aristotle puts it at the end of *NE* III 8, 1116b4-15, in athletic contests the strongest are those who fight best, but they are not thereby also the most courageous.

Secondly, in relation to the groundless-alarms view, Protagoras complains that, contrary to what Socrates claims, courageous people do go towards true dangers, such as war, while cowardly people avoid them:

[Prot.] 'But, Socrates, what the cowardly go toward is completely opposite to what the courageous go toward. For example, the courageous are willing to go to war, but the cowardly are not.' (359e1-4)

Protagoras' response, and his insistence that courageous people are willing to go to war, indicates that, for him, the readiness to go toward dangerous things is an important element of courage. He does not articulate this point explicitly, but he certainly does not straightforwardly accept Socrates' claim that courageous people only go towards good things or towards things they know to be good.

5. *The Problems with the Socratic View*

What is wrong with Socrates' view of the relationship between knowledge and courage? And with his analogy between the expertise of the soldiers and the knowledge of the courageous person? Isn't Socrates' position plausible insofar as he insists that, ultimately, the knowledge required for courage is that concerning what is *truly* dangerous (as opposed to experience and skill handling apparent dangers in battle)? And isn't Socrates right insofar as he is merely insisting that the courageous person knows that physical harm (or even death) is not a true evil? This is how we might be tempted to react to Aristotle's criticisms.

I think, however, that Aristotle in *NE* III 8 and *EE* III 1 identifies several interesting problems with what he takes to be Socrates' view, which we have seen is not far from what we find in Plato's *Protagoras*. First, Socrates makes expert knowledge about dangers too central for proper confidence and courage, and he neglects the fact that courageous agents often act in situations of uncertainty about their success or even in situations where success is improbable. As a consequence of this focus on knowledge, second, Socrates' view leaves out relevant components of courage that are ultimately responsible for the courageous person's *readiness* to endure evils despite knowing them evil. An additional point, which I think is at the heart of Aristotle's concerns is that Socrates fails to capture how courage requires that agents navigate properly the tensions between the beneficial and the noble. For Aristotle, while the advantageous is ultimately always aligned with the noble, they come apart in cases of courage, because while things like life or health are advantageous and good, and particularly are so for courageous agents, such agents must be prepared to act in ways that may harm their health or even destroy their life in order to choose the noble.

One of Aristotle's central worries is that Socrates' model struggles to explain cases of losing in battle that are nonetheless courageous. In *NE* III 8, 1116b15-23, Aristotle suggests that, one of the problems of Socrates' account is that by making proper knowledge of the situation and ability to handle dangers a central feature of courage, it cannot explain the superiority of citizen soldiers (who are inexperienced in the dangers of battle but have a decent grasp of the noble and the shameful) over professional soldiers. Citizen soldiers cannot be said to be knowledgeable of what is dangerous in battle, because sometimes they will be frightened by things that are not really dangerous. However, they can stand their ground even in the face of certain death, because, according to Aristotle, they find death preferable to shameful retreat (1116b19-20). This, Aristotle thinks, is not a matter of expertise in any kind of skill that optimizes the good simpliciter, because, in order to decide what to do, citizen soldiers need to have a complex notion of the good where the noble is sometimes in tension with the beneficial.

For Aristotle, both Socrates' assumption that knowledge and expertise produce the relevant sort of confidence and Socrates' thesis of the unity of value (where

the advantageous, the pleasant, and the noble always coincide) limit his ability to offer a plausible account of courage, where the beneficial does not completely coincide with the noble. In Aristotle's view, there is a clear loss and harm for the courageous person who gives her life in battle, and Socrates' model refuses to acknowledge such harm because it insists on the complete coincidence of the noble and the beneficial. Aristotle (with Protagoras) rightly suspects that, by doing away with the potential harm, Socrates fails to acknowledge the courageous person's courage altogether.⁸

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