

## Courage and Those Who Will Not Fight

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In “Flourishing and the Failure of the Ethics of Virtue,”<sup>1</sup> Sarah Conly attempted to show that while courage is clearly a virtue, it is possible to live a flourishing life while lacking courage. Her example, taken from science fiction,<sup>2</sup> is of the ‘puppeteers’, a species of ‘cowards’ living in a world where there is another species that is extremely aggressive and war-like. The puppeteers supposedly put personal security above all else and avoid danger in any way they can. In this, they succeed very well because of how they organize themselves, planning years ahead and developing a technology which allows them to trade advantageously.

Conly means to undermine Aristotelian virtue ethics by showing that it is possible to flourish without virtues such as courage. She considers and dismisses two possible replies to her example. One is that the puppeteers are not flourishing. She dismisses this quickly and I will not explore this possibility here. The second reply, which she dismisses with equal speed, is the one that I will focus on: It is the claim that the puppeteers are courageous. In this paper, I will first describe some versions of the puppeteers’ character and motivations that enable me to portray them as courageous. I will then discuss Aristotle’s account of courage. Although I think that the puppeteers could be courageous, I agree that Aristotle would have to deny this. I will identify mistakes in defining courage common to both Conly and Aristotle, and suggest an alternative view of courage where it is possible that courage is found in those who will not fight. Finally, I will draw some lessons for views of courage in the post 9/11 world.

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<sup>1</sup> *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 13 (1988): 83-96. Page numbers will be cited in parentheses in the text.

<sup>2</sup> Conly cites Larry Niven, *Neutron Star* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1968), as the source of her example.

## 1. Conly and the Puppeteers

Conly says that although the puppeteers “show certain behavior associated with courage” such as collectedness rather than panicky behavior, the fact that they would not risk themselves for others makes them cowards (91). The problem here is that because she defines a courageous person as believing that “there are things more important than her security,” the puppeteers are by her definition not courageous. Surely we need to know more about them before we know whether they lack courage. Here are some ways to extend the story that Conly has told us about the puppeteers.

The puppeteers supposedly co-exist with another species that is extremely aggressive and warlike and ready to kill on sight. In such a world, a puppeteer only has a choice of fighting or hiding. This world resembles Hobbes’ state of nature, but here the puppeteers are able to band together and organize themselves which seems to have given them a distinct advantage in survival. It would seem that prudence would support their choice to not fight, and that such a choice is not determined by whether they have or lack courage. Perhaps some puppeteers are courageous but choose not to take the risk of fighting because they recognize that their society’s survival depends on their jointly pursuing the strategy of not fighting. Suppose one of the puppeteers Paul is caught in a trap, and a comrade Peter has to decide whether to risk a rescue. Peter may well decide that he should abide by the community’s agreed policy of not taking such risks. His decision in no way reflects upon his personal courage.

Conly’s view that the puppeteers necessarily lack courage seems to presume that when Peter decides not to rescue Paul, he is motivated not by concern about upholding

the community's policy, but by his excessive fear for his own safety. She says that the puppeteers "fear injury about all else" and their "dominant consideration is personal security" (90). Now this seems to me to have begged the question against the possibility of a courageous Peter. If it was the case that all puppeteers were by nature cowards, it would not even be necessary for the puppeteers to agree on a policy of not taking risks. Yet Conly describes the puppeteers as having a rule of exiling "anyone who risks his own safety, for whatever reasons" (90). There is a dilemma here. If for the greater good, the community discourages risk-taking, then someone who abides by this rule for the good of the community is not necessarily a coward. It must be possible for a puppeteer to have courage, and Peter's choice not to save Paul does not prove that he lacks it. On the other hand, if Conly's position is that Peter as a puppeteer is by definition a coward, then it is not necessary to have a rule to discourage risk-taking. In fact, one can hardly see how the puppeteers can cooperate to the extent needed to flourish in the way that Conly describes, given that such excessive concern for personal security would be a poor starting point for society. There is risk-taking involved in making an agreement to live by common rules. Those who would not take chances with their personal security will be hiding in cubby-holes all by themselves, not participating in a complex organized community.

I have so far described the possibility of Peter making a choice for the common good that is independent of whether he possesses personal courage. But once we have chosen not to interpret the example as one that rules out courage by definition, there are other possible motivations for Peter that do not implicate him in cowardice. Suppose Peter believes that he could rescue Paul without endangering the whole community. If he were to choose not to rescue Paul, would that make him a coward? The impression we

get from Conly's story is that the puppeteers are weak and timid. If Peter is too weak to take on members of the aggressive species that he would need to confront on his rescue mission, that may not count as a lack of courage, just as it is no lack of courage for a non-swimmer to not jump into the river to save a drowning child. But what if Peter is strong enough to fight with the other species? Even then, his choice not to go to Paul's rescue need not be proof of cowardice. He may be a pacifist who believes that violence is wrong under any circumstance. He may believe that a peace agreement can be achieved between the two species and that Paul had walked into the trap in an attempt to sabotage peace talks. We should note here that in Conly's example, the species are locked in an unending struggle given that she assumes not just that the puppeteers have a fixed (cowardly) nature, but the species that opposes them also is fixed in its aggressive ways. That is why the puppeteers only have a choice between fight and flight. But this tells us nothing about what courage means in our world where the choice not to fight is often a choice to pursue other options besides hiding away to avoid risks.

## 2. Aristotle on Courage

My main criticism of Conly concerns how she defines courage as a willingness to risk one's safety for others. Prudence, and the availability of options other than fight or flight, may motivate a courageous puppeteer not to take such risks. However, Conly's example may well ground a valid criticism of Aristotle. It is not difficult to show that Aristotle in his account of courage makes a definitional error similar to Conly's. In the *Nicomachean Ethics* III.6, the courageous man is one who is fearless in the face of a noble death, and the noblest death occurs in warfare. Those who are unwilling to risk their lives in combat

cannot possess the virtue of courage. The puppeteers will be cowards on this account. So if they flourish, courage as Aristotle defines it is not needed for the good life.

Instead of faulting Aristotle, we should recognize that his account of courage is an intuitive one for an ancient Greek. Given that the Greeks at the time believed that life in the *polis* enabled them to lead civilized human lives, and the main threat to happiness comes from barbaric outsiders, it is inconceivable for a courageous citizen to refuse to take up arms to defend the city-state. They were in fact like Conly's puppeteers, faced with the threat of aggressive invaders who would massacre and pillage cities that fall into their hands. Conly was imagining the possibility of such people flourishing by hiding rather than fighting, and if she had succeeded, then Aristotle would have to accept that courage as he and Conly defines it is not needed for human flourishing.

In my criticism of Conly, I imagined other possibilities for the puppeteers so that for instance, a courageous individual may choose not to take the risk of engaging his enemies in order to rescue a comrade in danger. Similarly, we can conceive of how, unlike in ancient Greek society, we today can choose not to fight against aggressive enemies without failing to be courageous. We live in more complicated times, in which a definition of courage simply in terms of willingness to engage in combat is bound to be problematic. First, unlike the idealized citizen-soldiers of the *polis*, the ones who fight in today's modern armies are not necessarily virtuous. Even if they fight on behalf of a good cause, their personal reason for fighting may be base rather than noble. And combatants cannot be assumed to be 'fearless in the face of death' if the means with which they fight is relatively risk-free, relying on numerical or technological superiority. Second, those who are unwilling to fight may have moral reasons not to fight, if for

instance, they think a war to be unjust or if they are pacifists. We saw that Conly's example of the puppeteers is too under-described for us to draw conclusions about whether they lack courage. If the puppeteers were not overly timid or weak, but conscientious objectors, they may well be courageous in their avoidance of combat. Even in ancient Greece, wars were fought that were expansionist and not defensive. Most wars today are of questionable justice and it is simplistic to assume that those who will not fight in such wars so choose because they lack courage.

### 3. Courage of Those Who Will Not Fight

Let me expand on the points in the previous paragraph in relation to both the puppeteers and the situation of the U.S. military in Iraq. I said that Peter, in failing to rescue Paul, may be motivated by prudence and not excessive concern for his own security. Suppose he was to acquire Gyges' ring (from Plato's *Republic*) which could make him invisible. He could save Paul without any personal risk so prudence no longer counts against a rescue. But in either case, his choice is motivated by practical reasoning, and does not reflect on his courage or lack of it. In Iraq today, American troops are routinely referred to as 'the brave men and women in uniform'. But apart from the soldiers who go out on patrol, those who use technology to attack the enemy from fortified positions out of reach of the enemy's limited arsenal do not show themselves to require courage to 'fight'.

On the other hand, Peter may decide not to make the rescue attempt not because he is afraid of the risks involved in rescuing Paul, but because he objects to fighting and killing members of the other species. If we drop Conly's assumption that there is no possibility of pursuing peace between the two species, Peter may well believe that it is

not only prudentially justified but morally preferable to avoid more fighting with the other side. Note that this is not a risk-free choice: it takes courage to speak with one's enemies, and there is always the chance that failure in peace talks can leave one's side in a worse position. Thus, it is not reasonable to conclude from a puppeteer's choice not to fight that he exhibits a lack of courage.

The application of this point to the post-9/11 world are clear: Courage has been one of the buzzwords in justifying an aggressive military posture by the United States in response to the terrorist attack of 9/11, whereas those who call for a troop withdrawal from Iraq or negotiations with Iran are branded as cowards. What I argue is that to evaluate courage, we must examine the reasons that motivate those who will fight and those who will not fight, because the concepts of courage and cowardice cannot just be measured by a person's willingness to fight in a war.

From what I have presented above, there are at least four reasons for an American citizen or soldier to refuse to support or participate in the post-9/11 military actions taken against Iraq and the threats made against Iran (and a war, should that break out). The first reason is prudence. Just as a puppeteer may decide not to fight with the aggressive species, even when he is not excessively fearful of fighting, because the survival of the puppeteer community is best served by a policy of not fighting, it has been argued that the U.S. invasion of Iraq has created more enemies in the Muslim world than the jihadists that have been killed. Al-Qaeda did not have a foothold in Iraq prior to the removal of Saddam Hussein's regime by the U.S. Since the invasion, thousands of Iraqis have joined insurgent and terrorist groups, and foreign fighters have flooded into the country to fight the U.S. forces, while plots have fomented to carry out attacks against American-

linked targets around the world. It is plausible to believe that a U.S. military withdrawal from the region would undercut the appeal of Islamic fundamentalism and nationalism. On this view, it would be more prudent for the U.S. not to continue fighting in Iraq (even if the U.S. could afford to pay for a continued war).<sup>3</sup> For someone to recognize and accept this as a requirement of prudence does not reflect his lack of courage.

The second reason not to fight can be seen in the context of Iran. While the U.S. has threatened to attack Iran and may be about to start a war, there are Americans who object to fighting because the option of peace talks is morally preferable. Some military strategists have suggested that a missile or air strike against Iran's nuclear facilities can be carried out without a full-scale invasion. Is it an act of courage to launch such an attack, and is it cowardice to call for negotiations with Iran? As I've stated, attacking the enemy from a safe distance does not show courage. And as discussed earlier concerning the puppeteers, when the relation between the two sides is not fixed and unchangeable as Conly had assumed, there is the option of reaching an agreement with one's enemy. So to oppose a provocative first strike that would scuttle the possibility of peace talks is not necessarily evidence of a lack of courage.

The third reason to oppose both the war in Iraq and a prospective war against Iran is that war in both cases is not morally just. Regardless of whether the Bush administration actually deceived the country into war, the doctrine of preventive war is morally suspect. Walzer has argued that self-defense does not include preventive war because when a country acquires a new weapon or its leader rants boastfully, the 'threat' posed is not

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<sup>3</sup> A recent book by Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), makes the case for a U.S. withdrawal, from the point of view of forensic psychiatry, by explaining the psychological profile of Islamist terrorists.

sufficiently serious to justify war.<sup>4</sup> Both Saddam Hussein of Iraq and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad of Iran had in the past boasted of their countries' military prowess, and both may have once been in the process of acquiring nuclear weapons. But neither Iraq nor Iran has ever threatened to attack the U.S.<sup>5</sup> Opposing U.S. military action against both countries out of a belief that those actions are unjust cannot be used to prove that someone lacks courage. In fact, such opposition has come from soldiers who have risked their lives on combat duty in Iraq.

The fourth reason for opposing military action is pacifism. Pacifism may be morally controversial, but it is a legitimate moral position and may be held consistently. Since pacifists would avoid fighting another person even to defend their own lives or the lives of loved ones, it would seem proof of a lack of courage. But surely not! Could not a pacifist have the courage to enter a burning building to save his family, since that does not require the use of violence? It in fact took tremendous courage for pacifists to speak out against the invasion of Iraq in the early days when the majority of Americans and the news media were cheering for the war. It took courage because those who said that the war was morally wrong were called 'unpatriotic' and even threatened.

In a sense, what I am saying in this paper should not need to be said. Yet there is such a temptation for many to equate courage with the willingness to fight and cowardice with those who will not fight. I can only say that those who make the equation are people who do not know what courage really means.

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<sup>4</sup> Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), Ch 5.

<sup>5</sup> Both countries had at some point threatened an American ally, Israel, but even if their threats count for anything more than domestic propaganda, Israel is perfectly capable of defending itself without the kind of U.S. action that has taken place in Iraq and that may take place against Iran.

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