



Gopal Sreenivasan, *Emotion and Virtue*: Five Questions About Courage

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Abstract

An important virtue of *Emotion and Virtue* is its careful and sophisticated discussion of the central yet ill-understood virtue of courage. However, Sreenivasan's treatment of courage raises as many questions as it answers; several of these can be brought into sharper focus by comparison with the argument of Plato and Aristotle on the topic.

Keywords Sreenivasan · *Emotion and Virtue* · Courage · Plato · Aristotle

Courage is perhaps the most confusing of the virtues. In popular culture it reigns supreme: no virtue is more recognizable, intensely attractive, forceful in its claims on the imagination. Movie audiences will cheer on the action hero at the same moment in every country in the world. But – perhaps because of this superficial legibility – no virtue has been of less interest to philosophers. The topic was important to Plato and Aristotle, and the latter's treatments are surely still the richest by any major philosopher (*EN* III.6-9, *EE* III.1). But in recent times there have been only a small handful of discussions by analytical philosophers (albeit generally of rather high quality);¹ for the most part, courage has been left to the other disciplines, leading to empirically rich, historically informed, but theoretically inconclusive results.² This is not because the problems were solved by Aristotle (or anybody else); his two accounts do not

¹ See e.g. Walton, D.N., *Courage* (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 1986), Scarre, G., *On Courage* (London: Routledge, 2010); Pears, D. (2004) "The Anatomy of Courage" *Social Research*, 71(1), 1–12.

² Miller, W.I., *The Mystery of Courage* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2000); Avramenko, R., *Courage: The Politics of Life and Limb* (South Bend IN: Notre Dame Press, 2011).

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even agree with each other, and each is full of unresolved puzzles and tensions, only some of which seem to be recognized by the author. It is more as if the concept tends to disintegrate on close inspection, has somehow blurred or become less important over time, and has now been, at least by many philosophers, quietly given up.

One of the virtues of *Emotion and Virtue*, then, is that it gives courage its due. Sreenivasan has the guts to take it as theoretically central; he adopts it as a test case for the integral account of virtue he expounds, according to which a virtue involves an assortment ('bento box') including cleverness, moral knowledge, and – above all, and the central demonstrandum of the book – a 'rectified emotion trait'. Readers of Aristotle will recognize something akin to his analysis of virtue into the nonrational ethical virtues and the complementary intellectual virtue *phronêsis* – only here the division is located within each virtue, and *phronêsis* is further subdivided, reasonably enough, into the complementary constituents cleverness and knowledge. And in the case of courage there is no doubt as to *which* emotion trait is relevant: courage obviously has something to do with fear. Courage is thus a good test case for the thesis that the virtuous person must not only experience the relevant emotion but do so in the correct way. (We might want to go on, in the Aristotelian mode, by adding conditions: at the right time, for the right reasons, to the right extent... but these become less certain.) Further (a somewhat non-Aristotelian twist) this trait is necessary for *cognitive* reasons; a rectified emotion trait is needed for the agent to reliably detect as salient the circumstances in which an action expressive of the virtue is called for. In other words, the distinctive contribution of the rectified fear trait in courage is to enable the agent to formulate the cost-benefit analysis of a prospective action correctly, by giving the right input on the 'danger' side of the ledger.

This line of argument is based on recent neuroscientific thinking (discussed helpfully in Chapter Three) to the effect that without emotions to give shape to our attentiveness or concern, practical reason – or indeed any decision-making at all – becomes impossible. That point is hard to challenge, and I have no inclination to do so here. Moreover, Sreenivasan's argument in this book goes far beyond a simple argument for that thesis; it is at every point rich, original, and sophisticated, filled with insights which are worth musing on in their own right. However, at the end of the day it answered fewer of the questions about courage which puzzle me than I had hoped; some 'chestnuts' receive answers which strike me as inconclusive, and other perplexities, brought out in the ancient discussions or reflection on paradigm cases, are not on the agenda at all. While it would be unfair to criticize Sreenivasan for not writing the comprehensive new treatment of courage which we need, it is I think fair to point out the ways in which it remains a mystery; here are five puzzles, then, which puzzle me still.

1 How is Courage Related to the Other Virtues?

The unity or disunity of the virtues is a recurrent theme of the book, with Sreenivasan coming down in favour of a modified disunity thesis (Chapter Four, cf. 218, 236 ff.). This is certainly a long-standing 'chestnut', though not classed as such here; and both Plato in the *Laches* and Aristotle end up on the side of unity or at least reciprocity. For

Aristotle, courage can only be possessed in full by the person who has a generalized practical wisdom, *phronêsis*, which in turn entails possession of all the other virtues (EN VI.13); so the virtues are mutually entailing indirectly. In Plato's *Laches* (which ends in *aporia*, so that admittedly all bets are off as to his own all-things-considered view, even at the time of writing), he considers a theory that the courageous person is one who has knowledge of what is and is not to be feared (196d-9e). (Why would correctness in fearing have to take the form of *knowledge*? Plato assumes that fear expresses a belief, specifically the belief that something approaching is bad for the agent – so that fear is a reaction to information, not as for Sreenivasan information-bearing itself. And reliably, systematically correct beliefs of this kind are reasonably taken to constitute or express a kind of expertise. There is perhaps also an adumbration of the thought made explicit in the *Phaedo* (68a-9d), that a person should not count as courageous if in them one fear is simply driven out by another, even if the resulting behaviour is correct. Courage must be a different kind of thing, one which reliably regulates fear – which has as it were the *right* to regulate fear. And what could that be if not knowledge or wisdom?) Socrates then argues that fear is of approaching evils ('bads'), and there is no kind of expertise which deals with future x's but not past and present ones; it is also assumed that knowledge deals with opposites; so the courageous person must have a comprehensive understanding of *all* goods and evils (198a-9e). If so, then courage is surely sufficient for all the other virtues as well, since each is a matter of correctly pursuing some kind of good and avoiding some kind of evil.

Whatever way you get there, this thesis of the unity or reciprocity of courage with the other virtues is somewhere between surprising and flatly incredible. In the *Protagoras*, when Socrates asks that distinguished sophist whether the person who has one virtue necessarily has them all, he takes it as obvious that they do not, and that it is the case of courage which shows this best: "By no means, since many are courageous but unjust, and many again are just but not wise" (329e).³ Protagoras doubles down later on: "What I am saying to you, Socrates, is that all these are parts of virtue, and that while four of them are reasonably close to each other, courage is completely different from all the rest. The proof that what I am saying is true is that you will find many people who are extremely unjust, impious, intemperate, and ignorant, and yet exceptionally courageous" (349d). Protagoras is professionally and by philosophical inclination in much closer touch with common opinion than Socrates; but he is no fool, and no slave to the thinking of 'the Many' either (352e-3a). Nor does he seem to have any revisionist or theorized view of his own about the matter (though he does have a theory about how courage is acquired, cf. 350c-51a). His certainty comes across rather as a matter of empirical common sense: it is just an observable fact that courage travels separately from the other virtues. And this seems on the face of it hard to dispute. It is no doubt based on the Greek understanding of the paradigmatic courageous person as the one who is brave on the battlefield, regardless of their behaviour elsewhere. But the point only becomes more stark if we expand our traditional paradigms, to include not only the war hero but the conscientious objector, the person escaping slavery, the Resistance member, the volunteer kidney donor, the mountain

³ Translations are by S. Lombardo and K. Bell (Hackett, 1993).

climber or ski jumper. We are not surprised to learn, in any of these cases, that such a person could also be unjust or unwise or intemperate – even if we feel averse to granting that the terrorist or serial killer acts courageously in performing their evil acts (the extreme case of ‘disunity’). Perhaps more oddly, we do not even particularly expect that the person who is courageous in one of these ways or contexts will be so in the others, a point I will return to.

However, the *Laches* argument is not so easy to resist as it might at first appear. For one thing, it is not at all clear that one can have the *other* virtues in full without courage. Certainly the just person cannot be fully just, in an exemplary way, if they cease to do the just thing whenever it is dangerous to them. The truly temperate person, who has overcome any excessive attraction to alcohol, will not chicken out of a cocktail party. The truly practically wise person does not deliberate in a way warped by any fears. Moreover if we suppose that ‘approaching bad things’ can include prospective wrong actions, the person of exemplary virtue will *fear* making moral mistakes in any domain. It is in fact key to the Socratic conception of a comprehensive knowledge of goods and evils that moral evils are the worst, so that the desire to avoid them must always trump all other motivations. It follows that if courage is what correctly regulates fear, it must have a meta-relation to all the other virtues in the fully virtuous person, reinforcing them by leading the agent to fear failure in their regard. And this is just one of any number of possible connections. We cannot assume that a simple and uniform answer to ‘disunified or unified?’ is available – that the relations here will be the same for every pair of virtues, or that the dependence relations of any given pair will be symmetrical. Sreenivasan’s account presents courage as enabling the deliberating agent to draw up a balance sheet in which the rectified fear trait informs us about the dangers of some action, while on the other side, all of cleverness, supplemental moral knowledge, and minimal moral decency help us to decide whether it is worthwhile nonetheless. But a full accounting, it seems to me, would be still more complicated than that.

Sreenivasan takes the unity thesis, correctly I think, to stand or fall with the postulation of a higher ‘true’ virtue whose possessor would act unerringly. Protagoras’ brave but intemperate and unjust warrior is no counterexample, then, because he has only a lower, separable proto-virtue. This postulate is rejected on the grounds that even the highest virtue is insufficient for inerrancy, and this in turn, Sreenivasan argues, is because considerations about rights are not the department of any virtue. This last claim – the rejection of ‘imperialism’, as Sreenivasan calls it, on the part of virtue theory – seems to me both unconvincing in its own right and unsatisfyingly orthogonal to the question at hand. So far as I can see, our contemporary conception of the just person is very much that of the person who respects and defends the rights of others, though it is interestingly hard to pair this with a single emotional trait: is justice a kind of respectfulness, perhaps with a touch of the Greek quasi-virtue of shame or reverence, *aidôs*? Or is righteous indignation at *injustice* the salient characteristic of the just? Be that puzzle as it may, I see no advantages to secluding rights from the scope of virtue, even if for practical theoretical purposes (so to speak) they are often best served by independent investigation. It is hard to see how we can tell whether our table of the virtues is the best we can come up with, if the aspiration to comprehensiveness is given up – if we are not to see deliberative gappiness, regard-

ing rights or anything else, as a theoretical defect. And the question whether there is a virtue corresponding to actions required by respect for rights seems to me in any case too far removed from the question whether whatever virtues there are are interentailing to plausibly settle the question. The more directly pertinent question, as it seems to me, is what work is done (for good or ill) by insisting on the theoretical postulate of the agent with full, perfect, and therefore interentailing virtues. The logical terminus of that idea is to be found in the Stoics, with their Sage who has probably never existed, and the resulting endless terminological awkwardness in relation to real people we would like to praise. So Sreenivasan's preference for 'plain', disunified virtues – and for ascribing virtue to the fallible agent, a sensible stance which already does important work in Chapter Five – seems to me preferable on much simpler grounds than his own.

To do some of the work done by mutual entailment, Sreenivasan enriches each virtue by adding to the bento box an all-purpose requirement for minimal moral decency; this allows for the reluctance we feel about describing a risk-taking serial killer or terrorist, say, as courageous, without having to affirm a strongly objectivist view across the board about the ways in which the goal of courage must be worthwhile. However, it does not address the ancient worries, which have less to do with being scandalized by obnoxious instances of virtue than with genuine puzzles about whether a clean division of labour among the virtues is really possible (cf. 235). And one might also wonder whether we are really *right* to want to reserve 'courageous' for the decent person. Sometimes in these areas the 'attractive' thesis (an ambiguous term Sreenivasan rather likes, perhaps because of its ambiguity?) is attractive in the way that wishful thinking is attractive: of course we would *prefer* not to praise the person who is evil or all-things-considered profoundly vicious, in any terms at all. But that is perhaps the kind of preference which reality does not accommodate – a datum to be taken into consideration in our thinking about the ethics of praise, perhaps, but not about the moral psychology of the agent in question.

2 Is the Fearless Person Courageous? If Not, Can the Less Fearful Person Still be More Courageous?

Aristotle and Sreenivasan are agreed that the courageous person is not fearless, and this seems correct. Conceptually, the courageous person is one who takes a stand *against* fear, which implies its presence or at least availability; moreover the person who is totally fearless in all situations, or in ones in which a normal person would feel fear, seems to be in a way defective – they are getting something wrong, failing in aptness to the situation. So consideration of virtuous psychological profiles seems to confirm our understanding of courage as intrinsically fear-dependent. But once again matters are not really so simple. For one thing, Aristotle still wants to say that the courageous person is *less* fearful than others, especially than the coward, and surely this is plausible too. Some of our paradigm cases of the courageous person – the bomb-disposal expert, the seasoned paratrooper, the mountain climber – have 'nerves of steel', and this seems to be a way of imagining them as having less fear or somehow experiencing it less fully than the ordinary person. But this combination

of intuitions is, on reflection, a bit awkward: can it really be the case that decreasing fear goes with increasing courage, asymptotally, until with the limit case of the fearless person courage became impossible? A related worry in the ancient discussions is the relation of courage to expertise. In the *Laches* and *Protagoras*, the paradigm is the skilled well-diver (193c and 350a respectively); their modern counterpart is presumably the firefighter or the bomb-disposal expert. Such a person takes risks which would overwhelm or dissuade others, and importantly, their doing so cannot be dismissed as irrationally rash. But their expertise reduces the occasion for fear (and habituation might well reduce their experience of it) even as it increases their risk-taking activities. There is also a further puzzle about how *this* kind of ‘knowledge of goods and evils’ relates to the morally informed kind in the *Laches* argument; Aristotle seems to accuse Socrates of confusing the two (*EE* III.1, 1230a5-10).

Finally, what about Socrates himself? He is presented as a paradigm of courage in the *Apology*, *Crito*, and *Phaedo*, calm and steadfast while others panic on his behalf, comparing himself to the hero Achilles in his resolve (*Apology* 28b-d). But he holds that death is nothing to be feared, giving different arguments to that effect in different dialogues (*Apology* 40b-41e, *Phaedo*); while wrongdoing, which harms the soul by tainting it with injustice, is always to be greatly feared and fled (*Crito*). If Socrates really does not fear death, though, it is unclear that his facing it should count as courageous – unless there is a kind of courage which takes the form of fearlessness after all. Why *does* Socrates strike us as courageous, when the adult who is indifferent to a spider in the room, understanding that it is nothing to be afraid of, does not? Perhaps the answer is that we do not really believe that a human being *can* avoid fearing death, pain, and physical harm more than they do wrongdoing, let alone altogether: when Socrates or a Stoic argues that such things are not to be feared, they are engaging in a kind of self-exhortation which cannot meet with full success. We admire that project as a kind of morally useful self-cultivation, which will strengthen their ability to act correctly, rather than accepting it as expressive of their actual psychological state. But this comes uncomfortably close to saying that Socrates is a hero because he argues in bad faith. And it suggests that what we should say is not that the fearless person is not courageous, but that the fearless person is impossible. But then perhaps so too is the perfectly courageous person; and the paradoxical asymptotal view of courage and fear could perhaps be the right one after all.

3 What is the Goal of Courageous Action? Need it Have Any Goal at All?

Sreenivasan takes the standard modern view that courage is unlike most of the other canonical virtues in a structurally distinctive way: it is an executive virtue, and executive virtues are characterized by not having any fixed end or goal of their own. Rather, they take any (good) external goal(s) of the agent as input and facilitate success in action as output. They help us to execute our purposes, by “enabling the agent to surmount some obstacle to her purpose, where different executive virtues are differentiated from one another in terms of the nature of the obstacle in question. With courage,

the surmounted obstacle is danger or fear, whereas with patience, for example, it is delay and with temperance it is bodily appetites” (209).

‘Executive virtue’ is not a concept Plato or Aristotle have, and I think they may be better off without it, at least in this case. (So they do not think of temperance that way either, and this too seems better: really intemperate pursuers of pleasure may well have *no* goals with which the pursuit of pleasure interferes, but this is part of what is wrong with them.) If there are executive virtues, they must indeed be the ones which contribute to the attainment of a determinate and distinct end of the agent, in the way that the virtue of good time management (if it is one) or being organized does. To say that courage is like this amounts to reducing it to perseverance, and indeed Sreenivasan makes this reduction explicit and definitional: “Courage is perseverance in the face of danger when and because the perseverance is worthwhile” (211). But perseverance seems to me to be only one subspecies of courage: the temporally extended goal-oriented one, or perhaps more specifically the *active* temporally extended goal-oriented one, with endurance as its passive counterpart. (The person who perseveres *keeps trying to do* something in the face of obstacles and setbacks; the person who endures *keeps putting up with* things, particularly suffering and loss.) But courageous behaviour comes in other forms and flavours too: the extraordinarily daring adventure, the flamboyant gesture of defiance, the uncalculated moment of sacrifice. The student who throws a Molotov cocktail at the tank of the evil invader is presumptively doing something courageous, without our needing to interview them on their goal and assess its worthwhileness, or to be assured that it belongs to the kind of ongoing policy we would standardly call ‘perseverance’. Indeed courage is most marked and thrilling – heroic – when it ruins or threatens to ruin the courageous person’s life. The professional soldier who volunteers for danger in a routine way does not seem as courageous as the dystopian hero who while going about his ordinary business is confronted with evil, and cannot help but risk everything by obstinately standing against it. That person certainly does not *experience* courage as useful to some antecedent goal – it is rather a burden, likely if anything to foreclose all goals. Of course, we might still think that courage as such and in general – its status as a virtue – is due to its instrumental value to individuals and societies; but this is different from its being executive, and quite plausibly all the virtues are ‘instrumental’ in this way.

One kind of non-goal-oriented courage is considered by Sreenivasan here, in a very interesting discussion of Jonathan Lear’s account of the Crow Indian leader Plenty Coups: a kind of commitment to hope in the abyss. (Post-apocalyptic courage, we might call this, thinking also of some of the characters in the novel and film *The Road*.) Intuitively, to adopt a stance of hope in the abyss is a courageous act, and a form of perseverance too. But it is negative rather than goal-oriented, unless refusing to give into despair and sink into inertia can be called a goal. Even if it can be, it is very hard to parse as an *external* goal, since it is also just what the courageous action *is*. The Plenty Coups case is even more extreme than that of the heroes on the dying planet of *The Road*, since (as Lear stresses) it is not merely that no worthwhile goal is practically available to the Crow at the moment in question, but that they no longer have access to a value system of the kind which would enable one even to be identified and aimed at. So Sreenivasan is right to single this out as a putative kind of

courage which his account excludes; but I do not really see a fully convincing argument here for the exclusion.

A courageous act should perhaps not be pointless; but we are inclined to think that the point can be rather hard to articulate, or largely negative, and that a courageous action can indeed be its own point – at least up to a point. Oddly, the two opposite extremes seem to converge here: at one end Plenty Coups and the dystopian or post-apocalyptic hero, with their probably futile gestures and inchoate aspirations, and at the other the mountain climber, for whom risk is an attractive part of a concrete challenge voluntarily assumed. When asked why he would try to climb Mount Everest, a paradigmatic courageous action at the time, George Mallory, who was to die on its slopes, famously said: ‘Because it is there’. This is obviously a refusal to answer, and one naturally hears it being said in an irritable tone; it says nothing, but designates the questioner as presumptively obtuse. But if no explanation can be given to the person who would ask, is that because there is no explanation at all, or because the explanation is obvious to (as Aristotle would say) anyone who has been correctly brought up? I take Mallory’s point to be that there is no intelligible *external* goal: the point of climbing Everest is to climb Everest. And to me, this sounds like a slightly furtive, 20th-century way of expressing the Aristotelian idea of an action chosen for its own sake and for the sake of the *kalon*, the beautiful (or noble, or fine). Mallory spoke in 1923. After WWI, and the recognition of how easily ‘fine’ sentiments could be manipulated to enable pointless mass slaughter, one perhaps could not say out loud: I am choosing this action precisely because it takes courage and skill and enterprise, and these things are beautiful, and this beauty is heightened by the fact that the action serves no further purpose. Even Aristotle probably would prefer his virtuous agent not to spend too much time thinking explicitly about his own behaviour in such terms. But it is hard to make intelligible what the worthwhile end involved in voluntarily high-risk activities could be without invoking courage itself or some proxy associated with it (risk-taking, danger, challenge). What makes a courageous action worthwhile, then, is not necessarily cleanly on the other side of a balance sheet from the dangers being faced by it, nor does courage always necessarily aim at a goal separable from the exercise of courage itself.

4 Is the Courageous Person Cross-situationally Consistent?

Definitionally yes, and in Chapter Five Sreenivasan is concerned to counter situationists dubious about the reality (or anyway the wide distribution) of such traits. But in practice, we are curiously ready to attribute courage (or cowardice) on the base of a single paradigmatic episode, without worrying about cross-situational consistency at all. This might just look like our old friend the fundamental attribution error. But in the case of courage it is not that we overgeneralize from a small behavioural sample, and then are surprised at having to retract our judgement – when we discover that the military medal winner is not also brave in the board room, at the town council meeting, at the dinner table, or when faced with a spider in the garage. It is rather that we do not care. (Certainly nobody thinks in that case they should hand the medal back.) Even if we set aside the diversity of settings in which courage may be exercised,

restricting ourselves to a single kind of context, we do not seem interested in reliability in the way we are with the other virtues. His Majesty the King gives lifetime honours for the contributions made to society by the just or compassionate person, but medals to the person who is outstandingly courageous once. It is as if we cannot help but think of courage in narrative terms, as belonging to the person who ‘rises to the occasion’ in response to a single defining test. And it is easy to imagine evolutionary reasons for prizing the single crucial episode – the moment in which one band member saves the life of another by charging the lion. Perhaps this is a mistaken way of thinking, a misleading paradigm, which we should try to replace or correct; then again, perhaps philosophers should be more cautious about the assumption that courage is a stable trait in the manner of the other virtues, and a cross-situational unity.

5 What Exactly Does Right Emotion Contribute to the Virtue of the Virtuous Person? And What Does it Mean to Feel Rightly, in the Case of Courage?

To put it in Sreenivasan’s terms: What is it for an emotional trait such as fear to be ‘rectified’? Sreenivasan’s account of this is complex, and distributed across a number of chapters. He considers in detail two bits of rectification which must be a standard part of the virtuous person’s equipment: the compassionate person must be able to extend their compassion to members of out-groups, and the courageous person must be adept at detecting social as well as physical dangers. He also clarifies that the rectification must be internal to the trait itself; since the need is to detect input salience, cleverness and moral knowledge come into the picture too late to fix any deficiencies. (This is, I suppose, most clearly so if the fear trait is too weak: a hypersensitive fear trait could be told to calm down, but cleverness cannot warn it of what neither of them has noticed. On the other hand, cleverness *should* be able to notice, for instance, that x is a life-threatening health risk statistically as threatening as y and z , where y and z are routinely met with fear but x is not, and raise the alarm accordingly. Perhaps *some* fear trait must be present for cleverness to cantilever off it in this way; but if cleverness can do the cognitive work of fear much of the time, it may seem less important for the trait to be rectified.)

So a crucial question for Sreenivasan is: just how much goes into rectification? On reflection either a highly ambitious or a minimalist conception seems possible – indeed each has some warrant, but neither is satisfactory. At the limit, a perfectly and comprehensively rectified fear trait would presumably do the same work behaviourally as Socrates’ knowledge of good and evil, infallibly calibrating all threats (including threats to the agent’s worthwhile goal of doing the right thing). Full rectification thus seems to incorporate or duplicate cleverness and supplementary moral knowledge within the emotion trait itself, muddling the containers in the bento box; it also lands us once again with the spectre of an unrealizable perfect virtue.

A more modest conception of rectification thus seems preferable, but this too is tricky to specify. In particular, there is something odd about the idea of a rectified fear trait being especially required in relation to social dangers. Sreenivasan’s discussion of social danger focusses on assuring the reader that our fear traits are sufficiently

plastic to acquire learned stimuli as triggers, so that we may acquire a disposition to fear angry faces as well as snakes (224-7).⁴ But in fact this social dimension of our fear trait works all too well: we seem to be at once hypersensitized to experience such fears and experientially quasi-blind to them. Most ordinary people will do what they know to be wrong rather than face disapproval from a low-level authority figure, whom they could walk away from at any time.⁵ We trudge off to pointless wars without resistance, thinking ourselves courageous all the while. When routinized into conformism, this overpowering aversion to social danger may not *feel* fear-based. (That there is clearly such a thing as un- or sub-conscious fear may not ultimately be a problem for Sreenivasan's account, but it perhaps deserves more discussion: how does the 'balance sheet' model work, when the accountant is unaware of some of the entries?) Sreenivasan argues, correctly, that non-longitudinal studies of the Milgram experiment kind cannot prove that any given participant lacks the virtue being tested for. But I hope he does not take this to show that such studies show us nothing. If on a single test 66% of students misspell some word, it is probably true that a certain proportion of them *do* know how to spell it – that is, they spell it correctly the great majority of the time, and not by accident – and have merely made a lapse. But it is extraordinarily unlikely that all 66% fall into that case; some will have misspelled it because they usually do so, because they do not know how to spell it correctly. The proportions of the two types are impossible to adjudicate from a single performance, and there will be a broad grey indeterminate zone in the middle. But the study is still evidence that there is a widespread *problem* with the spelling of that word: it is evidence which should heighten our willingness to bet against any particular student spelling the word correctly on any future occasion. In other words, the situationist literature is good evidence that our species has a big problem with *over*-reaction to social dangers, whatever the breakdown may be of that defectiveness into blindspots, blackspots (a pair of useful concepts introduced in Chapter Five), and a cross-situationally robust lack of 'moral courage'. This may not make much of a difference to Sreenivasan's argument at the most general level; but it means that the focus of his discussion of rectification feels misplaced. The interesting question is not whether or how human beings can come to reliably fear social dangers, but what can be done about our tendency to fear them far too much. This is in fact an important reason that the prospect of a *fully* rectified fear trait seems hopelessly remote and overidealized; and it helps to explain why our expectations for cross-situational courage are so oddly, yet correctly, low.

Most of these puzzles and paradoxes contribute in turn to a single larger *aporia*: whether courage is really one thing. It is not the (or even a) purpose of *Emotion and Virtue* to consider that question; and it would be churlish to complain about that when Sreenivasan gives us so many interesting ideas to think about on so many pertinent

⁴ I am not sure that we should assume as Sreenivasan does that "the relevance of these [social] dangers is hardly evolutionary in character". Ostracism, contempt, and hatred were probably greater survival threats to our band-member ancestors than snakes, and it is far from impossible that fear of them has come to be selected for. Cf Boehm, C., *Hierarchy in the Forest* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

⁵ The locus classicus is of course the Milgram experiments, the results of which remain as shocking and well-confirmed as ever despite recent attempts at debunking (Milgram, S., *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* (New York: Harper Collins, 1974)).

points. But not to know whether something is one thing is also not to know what that thing really is; and so what courage really is remains something of a mystery. This does not mean that Sreenivasan's account of it is wrong, but that one way or another his bento box analysis cannot be the whole or final story.

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