Temptation and Easy Virtue

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[**Abstract:** We tend to think of the virtuous person as free from temptation, since a soul riven by internal conflict is not in its healthiest state. Yet we also tend to think that one doesn't count as virtuous unless one has to struggle to resist temptation, since otherwise the agent seems not to deserve much credit. I argue against both conceptions. The charge that virtue comes too easily for the untempted is defeated by attention to past and counterfactual circumstances; but the value of temptation is that it sometimes accurately represents important normative features of the situation.]

There are two ways in which we are drawn – I'm tempted to say tempted – toward thinking about the relation between virtue and temptation. On the one hand, there is a tendency to think of the virtuous person as free from temptation; on this view, all the virtuous person's desires line up together in the right direction. Call this the Unity conception. On the other hand, there is a tendency to think that one doesn't count as virtuous unless one has to struggle to resist and subdue temptation. Call this the Overcoming conception.

Our double-mindedness on this issue is especially clearly exemplified in the way we think about courage. On the one hand, we often use the word "fearless," with the blessing of our dictionaries and thesauruses, as a synonym for "brave" or "courageous," as though courageous people felt no fear, no temptation to run away. One popular collection of sayings about courage is even titled *Fear Not*, as though such a title were natural for a work on this subject – even though many of the apothegms assembled therein would seem to dissent from such an implication.[1] Yet on the other hand we readily speak as though courage, far being incompatible with fear, actually requires it. Consider the following series of quotations:

> Courage is resistance to fear, mastery of fear – not absence of fear. Except a creature be part coward it is not a compliment to say it is brave.[2]
>
> There is no living thing that is not afraid when it faces danger. True courage is in facing danger when you are afraid ....[3]
>
> Courage is doing what you're afraid to do. There can be no courage unless you're scared.[4]

> Courage isn't just a matter of not being frightened, you know ... It's being afraid and doing what you have to do anyway.[5]

> The brave man is not he who does not feel afraid, but he who conquers that fear.[6]

> Before I knew you, I thought brave was not being afraid. You've taught me that bravery is being terrified and doing it anyway.[7]

> "Can a man still be brave if he's afraid?" "That is the only time a man can be brave."[8]

The first of these quotations is from Mark Twain in 1894. The second is from the original *Wizard of Oz* in 1900. The third is from the World War I aviation hero Eddie Rickenbacker, circa 1928. The fourth is from a 1973 *Doctor Who* episode. The fifth is from Nelson Mandela in his 1994 autobiography. The sixth is from a 2008 novel in Laurell K. Hamilton's *Anita Blake: Vampire Hunter* series. And the last one is from *Game of Thrones*.

Let's throw in, as well, science-fiction writer Robert Heinlein, who in illustration of his definition of courage as "the capacity to choose to face danger when you are frightened by it," tells the anecdote of "the bravest man [he'd] ever met" – a man who had chosen, in order to rebuild his doctor's morale, to take an injection from the terrified doctor whose last injection had accidentally killed the patient by inducing an air embolism. Upon receiving the injection, Heinlein's "bravest man" died too – not from an air embolism, however, but of fright.[9] Clearly the implication is that his death proves his bravery by demonstrating the extent of the fear he had to overcome.

Quotations like these can be multiplied indefinitely by a few minutes' internet search. Evidently, the idea that courage is not absence of fear but willingness to face fear is well entrenched in popular culture and has been so for a long time. Yet, curiously enough, these quotations all treat the contrary position as though *it* were the entrenched view and needed to be combated. Evidently the Overcoming conception has enough pull on public consciousness to receive its endorsement, yet the Unity conception, for its part, has enough pull on public consciousness to be regarded as the received position (even though it apparently is not).

I suspect that the reason that both conceptions have so strong a hold on us is that, as I shall argue, each contains an important part of the truth – but neither is wholly correct.

Why does either seem correct? The attraction of the Overcoming conception is its alignment with our ideas about *merit* and moral praiseworthiness. If a desirable action is accomplished too easily, the agent seems not to deserve much *credit* for choosing it; and if feeling some desire for an object of choice is, plausibly, a precondition of the possibility of choosing it, a person devoid of all temptation would seem to earn no credit at all.

The Unity conception, for its part, attracts us through its alignment with our *aspirations*. Just as a body in pain is not a body in its healthiest state, so a soul riven by internal conflict seems not to be a soul in its healthiest state. And if we incline to the view that feelings and desires are cognitive, that they embody judgments, then we must view the tempted person as one who to some degree, or with some part of her soul, is judging falsely. Aren't false judgments undesirable? Wouldn't we be in a better state without them? (Moreover, believers in a personal God tend to be quite generous in praising such a being for its actions, even though an omnipotent deity's difficulty in overcoming temptation would presumably be nil; religious beliefs of this kind thus tend to block a general application of the Overcoming conception. Since I don't think the notion of God as a personal agent makes sense, I won't explore this aspect of the issue further.)

It is common to associate the Unity and Overcoming conceptions with Aristotle and Kant respectively. Both interpretations are mistaken; neither of these philosophers was unsophisticated enough to fall for such a simplistic dichotomy. It is true that Kant sees conflicts between duty and interest where Aristotle sees none; but Kant does not take such conflicts to support the Overcoming conception, nor does Aristotle take the absence of conflict to support the Unity conception.

Kant, for his part, does hold that it is only when we follow duty *against our inclinations* that we can be justifiably *confident* that our action has moral worth. But Kant never says that acting against inclination is a prerequisite for acting from duty; he says only that when duty and inclination conflict it is much easier to *distinguish* the dutiful motivation from others.[10] But as duty requires of us only that we *in fact* act for the right reasons, not that we *know* ourselves to be doing so, the clash between duty and inclination is not needed for anything morally necessary. Indeed, far from telling us that we ought not to enjoy doing our duty, Kant insists that we have a duty to cultivate in ourselves a tendency to take pleasure in what duty commands.[11] Hence Kant does not regard the presence of temptation as a prerequisite for moral worth, and so does not embrace the Overcoming conception. Yet he clearly does

not accept the Unity conception either, since he explicitly regards those who overcome inclination for duty's sake as praiseworthy.

As for Aristotle, while he does regard virtuous conduct as ordinarily pleasant for the agent,[12] and likewise regards the virtuous person's appetites as in agreement with her rational judgment,[13] he nevertheless grants that the courageous person will feel fear. Nor is this merely the fear of those things that are rightly to be avoided; on the contrary, Aristotle insists that the courageous person will fear *even those dangers she virtuously faces*,[14] and thus that courage is an exception to the rule that the exercise of virtue is pleasant.[15] This means that the courageous person will be tempted to run away from dangers that she should face, and thus will in some respect and to some extent be judging them, falsely, to be worth running away from. Aristotle, then, does not accept the Unity conception; the courageous person is not, after all, entirely free from inner conflict and cognitive confusion. Yet Aristotle also seems to think that, at least as a rule, the greater the difficulty one experiences in hewing to the right path (even if one succeeds in hewing to it), the *worse* moral condition one is in; thus he apparently does not accept the Overcoming conception either.

Let's consider, then, whether we can do better than the Unity and Overcoming concetions. (Since my own views on virtue and practical reason are for the most part closer to Aristotle's than to Kant's, I shall leave Kant aside now, taking Aristotle as my primary guide. If issues concerning slavery should come up, I will of course hasten to call Kant back.)

I shall begin with the Overcoming conception. What's wrong with it? Where is the mistake in thinking that there's no credit without temptation? I think two limitations of vision lead us astray here: a focus on the present as opposed to the past, and a focus on the actual as opposed to the counterfactual.

When we focus on a current time-slice of the virtuous person, we may see an absence of temptation – or, more accurately I think, a *weakness* of most temptations, and an absence of *certain* temptations; but let's lump all these possibilities together as low temptation. Thus we see someone for whom little effort is (at least ordinarily) required to do the virtuous action in the virtuous way for the virtuous reasons, *etc.*, and so we are inclined to grant little praise. But if we are good Aristoteleans, we will remember that nobody is *born* virtuous – which means that this virtuous character that shines so radiantly before us, delivering itself of noble actions left and right with effortless grace, was itself once an *achievement*, won by *effort*.

Admittedly some people have a head start on virtue, or on some virtues, finding it, or them, easier to achieve than others do; these are the people that Aristotle calls "naturally virtuous." But being naturally virtuous is *not a way of being virtuous*, except in the way that a partly completed book manuscript is a book manuscript. The path from natural virtue to ethical virtue always requires effort, even if not always the same amount; so a person who faces little temptation *now* may justly be credited with her victory over the *past* temptations she had to overcome in order to achieve her present equanimity – just as the skill of an athlete who leaps hurdles effortlessly is doubtless the product of much past effort and training. Aristotle tells us, famously and plausibly, that a person who now finds it *difficult* to avoid vicious conduct is still *blameworthy* for not avoiding it, because her vicious character was shaped by past actions that could once more easily have been avoided;[16] it seems a simple corollary that a person who now finds it *easy* to avoid vicious conduct is still *praiseworthy* for avoiding it, because her virtuous character was shaped by past actions that once were less easy to achieve. If, in looking at the virtuous person, we see little or no struggle (and thus little or no merit), that may be because we are looking in the wrong place, or rather the wrong time; in focusing on the present we are missing struggles that lie in the past.

It is also a mistake to infer, from the fact that a virtuous person does the right thing without feeling (much) temptation to do otherwise, that it is only *because* of low temptation that she does the right thing. On the contrary, we can distinguish conceptually – however hard it may sometimes be to distinguish empirically – between those who *would* (likely) succumb to temptation if the temptation were stronger, and those who would (likely) not. Aristotle himself tells us that those who whose courage vanishes when their passions change were never truly courageous;[17] and although he has in mind passions weakening, the same moral would seem to apply to passions strengthening. Still more to the point, Aristotle tells us explicitly, in a passage that is too little known, that despite the contrast between the temperate person (who faces little or no temptation in doing the right thing) and the continent person (who manages to do the right thing only through great struggle against strong contrary temptation),[18] the temperate person herself may be called continent *in the sense* that although she does not feel the temptations that the continent person feels, she is such that if she *did* feel them she *would* still resist them: "For the temperate man is also continent; for the continent man is not only he who, having the appetites within him,

masters them in accordance with reason, but also he who, not having the appetites within him, is such as to be able to master them if they were to arise."[19]

This last passage is from the *Magna Moralia*, whose authenticity is admittedly disputed;[20] but a precisely parallel point is made in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, where Aristotle tells us that a disposition to shame can be applied in a hypothetical sense to the virtuous person; such a person is of course in the ordinary sense not disposed to feel shame, since she is not disposed to do anything worth feeling shame about – but, says Aristotle, she is still so disposed that *if*, counterfactually, she were to do something shameful, she would feel shame: "For shame is not a virtue, if it comes about as a response to base actions. ... Shame is a virtue only in a hypothetical sense, for if one were perform [base actions] one would be ashamed."[21] The *Nicomachean* passage adds that while this merely hypothetical disposition to shame is implicit in virtue, it does not by itself entail virtue – just as the *Magna Moralia* passage adds that while this merely hypothetical disposition to continence is implicit in temperance, it does not by itself entail temperance. Thus Aristotle appears to hold that a person who faces low temptation in the actual circumstances may nevertheless be credited with overcoming high temptation in counterfactual circumstances. In any case, whether or not Aristotle held this view, he ought to have; it is the natural line of development of the Aristotelean way of thinking about these matters. I hereby baptise it *in nomine Aristotelis*.

Thus the person who has no need to overcome temptation now may still draw credit from past overcomings and counterfactual overcomings. But the defender of the Overcoming conception, even if pushed to abandon the view that continence is superior to temperance, may still attempt to retreat to the weaker view that the value of temperance is always parasitic on the value of continence – if not present continence, then past continence or counterfactual continence. But this view is mistaken as well.

Suppose that I am subject to especially creepy temptations. I am constantly feeling, say, the extremely powerful urge to kidnap people and slowly torture them to death in my basement. When I look at you, I imagine you in the grip of my ingenious devices with the same vivid urgency of longing as that with which a person dying of thirst in the middle of the Sahara imagines water. But I never act on these promptings; for I know it would be wrong to do so – and so, day after day, hour after hour, I heroically subdue my perverse appetites and behave with due propriety. I struggle endlessly not to act on my urges, and in

that struggle I always succeed; I also struggle endlessly to become free of having such urges in the first place, but in that struggle I always fail.

Upon learning all this about me, do you think better of me than you did before? According to the Overcoming conception, you ought to – for my ordinary social interactions require far more subduing of temptation than most people's do. (Nor do most people deserve any credit for having *achieved* their freedom from extreme sadistic temptations like mine; for they never felt such temptations in the first place.) But it is more likely that you will be horrified. You may grant me credit for my success in resisting my impulses; and you may decide that the presence of the impulses is not my fault; but that doesn't mean that you will, or should, regard me as a moral ideal. On the contrary, the natural response would be to regard my moral character as radically flawed, as vicious. Perhaps we should conclude that vice in the sense of what deserves blame and vice in the sense of moral unhealth do not coincide as closely as even Aristotle's language sometimes suggests.

When we do think of temptation as necessary for virtue, then, we seem to have in mind ordinary kinds of temptation, not the extreme kinds that Aristotle calls "brutish," such as cannibalistic impulses, or terror at a mouse's squeak.[22] Apparently when the temptations are sufficiently unlovely or unnatural, the Overcoming conception's focus on credit loses its grip on us and something closer to the Unity conception's focus on aspiration takes over.

As we've seen, Aristotle too thinks that virtuous people are free from strong and perverse temptations but subject to (some) more ordinary ones. But Aristotle's reason for allowing some temptations in are not credit-driven; they're aspiration-driven. The reason some temptations are needed is not because virtue would be too easy without them, but because lacking them would be a defect in character.

For Aristotle, the reason that the courageous person will feel fear, not just of those dangers that she ought to avoid, but even of those dangers that she ought to face and will face, is that courage involves facing dangers that are properly to be feared.[23] Now this is just what a full-fledged adherent of the Unity conception – a Stoic, say – would deny; since fearing X involves desiring to avoid X, and/or judging that X is to be avoided, nothing that is proper to fear can also be proper to face. But Aristotle evidently thinks that our emotions should be responsive to more features of the situation than just which of our options in the present moment is to be chosen all things considered. If courage requires us to rush into a burning building to save Fénelon's chambermaid, the Stoic will say we should not fear the

flames, because facing the flames is the best available option under the circumstances; but as Aristotle sees it, an absence of fear would involve a failure to register a important feature of the situation – that burning buildings are genuinely bad for us, and that something of real value, namely safety, is being sacrificed, albeit for something of greater value. For the Stoic, our emotional responses should have only two settings: an endorsement of whatever should be our top priority in the present circumstances, and a rejection of all options inconsistent with that top priority. But for Aristotle, our emotional responses should reflect a *ranking* of values. The fear that the courageous person feels on entering the burning building reflects the fact that although attempting a rescue is more important than avoiding the flames, an even better option, unfortunately unavailable under present circumstances, would be to pull off the rescue without having to face the flames. The risk of burning, though not the worst evil on offer in the situation, is still a bad and regrettable thing; and unless we are generally responsive to the badness of getting burned, we will not choose reliably in the general range of cases involving fire, and may even act with excessive rashness in the present case. This will explain why the virtuous person should feel some temptation to avoid the burning building even when she needs to face it, while she should not feel the temptation to torture people. Sacrificing one's safety is sacrificing a genuine good, albeit to gain a greater good, and so giving up safety should occasion some pain; sacrificing the opportunity to torture people, by contrast, is not sacrificing anything worth caring about, and so we should feel no pain in relinquishing such an opportunity.

Should we agree with Aristotle that in choosing the best action the virtuous person needs to respond emotionally to its suboptimal aspects? I think so. To see why, consider the following example, which I borrow from Karen Stohr. Suppose it falls to you to break bad news to someone – that their loved one has died, for example. Perhaps you work for the military, and have the job of knocking on the doors of soldiers' families to report a death; or perhaps you're just the first person to hear the news and you need to tell a friend. In such cases, surely, you *ought* to feel some reluctance do your duty – not so much reluctance that you're rendered unable to do it, but still a significant amount – which means that you ought to feel a temptation to do the wrong thing. What, after all, would we think of someone who *enjoyed* performing this duty? "Six more dead soldiers' families to inform today – damn, I love my job." Just as the presence of some temptations (like my torture fantasies, or Aristotle's examples of cannibalistic and mouse-fleeing temptations) is a sign of

a character defect, so the absence of some temptations can be a sign of a character defect as well.

Just as Aristotle treats courage as an exception to the rule that the exercise of virtue is pleasant, so he also treats it as an exception to the rule that the exercise of virtue is always more choiceworthy than its mere possession. Although private property is good, Aristotle tells us, because it makes acts of generosity possible,[24] it would be wicked to seek warfare in order to have similar occasion for acts of courage.[25] Aristotle is right to see a contrast here, but wrong to frame it as one between generosity and courage. After all, it would presumably also be wicked to hope for misfortunes to befall one's neighbours so that one might have a chance to practise some more generosity. The real difference is that some of the preconditions for acts of generosity are bad in themselves (others' misfortunes) while others are good in themselves (one's ability to alleviate such misfortunes); presumably the same applies to courage, where the existence of danger is bad but the ability to face it is good. (The fact that the ethical virtues so often seem to include negative features among their conditions of exercise would appear to explain, at least in part, Aristotle's preference for philosophical contemplation over ethical virtue.) In any case, when the preconditions *are* bad, Aristotle thinks that our emotional responses should be sensitive to that badness; it's hard to see how we could disagree with him without falling into the absurdity of thinking that Stohr's bringers of bad news should be whistling while they work.

In the end, though, the Unity conception, while mistaken, is closer to the truth than the Overcoming conception. Virtuous people should be *mostly* motivationally unified; they should be free of temptations toward positive evils, and their temptations toward genuine goods should not be so great as to render it very difficult to sacrifice them for goods still greater. As for those circumstances where they should *not* be motivationally unified, the reasons for this have nothing to do with a struggle against temptation being needed for credit – since the charge that virtue comes too easily for the untempted is defeated by attention to past and counterfactual circumstances. The value of temptation, *when* it is valuable, is not that one earns brownie points for overcoming it, but that it accurately represents important normative features of the situation. It is not temptation's wrongness, but its partial rightness, that earns it a hearing.

Notes

[1] Benjamin Darling, ed., *Fear Not: Thoughts on Courage* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2002).

[2] Mark Twain, *Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1894), ch. XII.

[3] L. Frank Baum, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900), ch. 15.

[4] Eddie Rickenbacker, ca. 1928.

[5] Terry Nation, "Planet of the Daleks," episode 2 (1973).

[6] Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom* (Boston: Little Brown & Co., 1994), p. 622.

[7] Laurell K. Hamilton, *Blood Noir* (New York: Penguin, 2008), p. 66.

[8] George R.R. Martin, *A Game of Thrones* (New York: Random House, 1996), p. 13.

[9] "No Bands Playing, No Flags Flying –" in Robert A. Heinlein, *Expanded Universe* (New York: Ace Books, 1980), pp. 237-243. Online at: **http://www.e-reading.org.ua/chapter.php/73047/20/Heinlein_-_Expanded_Universe.html**

[10] *Groundwork* I, 4: 397-99.

[11] *Metaphysics of Morals* II.i.12.a, 6: 399-400.

[12] *NE* I.8, 1099a7-25.

[13] *NE* III.12, 1119b15-18.

[14] *NE* III.7, 1155b11-13.

[15] *NE* III.10, 1117a33-b17.

[16] *NE* III.5, 1113b15-1114a22.

[17] *Magna Moralia* I.20, 1190b33-1191a14.

[18] *NE* VII.2, 1146a10-14.

[19] *Magna Moralia* II.6, 1203b11-23.

[20] On the authenticity of the *Magna Moralia*, see John M. Cooper, "The *Magna Moralia* and Aristotle's Moral Philosophy," *American Journal of Philology* 94 (1973): 327-349, and Christopher J. Rowe, "A Reply to John Cooper on the *Magna Moralia*," *American Journal of Philology* 96 (1975): 160-172.

[21] *NE* IV.9, 1128b23-35.

[22] *NE* VII.6, 1149a1-20.

[23] *NE* III.10, 1117a33-b17.

[24] *Pol.* II.5, 1263b5-15.

[25] *NE* X.7, 1177b6-13.