

# Aristotle on Real vs. False Courage

It seems there is no shortage of problems promising to plague Americans in the coming months. Like the six hundred in Tennyson's *Charge of the Light Brigade*, there are (pardon the parody):

"Riots to the right of them,  
ISIS to the left of them,  
Diving Wall Street in front of them"

In the midst of such chaos and confusion, nothing is more needful than courageous individuals. But do we really have a correct idea of what courage is?

Aristotle pondered a similar question in his famous work, [\*Nicomachean Ethics\*](#). As he saw it, individuals often mistake the following five things for true courage:

1. Compulsion – Aristotle labels this as “political courage,” wherein individuals are influenced to do brave acts by those in authority. Unfortunately, these brave acts are only performed out of a fear of the consequences administered by the authorities for *not* performing them!
2. Experience – The cocky overconfidence that comes to those who have had extensive practice navigating problems. Aristotle, however, notes that these individuals become even more cowardly than an average person when they meet with a danger or trial which they have no clue how to handle.
3. Anger – On this point, Aristotle says, “[A]nger is a painful state, the act of revenge is pleasant; but those who fight from these motives [i.e. to avoid pain or gain pleasure] may fight well, but are not courageous: for

they do not act because it is noble to act so, or as reason bids, but are driven by their passions; though they bear some resemblance to the courageous man.”

4. Optimism – Similar to those who base their courage on past experience, Aristotle declares that the individual with this form of false courage is “confident because he thinks he is superior and will win without receiving a scratch.”
5. Ignorance – This type of courage is exuded by those who display a “Mr. Magoo” approach to life; who boldly charge ahead simply because they fail to recognize danger for what it truly is.

So if these examples are not true courage, then what is? According to Aristotle, the foundation of true courage is found in someone who does the right thing *in spite of fear*:

*“Courage then, as we have said, is observance of the mean with regard to things that excite confidence or fear, under the circumstances which we have specified, and chooses its course and sticks to its post because it is noble to do so, or because it is disgraceful not to do so.”*

The test of true courage is certainly coming to America in the near future.

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