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Be Not Afraid:

The Virtue of Fearlessness

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The Stoics viewed fear as something we are better off without. According to Seneca, anyone who is afraid "resembles a madman," and a happy life is attained by using reason to move beyond the reach of fear (2010a: 110; 2007: 133). Epictetus places fear among prototypical vices such as envy, greed, and spite, and he claims that "no one who is in a state of fear is free" (2008: 116, 79). This has not been the dominant view of fear in Western philosophy. Although Aristotle denigrated excessive and irrational fear, he claimed that "to fear some things is even right and noble" (1952: 361 (*Nic. Eth.* 1115a12–13)).[1] Most contemporary virtue theorists hold that fear of genuine dangers is appropriate and that what matters is one's ability to surmount it when necessary. To overcome fear for the sake of the good is an act of courage, whereas succumbing to it is the manifestation of cowardice (Roberts 1984; Rorty 1988; Driver 2001; Adams 2006; Alfano 2016).

This orthodox view contains a significant oversight. While it is true that overcoming one's fear in a moment of crisis is a mark of excellence, courage is not the highest ideal toward which we ought to strive. Virtue theories that give courage an exalted status fail to appreciate the excellence exhibited by those who dutifully or lovingly put themselves in harm's way without having to overcome an inclination to avoid. Since these agents do not experience fear, they do not qualify as courageous, and some would even describe them as defective. But there seems to be something especially excellent about the fearless agent's unified psychology and readiness to risk herself for the sake of the good or the right. Hence, my central thesis is that the supreme virtue exhibited in response to danger is not courage but rather fearlessness.

The discussion proceeds as follows. I begin by clarifying the conception of fear that is most pertinent within a virtue-theoretical context. On this conception, fear essentially involves a motivation to avoid an apparent danger that would not be immediately extinguished by the agent's judgment that she ought to confront rather than avoid. After

1. See Pears 1978; Gay 1988; and Baima 2019. There is some evidence that Plato sides with the Stoics. For instance, in the *Phaedo*, Socrates lists fear among the primary human ills along with confusion, ignorance, and violent desires (1997: 71 (81a)).

defending this conception against objections, I turn to the case for fearlessness. I argue that, while courage is indeed a form of excellence, the fearless agent possesses a more robust psychological harmony that is valuable in itself and also allows her to act in accordance with her values with greater reliability. I then respond to several worries, including the suggestion that fear cannot be objectionable as long as it involves an accurate appraisal of danger and is in that sense "fitting." A brief conclusion follows.

1. Conceptualizing Fear

1.1 Fight or Flight

Before we consider the case for fearlessness, we must first home in on the conception of fear that is most relevant within a virtue-theoretical context. A natural place to begin is the so-called fight-or-flight response. Psychologists often operationalize fear as essentially consisting of strong physiological arousal and action tendencies in response to perceived threats (Barlow 2002: 104). Among the physical symptoms that constitute this state are increased cardiovascular activation, shivering, piloerection, sweaty palms, rapid breathing, dilated pupils, dry mouth, and nausea. The associated action tendencies are propensities to attack, flee, or freeze. Accordingly, the combination of bodily changes and action tendencies is commonly known as the fight-or-flight response. This reaction to perceived danger evolved in human beings to aid in the survival of perilous situations.[2]

If we understand fear as merely the evolved physiological response to danger, it would be strange to argue for its eradication. Being in the alarmed state that constitutes the fight-or-flight response does not diminish one's agency in a problematic way, nor does it manifest a defective value system. However, there are good reasons for not conceiving of fear as essentially identical with the fight-or-flight response. Note that while this response is usually present in individuals experiencing fear, it can also be present in individuals who clearly are not afraid. Consider a prizefighter in the final hour leading to a championship bout. We can imagine the confident challenger sitting in her locker room experiencing physiological arousal and associated symptoms when thinking about the upcoming confrontation. But suppose that while she is in this heightened state, all her anticipatory thoughts are positive, and she firmly believes that she will prevail and experience one of the greatest moments of her life. Although she knows that her opponent (the current champion) is capable of inflicting damage and that the encounter will likely be grueling and painful, she has not the slightest urge to flee the arena or call off the match. Indeed, there is nowhere else in the world that she would rather be. Considering these facts about the boxer's beliefs and desires, it would be highly misleading to claim that she is in a state of fear despite the fact that she is experiencing the fight-or-flight response.

Things become even clearer when we consider the challenger's opponent—the defending champion. Imagine that, like the challenger, the champion also experiences the physiological alarm response while waiting in her locker room in the hours leading up to the match. What is different about the champion is that, in addition to experiencing an increased heart rate and sweaty palms, she also feels tempted to avoid the confrontation while contemplating the possibility that she will be pummeled and humiliated by the challenger. Indeed, the champion even considers faking an injury during warm-ups so that the match will be canceled. From these facts about the different thoughts and motivational states of the respective boxers, we can conclude that only one of them is genuinely afraid even though they both experience the fight-or-flight response.

Here one might object that while the challenger is not afraid of the confrontation, she might still be afraid of the pain inflicted by the champion's punches. But although it is true that the challenger would prefer to experience as little pain as possible during the match and that she will do her best to dodge the oncoming strikes, not every desire to avoid a threat is a manifestation of fear. If the challenger were

2. While many accounts focus on fight and flight, there are other associated action tendencies such as tonic immobility (a type of paralysis), adopting a protective position, and emitting sounds or odors (Tappolet 2009: 332).

genuinely afraid of the pain, she would feel at least some motivation to avoid the confrontation altogether (given the high likelihood that her opponent will land at least a few blows). As I have described the example, however, the challenger can hardly wait to get into the ring and put herself in harm's way (all her motivations push toward fight rather than flight). Given that she is eager to put herself in a position of vulnerability to those punches by entering the ring in the first place, "afraid" is a highly inapt description of her state. This suggests that the fight-or-flight conception of fear is often inadequate and that a more nuanced notion is necessary for agent evaluation.

1.2 Value-Driven Avoidance

The primary reason why the physiological alarm response is insufficient for fear is that agents who are in this state may not have any desire to avoid the perceived threat (Frijda 1986: 88). Does this mean that an agent who experiences the fight-or-flight response *and* a desire to avoid the dangerous object or circumstance can be aptly described as afraid?[3]

Not always. Although an alarm response combined with motivation to avoid is typically the manifestation of fear, there are cases in which it would be inaccurate to describe an individual in such a state as afraid. Sticking with the boxing theme, consider a hypothetical example involving former world champion Lennox Lewis. Suppose that Lewis is enjoying an evening of celebration in his hometown of London, England. While Lewis and his friends are relaxing at a local pub, a belligerent man begins telling various patrons that he would knock Lewis out if they were to step outside and fight. This man is larger and younger than Lewis, and he appears to be in excellent physical condition. When word of these threatening remarks gets back to Lewis, he experiences the physiological alarm response along with a desire to gather his friends and take the party to a different location. After Lewis and his friends are gone, the belligerent man brags triumphantly, "The great Lennox Lewis is afraid of me!"

As I have described this scenario, it is unclear whether the belligerent man's claim is true. Although he is generally confident in his ability to defend himself, Lewis undoubtedly perceived the larger, younger man as a genuine threat. And it is true that he experienced both the fight-or-flight response and a desire to avoid the perceived danger. But these facts do not preclude the possibility that Lewis was not afraid at all. Perhaps he has learned from previous experiences that fighting a stranger in the street to defend one's honor is not worth the trouble. His desire to leave the pub rather than confront the man might have arisen through awareness that there is nothing at all to be gained from the fight, and certainly nothing that could outweigh the legal issues that would likely result from the quarrel. If these are the facts of the case, we certainly should not conclude that Lewis was afraid of the belligerent man.

To fully appreciate this point, it may help to consider a counterfactual version of the example. Imagine that Lewis had recently been convinced by a fellow retired athlete that confrontation is the only justifiable response to an idiotic attention seeker. And suppose that, operating under this belief, Lewis would have readily accepted the man's offer to step outside without experiencing the slightest impulse to avoid the confrontation. If it is true that Lewis would not have had any desire to avoid the danger had he judged that his values call for confrontation rather than avoidance (with the perception of danger remaining fixed), the belligerent man's braggadocious claim that Lewis is afraid of him was clearly false.

This example suggests that the fight-or-flight response combined with a desire to avoid a perceived threat is insufficient for fear. Sometimes the desire to avoid a threat is not a manifestation of fear but is rather a product of the agent's ethical and evaluative beliefs. In the original version of the scenario, Lewis's desire to leave the pub can be

3. On a certain usage, when we say that someone is afraid of *X*, we mean simply that the person wants to avoid *X* or hopes that *X* will not occur. While I am not arguing for the elimination of such usage, one of my primary aims is to draw attention to the fact that "fear" and "afraid" are used in a variety of ways, and that within a virtue-theoretical context the pertinent notion is distinct from the "want to avoid" and "fight-or-flight" senses.

attributed to his commitment to ignoring hecklers and troublemakers when there is nothing to gain from confronting them. The reason it would be false to describe him as afraid is that he would not have felt any motivation to avoid the fight had his ethical evaluation differed, as in the second version of the example.

This brings to light an important distinction between fear and what we can call *value-driven avoidance*. Value-driven avoidance, like fear, involves a desire to evade a perceived threat. The key difference is that value-driven avoidance is self-directed. In a case of value-driven avoidance, the persistence of the motivation to avoid is dependent upon the judgment that avoidance is sufficiently justified. Were the agent to become convinced that her evaluative commitments call for facing up to the threat, the desire to evade would disappear immediately (i.e., without internal struggle). If, on the other hand, the desire to avoid would persist beyond the initial judgment that avoidance is unjustified, then this is not a case of value-driven avoidance but rather genuine fear.[4]

Although the phenomenology of value-driven avoidance is similar to that of fear in many respects, there are discernible differences. Consider the case of two friends who at the last minute decide against jumping out of a plane while on a skydiving expedition they had long been planning. The friend who is first in line is convinced that he ought to jump, but he simply cannot bring himself to do so once he stands at the edge of the platform and perceives the open sky and incredible altitude for the first time. While the second friend also feels increasing arousal as the moment of truth draws closer, her desire to refrain from jumping arises out of consideration for the feelings of her friend. She recognizes that if she were to jump, this might increase the frustration and embarrassment that her friend is likely experiencing. These respective desires to avoid the dangerous activity have distinctive phenomenology. Although it is not easy to articulate the differences, reflection on our common experience of the different states can be helpful. Having had many moments of trepidation similar to that of the first friend in the example, I can testify that the desire to avoid in such circumstances is often accompanied by unpleasant feelings of weakness and a sense of helplessness that are typically augmented by self-condemnatory thoughts.[5] The second friend's experience is not colored by these negative affective and cognitive features. This is presumably because the self-direction manifested in her response precludes such features from arising.

Despite the aforementioned differences, it is not always easy to determine whether an agent's state is one of value-driven avoidance rather than fear, especially from a third-person perspective. In some cases, the best we can do is to consider counterfactuals as in the Lennox Lewis example. To the extent that we can be confident that an agent would have felt some motivation to avoid the threat even upon judging that her values call for confrontation, we can be confident that she was afraid.

2. The Recalcitrant Avoidance Motivation Model

2.1 The Model

The preceding considerations motivate a conception of fear that I believe is most relevant for virtue theory.[6] On this conception, fear essentially involves a motivation to avoid that would not be immediately eliminated by the agent's judgment that she ought to confront instead. As the central feature of this conception is a motivation, my proposal

4. I propose and defend my preferred conception of fear in the next section.

5. Tappolet (2009: 326–36) similarly characterizes the phenomenology of fear as involving "a sort of pang" accompanied by negative cognitions. This view can be traced back to Aristotle, who held that fear consists partly of a type of pain at the thought of impending danger (1952: 628 (*Rhetoric* 1382a20)).

6. This is not to suggest that only one conception can be legitimately employed in discussions of agency or character. My claim is, rather, that in our moral assessment of agents and their responses to danger, consideration of the phenomenon I am highlighting should (and often does) play a central role. Indeed, while the relevant notion has not been spelled out in precisely the manner I propose, the basic idea already exists in much of our everyday thought and discourse about these issues. This claim is supported by reflection on the various cases discussed throughout this paper.

has some affinities with Christine Tappolet's *desire model* of fear and its motivational impact on humans (2009: 334–39; see also Clore 1994 and Prinz 2004). On Tappolet's model, the essential characteristics of fear are (1) physiological arousal in response to a perceived danger that typically facilitates (or at least colors) certain types of actions and (2) a desire that sets a goal, such as avoidance of a specific harm or loss, and if it results in action, it does so only on the basis of the agent's deliberation (2009: 335–36).

The examples discussed in the preceding section give rise to two important points of divergence from Tappolet's model. First, we must specify that the characteristic motivation is to engage in avoidant behavior rather than to face the threat head-on. Second, the motivational state must be robust enough that it would be resistant (at least initially) to the agent's judgment that avoidance is not a sufficiently justified response (were she to make such a judgment). In light of these points, I propose the *Recalcitrant Avoidance Motivation* (RAM) model of fear, which involves the following essential features:

> (a) physiological arousal in response to a perceived danger that typically facilitates (or at least colors) certain types of actions; and
>
> (b) a motivation to avoid the perceived danger that would not be immediately extinguished by the agent's judgment that she ought to confront rather than avoid.[7]

Note that this model does not imply that the motivation to avoid must actually conflict with the agent's judgments in order to qualify as fear. Desires to avoid threats often mesh with the agent's evaluative commitments, and such meshing is perfectly compatible with the agent experiencing fear in the relevant sense. If I were to encounter a large shark while surfing, I would certainly experience an immediate desire to swim back to shore as fast as possible. In this case, my motivation would cohere with my considered judgment because it is clear that avoiding the shark is the optimal course of action. But the fact that my motivation happens to align with my considered judgment in this case is not enough to exonerate me. It depends on whether the motivation would be resilient against a judgment that I ought to confront the danger instead. If my desire to avoid would immediately disappear upon my judging that I ought to swim toward the shark (e.g., if I need to rescue a nearby child), then I am not in a state of fear. But if my desire to avoid would persist beyond my judgment that I ought to move toward the shark, then I am in a state of fear, despite the fact that in the actual circumstances my motivation to avoid aligns with my judgment.

Nor does RAM imply that a necessary condition for fear is that the agent does in fact make a reflective judgment about what to do. The model is consistent with the fact that one can be genuinely afraid prior to ascertaining the strength of the threat and without coming to a determination of what action her values call for.[8] What's required for fear according to RAM is that the motivation to avoid either is not or *would not be* sensitive to the agent's normative judgments concerning the circumstances in which she finds herself. If my desire to avoid a threat *would* persist after my judgment that I ought to face up to the danger (were I to make such a judgment), then I qualify as afraid even if I have not actually made any judgment.[9] Hence, RAM is consistent with

7. I use "avoid" in a broad sense that includes a variety of avoidant behaviors such as fleeing, freezing, hiding, or adopting a protective position.

8. For an interesting discussion of such cases, see Cleveland 2015. There is nothing problematic about being motivated to avoid a threat when one has limited information about the strength of the threat and the likelihood of success in attempting to confront it. As I explain in the main text, such motivation does not qualify as fear (according to RAM) unless it would persist beyond the point where the agent decides that she ought to confront rather than avoid. If the agent's affective state does have this feature, then it constitutes an obstacle to successful agency and reflects evaluative commitments that are either deficient or not fully internalized (I elaborate on these points in section 3 below).

9. For individuals who are incapable of making normative judgments about how to act (e.g., cognitively disabled humans and non-human animals), the fight-or-flight response accompanied by a motivation to avoid is sufficient for attributions of fear. This coheres with Seneca's suggestion that animals do not

fear being a response that is typically experienced quickly and without reflection or deliberation. This should forestall any concern that the model is overly intellectualized.[10]

Another important point of clarification concerns the issue of fear-like states experienced on behalf of others rather than oneself. We sometimes use the language of fear to describe a concern for the safety of others whom we perceive to be in danger. For instance, we might describe Adrian from the *Rocky* films as afraid *for* Rocky. This type of concern is often manifested with some of the same affective, physiological, and cognitive elements that frequently accompany fear in the sense I seek to elucidate. However, a key difference is that the experience of concern for the safety and well-being of others is not associated with any particular action tendency. One might be inclined to confront the danger on the others' behalf, or instead try to convince the other person that she must face the danger herself. One might also try to persuade the other person to flee. An attribution of fear does not seem any more or less appropriate when applied to agents who experience any of these motivations. As we have seen, this is not the case when we attribute fear to an agent who is herself threatened (recall that attributions of fear are inappropriate in cases where the agent desires to confront the danger rather than avoid it). This difference seems substantial enough to suggest that the two states merit separate treatments. Given that responses to personal dangers are generally more directly connected to one's agency, it will be useful to restrict our focus to agents who perceive threats to themselves.[11]

A related issue concerns fear experienced during the consumption of fiction. While it seems that we can experience fear while watching a movie or reading a novel, this needn't involve a desire to leave the theater or close the book. One option for handling this worry is to amend RAM with a qualifier of "in the absence of a belief that the object of one's fear is a fiction." Tappolet makes this move in proposing her desire model of fear (2009: 339). Although I am not strongly opposed to making such an amendment, it may not be necessary. Upon reflection, it seems that fiction-induced fear does standardly involve avoidance desires. When we are genuinely afraid during movies, we often have at least some (typically outweighed) motivation to leave the theater. And if we do not want to leave, we at least feel an urge to cover our eyes and sink in our chair. These behaviors are at least in the neighborhood of adopting a protective position, which is one of the avoidant action tendencies associated with fear. If an agent does not feel any such motivation while perceiving the threatening fictitious object, it seems reasonable to conclude that she is not genuinely afraid.

2.2 Objections

One might object to RAM's emphasis on avoidance because of the many cases in which agents who are plausibly described as afraid lash out aggressively against a threat rather than try to evade it. But while there are indeed many instances of fearful individuals responding aggressively, this does not undermine the claim that the desire to engage in avoidant behavior is a necessary element of fear in the relevant sense. RAM says nothing about how the individual ultimately responds; the claim is simply that the individual feels at least *some* motivation to avoid that would persist through her judgment that

experience emotions such as anger and fear in the way humans do but rather experience "some semblances of these feelings" (2010b: 17).

10. RAM is compatible with cognitivist theories of emotion, which claim that a belief-like state always plays an essential role. In the case of fear, one might argue that an individual cannot be genuinely afraid without having a belief that they are in danger. However, people with certain phobias, such as arachnophobia, can plausibly be described as afraid when they are reluctant to hold a toy spider despite believing that it poses no threat. In light of such examples, some theorists have described the cognitive component as "construing" or "seeing as" dangerous rather than fully believing the relevant object to be dangerous (Roberts 2003). This is a plausible thought, and it is fully compatible with RAM because both parts of the model involve a "perception" of danger. To perceive danger in the relevant sense, one needn't have a full-fledged belief that one is in danger—it is enough to construe the object as threatening. Indeed, the perception in question may even be non-conceptual (Tappolet 2000: ch. 6; Tye 2006).

11. Although Tappolet sees reasons to believe that fear for oneself and the similar concern for others are two variants of the same emotion, she acknowledges that the question remains open (2009: 340, n. 35).

avoidance is unjustified. This is compatible with the agent feeling a competing impulse in the opposite direction. In many cases, the aggressive motivation wins out and the agent confronts the danger head-on. But even if the agent ultimately responds by facing up to the threat, if she has a competing desire to avoid the danger that survives (or would survive) beyond her initial judgment that avoidance is unjustified, then she qualifies as afraid nonetheless.

Another objection arises from the fact that the counterfactual component of RAM implies that fear cannot be picked out entirely by its internal features. This might be problematic because we typically seem to know when we are in a state of fear precisely because of its distinctive phenomenology. However, as Timothy Williamson's anti-luminosity argument shows, no mental state types are such that we always know when we are in them (Williamson 2000). Moreover, as explained above, there is typically a discernible phenomenological difference between fear in the relevant sense and related states such as value-driven avoidance. And although my proposal implies that phenomenology does not tell the whole story, there is nothing odd about the suggestion that whether one's mental or emotional state qualifies for a particular category depends partly on its persistence conditions. Consider the common experience of wondering whether one's romantic feelings for another constitute a state of love as opposed to mere lust. When attempting to make such a determination it is reasonable to consider whether one's state of affection would last under various possible circumstances.

One might be suspicious of my model because the unreasonableness of fear seems to follow from it straightforwardly. In response, the first thing to note is that RAM is motivated by reflection on cases illustrating that if an agent's desire to avoid is not (or would not be) recalcitrant against her normative judgment, then she is not genuinely afraid. Such cases are by no means far-fetched or detached from real life. The state that I have characterized is common to human experience, and, as we have seen, it is distinct from other related states in important ways. Furthermore, it is a state that much of our thought and discourse about character, agency, and virtue emphasize, although we are often insufficiently precise. We often conflate several different states when using the language of fear (e.g., physiological arousal, desiring to avoid, or hoping an outcome does not occur) and this confusion makes it harder to recognize the problems with fear. We are all tacitly aware of the difference between, say, the conscientious objector for whom fear plays no role, and someone who believes a war to be just but still becomes hesitant to enlist whenever they contemplate the danger involved. RAM specifies and illuminates the concept that we use to track this important difference.

3. Against Fear

Given the preceding discussion, it is clear that fear impedes successful agency. While a fearful agent might be able to overcome her fear when the moment of danger arises, the fact that she is susceptible to a judgment-resistant motivational state makes her less reliable. Even if the agent has impressive strength of will and is generally adept at overcoming motivational states that run afoul of her better judgment, she would still be better positioned to act in accordance with her values if she did not need to rely on willpower when particular dangers arise. Since the fearless agent is not even tempted to avoid when she judges that confrontation is called for, she is generally more reliable than an agent who still needs to fight individual internal battles when faced with apparent dangers. Hence, a major problem with fear is that it puts us at risk of acting wrongly because there is always a chance that we might fail to overcome our fear in the heat of the moment.

This is not the only problem, however. The severance between motivation and normative judgments is not of mere instrumental disvalue, it is also intrinsically disvaluable. As the animals that can both understand and respond to reasons, our excellence inheres largely in the alignment between our beliefs about our reasons and our motivational responses to these beliefs. Furthermore, as Robert Adams observes, "motivational integration of the self" is a foundational trait that facilitates a range of other virtues (2006: 179). It is not an accident that an

emphasis on psychological harmony permeates throughout the history of virtue theory, from the ancient accounts found in Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics (see White 2002), to the rationalist moral psychology of Kant (see Baxley 2010), on through to the work of contemporary theorists such as Hurka (2001), Adams (2006), and Annas (2008).[12] Something akin to psychological harmony also plays an important role in Confucian and Buddhist ethics, such as in the "harmony" evinced by the Confucian jūnzǐ, the "consummate person" (Li 2008).

Of course, there are many cases in which an experience of fear will not interfere with an agent's ability to respond to danger optimally. It is often the case that our values tell in favor of avoiding dangerous situations, and in such cases, nothing bad results from experiencing a judgment-resistant desire to run or hide. Indeed, the adrenaline rush that typically accompanies fear is helpful when the appropriate response is to fight or flee. But these points are not enough to vindicate fear for three reasons.

First, as illustrated by the example of the prizefighter on the night of a championship bout, an agent can experience the beneficial fight-or-flight response without also feeling a motivation to avoid.[13] Second, the intrinsic disvalue of psychological disharmony remains even if it doesn't lead to bad effects. Third, and perhaps most importantly, an agent's susceptibility to fear manifests something defective in her value system. Our fearfulness reveals that, at least on some level, concern for our own safety and security tends to operate as a sort of master value. If I judge that the right thing to do is to confront the danger in front of me, and yet I still feel an urge to run away, this shows that I have failed to fully internalize the fact that many things in life are much more important than my material well-being (e.g., justice, integrity, and the greater good of my community).

12. Among contemporary theorists, Hurka's account of fear most closely approximates the view defended here (2001: 109).

13. For those who might be skeptical, there are numerous real-life cases of parents who fearlessly rescue their children with the boost of extra adrenaline and heightened awareness. For a collection of vivid examples, see Putnal 2010. For historical examples of fearlessness in war, see Miller 2002.

Some will be inclined to defend fear on the grounds that it is only natural to experience a desire to avoid perceived dangers, even upon recognizing that evasion is not sufficiently justified. One might think that the naturalness and ubiquity of fear imply that it is not something that we can and should seek to eradicate. But there are many natural and common human responses that we rightly seek to jettison (or at least mitigate), such as dispositions to selfishness, indolence, greed, lust, jealousy, and envy. And just as it is possible to cultivate away (or at least minimize) our dispositions to experience these natural states, so, too, can we reduce our susceptibility to fear.

The first step in cultivating away fear is to reflect on our values. The remedy for fearfulness is to remind ourselves that numerous things are of far greater significance than physical safety, financial security, and social status (Aurelius 2006: 55 (*Med.* 6.47)). In addition to reflecting on the relative unimportance of one's own safety, we can also be aided by the Buddhist and Stoic practice of contemplating the impermanence of all things (Goldstein 2013: 195–96; Epictetus 2008: 222; Seneca 2004: 178). Remaining mindful of the fragility and inevitable loss of our material possessions, including our physical bodies, can help us remain calm when those things are threatened.

Another means of cultivating away fear is habituation. By deliberately placing ourselves in dangerous (though controlled) situations, we can grow accustomed to them. This sort of training is performed in the armed forces precisely to eradicate, or at least diminish, the disposition to fear (Volkin 2005). Habituation can also occur through the exercise of negative visualization, which the ancient Romans called *premeditatio malorum*. By vividly imagining harmful events, we become less fearful of them and better prepared to take the appropriate course of action if they do occur (Pigliucci 2017: 151; Robertson 2019: 197–200). Furthermore, through practices such as mindfulness meditation and voluntary discomfort (e.g., cold showers, sleeping on the floor, or fasting) we can become less attached to material existence and bodily pleasure, while also learning not to identify ourselves with our typical

affective responses. This can in turn make us less vulnerable to fear (Wright 2017: ch. 16; Irvine 2009: 112).

While the foregoing methods of cultivation are most strongly associated with the ancient wisdom of Buddhism and Stoicism, their positive effects are supported by contemporary science, and their methods have been incorporated into modern psychotherapy, including cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), mindfulness-based therapy (MBT), and exposure therapy, which have been effectively employed to treat fear-related ailments such as generalized anxiety disorder and phobias (Grant et al. 2005; Hoffmann et al. 2010; Robertson 2019).[14] There is little reason to doubt that the effectiveness of these practices in reducing fear-based disorders is translatable to the general disposition to fear (as understood on the RAM model) found in the vast majority of human beings.

Admittedly, for most people, the prospects of completely eradicating fear are quite dim. Given the strength of our evolved instincts for self-preservation, attaining true fearlessness is nearly impossible, at least for ordinary people. This might seem like a decisive reason to reject the goal of attaining fearlessness. However, we must bear in mind that our notions of virtue and vice are corrective and aspirational (Foot 1997: 169). That is to say, our virtue concepts are meant to represent ideals to strive for, and their legitimacy depends only on the possibility of genuine progress. Just as few of us are likely to completely eradicate fear, we are equally unlikely to completely eliminate self-centeredness, vanity, envy, greed, and a host of other states and dispositions that are uncontroversially vicious.

Defenders of fear are keen to stress the point that, like most emotions, fear comes with conditions of appropriateness. Since fear can be appropriate, or "fitting," it may seem misguided to attempt to cultivate it away. The initial plausibility of this objection disappears once we clarify what fittingness amounts to. An emotion is fitting in the relevant sense when it includes an accurate appraisal.[15] For instance, anger is said to be fitting when the target of the anger actually did engage in wrongdoing—if they did nothing wrong, then the anger is not fitting. To see why the fittingness of an emotion cannot vindicate it, consider the case of envy. When I feel envy for my colleague who has just received a promotion, the emotion is fitting insofar as it includes an accurate perception of the fact that she has experienced something desirable that I was hoping to experience myself (the envy would not be fitting if the promotion were actually a bad thing). But the fact that this perceptual component of the emotion is accurate does not mean that my envy is good or justified—the virtuous agent would be happy for her colleague rather than envious.[16]

We can certainly distinguish tokens of fear in response to genuinely dangerous (i.e., fearsome) objects from fear directed toward objects that are mistakenly believed to be dangerous. There is an obvious sense in which the former is more rational than the latter. However, as in the case of envy, the fact that a token of fear involves an accurate appraisal of danger does not imply that it is justified or good. Since fear is not required for accurately perceiving danger, it cannot be vindicated solely on these grounds. And given that fear involves a problematic severance between judgment and motivation that manifests excessive concern for one's safety, we have good reason to try to become fearless.

14. These ailments illustrate an additional respect in which fear is destructive of human flourishing. Fear is generally quite unpleasant and a source of great frustration. A fearful disposition can cause one to have negative attitudes toward oneself and life in general.

15. The term "fitting" is sometimes used to convey that the emotion is overall justified. In that case, an appeal to the ostensible fittingness of fear would not have any dialectical force on its own. One would need to address the various problematic features of fear that I have been articulating in order to show that it is overall justified.

16. For relevant discussion, see D'Arms and Jacobson (2000). The general point can also be illustrated by returning to the example of anger. My anger toward someone might be fitting in the sense that it involves an accurate perception of wrongdoing. But that is not enough to show that anger is not vicious—for we can perceive wrongdoing and be motivated to correct it without experiencing the animosity and hostility inherent to anger, which are normatively objectionable in multiple respects (Nussbaum 2016).

Alternatively, one might hold that fear is fitting only in those cases where the object is indeed dangerous *and* the agent really ought to avoid it. However, if an agent in such circumstances is genuinely afraid, then it is merely a fortunate accident that her motivation coheres with the ethical facts. Even though she is perceiving the danger accurately and is motivated to engage in the correct behavior, there is still something defective about her disposition regarding perceived threats—she is prone to want to avoid them independently of whether she ought to. Hence, even if an agent's fear is fitting in this sense, it is still far from ideal. Given that fear manifests excessive self-concern and motivations that are not immediately responsive to reason, we have good reason to cultivate alternative modes of recognizing and responding to danger.

4. Fearlessness versus Courage

As mentioned at the outset, most virtue theorists hold that courage involves meeting dangers head-on (when appropriate) despite one's fear. While fear itself is not considered objectionable, it can lead to the vice of cowardice if we are unable to overcome it when we have most reason to do so.[17] This standard understanding of the relationships among courage, fear, and cowardice is defective. One of the major drawbacks is that it says nothing about those who put themselves in harm's way for the sake of their values without needing to struggle against fear. On the popular view I am arguing against, such agents are not classified as courageous because there was no fear to overcome. But there seems to be something even more excellent about such agents, and any adequate theory of virtue should accommodate this fact.

In light of the foregoing discussion, I believe the solution to this problem is to place greater emphasis on the virtue of fearlessness. A fearless agent is someone who puts herself in harm's way for the sake of her values without experiencing a recalcitrant desire to avoid. Given the features of fear outlined above, the fearless agent may initially experience motivation to avoid the perceived threat. However, in order to qualify as fearless, her motivation to avoid must immediately dissipate upon the recognition that her values call for confrontation. It is not enough for her to have conflicting desires, with the desire to confront the danger eventually overpowering the desire to avoid (as in the case of what is typically called "courage"). The fearless agent will not have to struggle to confront the danger once she judges that this is what she ought to do.

To appreciate the motivation for placing greater emphasis on fearlessness, consider an example involving a soldier who has been sent on a treacherous mission into enemy territory. When she crosses enemy lines, the soldier experiences the physiological alarm response typically associated with fear. Because it is a solo mission, she knows she is free to turn around and head back to safety (she can plausibly claim to have been ambushed). Yet, despite the palpability of the danger she faces and her awareness of an available mode of escape, she feels no urge to turn around. There is nothing she would rather do than partake in such an important assignment. According to my proposed characterization of fear, this soldier is not properly described as afraid. And because she is not afraid, she cannot qualify as courageous on the traditional model. Yet she clearly displays a type of excellence that merits admiration.

Some might object that lacking a desire to avoid a significant danger is not virtuous but rather foolhardy or even inhuman (Aristotle 1952: 362 (*Nic. Eth.* 1115b25)). But what separates fearlessness from rashness is that the fearless person's lack of fear does not arise through

17. One noteworthy exception is Foot, who is explicit about fear not being necessary for the display of courage (1997: 172). Cleveland suggests that courage is not a matter of suppressing fear but rather making an unimpeded transition from fear to hope to daring (i.e., willingness to confront the danger). On his account, fear is not seen as an impediment to successful agency but rather a helpful first phase of courageous activity. Still, he acknowledges that courage involves moving past one's fear: "My view is that there is an unimpeded transition and it is accomplished by the agent shifting her attention to an end to be pursued in light of the threat, identifying her plan for achieving the end, and executing the plan. Fear is eliminated when the assessment of the prospects of overcoming the threat change and fear is replaced by daring in the action's execution" (2015: 880).

a failure to understand the risks or a lack of appropriate concern for her safety. Rather, the absence of fear is the result of an admirable motivational structure in which certain natural impulses, such as the impulse to avoid dangers, do not survive through the recognition that they support the wrong course of action in the relevant circumstances. This does not mean that the fearless agent is akin to a robot who has no values and is incapable of intimate relationships. A fearless person can care deeply about her projects, her intimates, and her ideals. She can also be highly motivated to protect them and susceptible to pain if they are damaged. What is distinctive about the fearless agent is that these concerns do not give rise to a desire to avoid threats when doing so is against her better judgment. Indeed, insofar as one is able to manifest fearlessness in the face of significant threats, this is precisely because she has cultivated motivational responses that are sensitive to her judgments about which action is most conducive to the promotion and protection of the things she cares about most deeply.[18]

All that being said, true fearlessness is an exceedingly rare trait. Even those who are capable of facing grave dangers for the sake of their values typically do so by suppressing fear. This can occur in two ways. One possibility is that, although the desire to avoid is never completely dissolved, the agent is able to override this desire and confront the danger through strength of will. While such overcoming is typically given the label of "courage," I believe a more appropriate label is "fortitude." I reserve the term "courage" for agents whose suppression of fear is achieved in a different manner. Through deliberation and reflection, these agents are eventually able to dissolve their initial fear response such that they are able to face up to the threat without continuing to experience a competing impulse in the opposite direction. These agents thus act without ongoing fear, which is a mark of virtue. But because they were initially afraid, they have not exhibited the virtue of fearlessness but rather courage.

18. The idea that true virtue involves fearlessness rather than the mere overcoming of fear is articulated forcefully in Seneca's *On Anger* (2010b: 22–23). This point is also suggested by Plato in the *Phaedo* (1997: 59–60 (68d–69c)).

Fortitude and courage are both excellent traits, and it may even be tempting to view both as more estimable than fearlessness. There is certainly some plausibility to the thought that overcoming an internal obstacle such as fear when confronting danger is a greater achievement than confronting the danger without having had any fear in the first place (Sidgwick 1981: 224; Roberts 1984: 233; Foot 1997: 171). Yet, although a particular instance of fearlessness is not itself an overcoming of fear, the ability to live without fear is a sort of long-term overcoming. An individual who is able to face danger for the sake of her values without experiencing fear has likely put considerable effort into cultivating this ability, and this effort is at least as meritorious as that which is exhibited by agents who exhibit courage or fortitude.

Because courage, fortitude, and fearlessness are all admirable traits of self-governance, they all qualify as virtues. However, I believe that fearlessness is the most excellent of the three for two reasons. First, the fearless agent possesses more robust psychological harmony, which includes a deeply internalized acceptance of the fact that one's safety is not the most important thing in life.[19] This attribute is valuable for its own sake. Second, the fearless agent is able to successfully act in accordance with her values with greater reliability. The fearless agent does not experience *any* internal struggle once she recognizes that her values require facing the danger head-on. Hence, a person who has cultivated fearlessness is better equipped to act in ways that promote her values than a person who has cultivated courage or fortitude. No matter how skilled I become at overriding my impulse to avoid danger, there is always a chance that this impulse will get the best of me. Moreover, the struggle to suppress one's desire to evade a danger can consume energy that might be necessary for successfully vanquishing the threat (Sidgwick 1981: 333). If I have trained myself not to feel any

19. Agents who exhibit courage and fortitude may also have the right attitude regarding the relative value of their own safety and well-being. The difference is that they have not fully internalized it in the way that the fearless agent has, which is why they continue to experience at least some degree of internal struggle when they encounter dangers that they know they ought to confront.

fear in the first place, I will be able to successfully act in accordance with my values with a high degree of reliability.

Just as courage and fortitude involve overcoming a particular state of fear at a given time, cowardice is typically understood as the disposition to succumb to one's fear. On this point, I agree with standard contemporary virtue theory. What distinguishes my view is the implication that an agent experiencing fear is already in a problematic state prior to her inability to overcome it. If she responds with courage or fortitude, this certainly merits praise. But she should still aim to cultivate the quality of fearlessness, which is the most excellent trait pertaining to one's response to danger.

5. Conclusion

I have argued that within a virtue-theoretical context fear should not be understood as a mere physiological alarm response. Nor is fear properly attributed whenever we desire to avoid a perceived threat or bad outcome. On the most relevant conception, fear is properly ascribed when a motivation to avoid a perceived danger is (or would be) resistant to one's judgment that one ought to face up to the threat. I have argued that fear is problematic because it involves a disharmony between our motivations and normative judgments. Such psychological discord is intrinsically undesirable, and it makes it difficult for us to stand up for ourselves, our ideals, and those who may need our help. Furthermore, a disposition to fear is the manifestation of a deep-seated overvaluing of one's material well-being that is inherently disvaluable. Hence, although fear is a natural and ubiquitous human response, it is something that we should aim to cultivate away. While courage and fortitude are excellent traits, the ultimate goal should be to live our lives in the absence of fear.[20]

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