

The Virtue of Fortitude

I. Things dealt with and passions involved

- A. Fortitude deals with things or actions that should be done but which are difficult or painful (the difficult good).
- B. The passions or emotions involved in the virtue of fortitude
 - 1. Fear: the basic urge to flee difficulty and pain (or whatever might harm us)
 - 2. Confidence or daring: the urge to confront difficulties (what we see in good athletes: they get “fired-up” when things get tough; they are not wimps).

II. Basic structure of the virtue and its opposed vices

- A. We see by reason (thinking) that we should do something; this thing involves some difficulty or pain; if we have the virtue of fortitude, we face the difficulty readily and do the act; if we lack the virtue, we will tend to run away and not do the act. There are intermediary states (moral continence and incontinence) where a person feels too much fear but is able to overcome it (moral continence) or fails to overcome it even though he knows he should (moral incontinence).
- B. The virtue of courage does not remove all fear: many things are objectively harmful and objectively to be feared (e.g., death). The courageous person does the act he should do, even while experiencing fear. His fear does not cause him to avoid the necessary act. He does not, however, have excessive fear, but the right amount at the right time for the right things, etc.
- C. The good that reason recognizes one should pursue is usually the object of another virtue, either justice or charity. There is something that you have an obligation to do (justice) that is hard: e.g., stand up for honesty and not do a shady deal when your colleagues want to do it. Or work hard all day long because you are being paid for it (justice). Or taking a sick child to the hospital in the middle of the night (charity). A person who lacks fortitude will end up being unjust and not living charity, because he will flee from the difficulties these inevitably involve.
- D. There is also need for a judgment (of prudence) as whether the good to be achieved justifies the possible harm involved (e.g., risking death).
- E. The opposed vices
 - 1. Cowardice: too much fear that leads one to shirk one’s duty and charity. In its more extreme cases, cowardice will alter a person’s judgment of what hardships should reasonably be borne and the coward will tend to overestimate the hardships (and so justify avoiding them).
 - 2. Temerity: too little fear and too much daring as in General George Custer (he was always known as a very effective officer, but also as a daredevil)

3. Cowardice is far more common than temerity. In educating people into virtue, it is much more frequent to have to encourage than to discourage people to face difficulties.

III. Examples of fortitude

- A. Highest act: facing death for a noble cause (martyrdom, dying in battle, etc.)
- B. Facing physical pain when necessary: tiredness, lack of sleep, cold, heat, hunger, injuries, etc. This happens at work (finishing a project that needs to be finished), in the family, and in other good causes.
- C. Facing disapproval or ridicule from others when doing the right thing requires it.
- D. Being different from other people (when necessary). This is ever more important for Christians.
- E. Disciplining children. It is often easier to give in or just pacify them with TV, video games, etc. (the “baby-sitters”). Teaching children that they will need to be different at times.
- F. Having large families.
- G. Speaking in public (fear of what others will think)
- H. For children: school work, homework, chores, sports, learning an instrument; earning money is an excellent way for them to experience the relationship between facing difficulty and achieving a good.

IV. Importance of the fortitude (why it is a cardinal virtue)

- A. Many important goods in life have difficulties attached to them. If a person is not able to face difficulties in a consistent way, he will not achieve many important goods both for himself and for others. For example, if a man wants to be a doctor, he has to face all the difficulties of studies, residency, specialty, etc. So too if one wants to start a business. So too in marriage (always difficulties). So too if you have children (always difficulties). A coward will experience a shrinking of his life as he flees from one difficult good after another. He is unable to achieve much and eventually cannot even maintain friendships because he is not willing to engage in common actions with friends (the heart of friendship) when those actions are difficult.

V. How the virtue is inculcated/gained

- A. The affective/passionate aspect
 1. As with other moral virtues, a person come to experience the right amount of fear for the right things at the right times, etc., through habituation. Habituation to the virtue occurs by repeatedly choosing to do what you should in the face of fear.
 2. For teaching young persons to acquire the virtue of fortitude, they have to be encouraged (and at times required) to face difficulties and not be allowed to run away from them (if allowed to do this repeatedly, they will develop into cowards). Laziness is usually lack of fortitude.

3. Parents and teachers should not try to protect their children from difficulties and even all pain, but rather teach them to face them.
4. It is good to ask just how many difficult things one's son has to do. Does he get out of them easily or is he required to face them?

B. The cognitive aspect

1. A person needs to learn:
 - a. That he should face difficulties and pain and not run from them. He should not be surprised by difficulties and pain and should understand that they are part of life.
 - b. What difficulties he should face and which he should not face (the overly-daring person faces difficulties and dangers that he should not).
 - c. How to size up difficulties realistically (many people, especially cowards, over-estimate the difficulties).
2. How a person learns these ideas:
 - a. Example (especially parents)
 - b. Approvals and disapprovals; if when he does not face a difficulty this is accept with approval (or no disapproval), he will learn that it is OK to flee from difficulties).
 - c. Literature: stories, history, movies, etc. in which the connection between fortitude and achieving good is manifested. E.g., stories of the martyrs.