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7 Transforming “Manliness” into Courage: Two Democratic Perspectives

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Manliness is very fashionable today, not only among dictators, but also in the world’s leading democracies. Only the naive will be surprised. US president George W. Bush often seized opportunities to show off his manly credentials, as did former president Ronald Reagan. Prominent American authors such as Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr, have recently called for the revival of “manliness” in our supposedly gender-neutral society. Middle Eastern dictators still carry on the brutally manly traditions of the ancient kingdoms of the Near and Middle East. Has manliness ever been out of fashion?

No, it hasn’t: manliness has been a cherished marker of status and social esteem from classical antiquity to the present. The classical republics prized manliness as their cardinal virtue. In fact, ancient writers often suggested that manliness was the best or even the whole of “virtue” – as in the Roman term virtus, “virtue,” derived from the Latin word vir, “man” as opposed to “woman.” The ancients typically argued that their republican forms of manliness were superior to those found in other regimes, particularly monarchies or tyrannies. As far back as the fifth century BCE, for example, Herodotus held that Greek “manliness” or “courage” (it’s the same word in Greek: andreia) proved to be superior to that desperate, reckless “manliness” of the Persians under King Xerxes. The hyper-masculinity of the king meant the corrosion of masculinity among his servants. By contrast, Greek andreia was motivated by law and served the cause of political freedom; it was not driven by fear of a tyrant’s punishments.

To understand manliness in a democratic perspective, I propose to examine its manifestations in the political discourse of two popularly self-governing republics: ancient Athens (from 508 to 322 BCE) and
the United States of America (from roughly 1776 to 1840). Athens differed from the United States, of course, in being a comparatively small, self-contained, and direct democracy, as opposed to a representative democracy located in an extended or large-scale republic. One might point to other oppositions, too, such as polytheism versus monotheism, the premodern economy versus capitalism, and ancient “virtue” versus modern “right.” Despite these differences, though, and despite the American founders’ suspicion of direct democracy, I have chosen to explore Athens and early America alongside one another. As well-documented and carefully theorized embodiments of popular self-government, they both offer us significant empirical, speculative, and imaginative resources for understanding the relationship between democracy and manliness. In order to emphasize their similarity in this respect, I will consider each from the perspective of its popular sovereignty or “people-power,” without, however, neglecting differences in their central practices, institutions, ideals, and intellectual foundations.

My chief point is that democracies give manliness a special character, by encouraging it to become, or at least to approximate, what it should have been in the first place, that is, courage. This idea poses an important challenge to recent exponents of “manliness.” Because of their openness and self-questioning, democratic regimes specially advance the project of disentangling courage from manliness; and this is one of the key strengths of democracy. More than other regimes, democracies help their citizens to recognize that courage does not belong exclusively to men as opposed to women. Rather, democratic discourses and practices characteristically reveal that courage is the praiseworthy, firmly embedded disposition through which men and women confront dangerous or frightening circumstances in order to achieve admirable ends. Discussion of this point will lead us to search for the distinctive shapes that courage might take in democracy. My approach is to evaluate the diverse perspectives on courage found in democratic Athens and in early America. Examining their special ideals of courage will both bring out important differences between these regimes and uncover the distinctive human goods that tend to be nurtured by popular republics altogether.

**Contemporary Debates**

Contemporary exponents of manliness usually find that men are in “crisis.” Either manliness is not being used effectively, or men are
now inadequate to their traditional roles, or they are too irresponsible to live up to their own commitments. Men have become soft, weak, effeminized – in short, not manly enough. The “new man” is no man at all. He is an androgynous mixture whose impurity constitutes a danger to all mankind.\(^3\) Or have men, to the contrary, become hyper-manly, able to vindicate their manliness only in desperate acts of rage and aggression? According to many neoconservatives, notorious episodes such as the Columbine and Jonesboro shootings resulted directly from the undomesticated aggression of furious and neglected young men, who are themselves the victims of broken families and absent fathers.\(^4\)

Undoubtedly, this ambiguity – the apparent effeminizing and hyper-masculinizing of men, all at once – is unsettling to many men and women. This ambiguity, in fact, helps to explain why current perspectives on manliness vary so widely; think of the diverse views found among evangelical Christian “Promise Keepers,” the “Men’s Rights” movement, neoconservatives, and followers of the Jungian Robert Bly.\(^5\) As disparate as they may be both in intention and in effect, however, these movements share two central tenets. First, they agree that men are now suffering through a profound crisis of meaning and identity – that manliness needs to be rescued or restored to a prelapsarian condition. Second, and more important for us, they strive not only to speculate about manliness or courage, but also definitively to answer the question of manliness, to define its shape, to fix its form, so as to limit the presumptive dangers of further confusion. But is it right to be unsettled by these confusions? Should we be quick to settle the questions? Or is it healthier and more democratic to “live the questions” (to quote Rilke), to embrace the provisionality of our practical responses?

According to recent exponents of manliness, the underlying cause of our social ills is clear: it’s the feminists. For W.R. Newell, “Thirty years of stereotyping taught us to equate manliness with macho, piggish, violent behaviour. But according to the entire preceding tradition of the West (and, for that matter, the non-Western world), macho behaviour was considered unmanly, the very opposite of manliness. And that error, I will argue, is the source of the current crisis of manliness.”\(^6\) Newell argues that by criticizing patriarchy on the grounds of oppression, feminists destroyed all positive images of manliness. The feminist presentation of manliness led to a crisis in which young men could imagine no way to express their “rambunctious, competitive” male urges other than through acting out in reality the violence they learned from rap stars such as Eminem.\(^7\)
Harvey Mansfield, by contrast, is less directly concerned about men’s social destructiveness. Instead, he worries about the corrosion of traditional moral order, as well as the forms of fulfilment that, in his view, usually accompanied it. Despite the feminists’ creation of a “gender-neutral” society, Mansfield says, “women still rather like housework, changing diapers, and manly men.” Nonetheless, many women have abandoned conventional domesticity. By contrast, Mansfield argues, men have sought to regain their traditional standing, and, to the extent that they have succeeded, they have done so only as a result of traumatic, world-changing events: “With the disaster of September 11, 2001, Americans were sharply reminded that it is sometimes necessary to fight, and that in the business of government, fighting comes before caring. Women were reminded that men can come in handy.” Traditional gender roles provided pathways to security and happiness that are now being frittered away, with no corresponding gains.

This worry leads to Mansfield’s accusation that feminism is “nihilism,” in so far as it “says that being a woman is nothing definite and that the duty of women is to advance that nothingness as a cause” (147). This paradoxically nihilistic duty is dangerous because women, according to Mansfield, do have a substantial nature; ignorance or neglect of the intrinsic ends of that nature leads to injustice, unhappiness, and ethical and political disintegration. By nature, women should take pride in “good housekeeping,” which, along with “decorating and adornment,” can be “a delight to the eye and the soul” (142). They should recognize that “women’s bodies are made to attract and to please men” (155). Mansfield’s attack on feminism as narrow, dishonest, and dangerous resonates with a long tradition – and a republican one at that: think of such strange bedfellows as Aristotle, Machiavelli, Rousseau, Kant, and Hegel – of supposing that men have natural and indefeasible privileges and that women’s destinies lie in fulfilling men’s purposes.

As Martha Nussbaum has argued, however, Mansfield’s characterization of feminism corresponds badly to the work of such figures as de Beauvoir, Friedan, Gilligan, and others. Moreover, and more importantly, I would say, Mansfield’s antipathy to openness or provisionality in assuming gender roles, or in expressing traditionally gender-specific virtues, is both unhealthy and undemocratic. The drive to fix masculinity and femininity within essentializing stereotypes is unhealthy because it limits the possibility that men and women will cultivate the virtues traditionally associated with the other gender. Mansfield’s insistence is undemocratic because it runs contrary to the openness and
self-questioning characteristic of democracy at its best. Instead of being unsettled by prevailing cultural ambiguities, in fact, we might embrace provisional answers as the expression of our ongoing collective pursuit of more adequate understandings of our own questions about men and women. We might recognize in our confusions a persistent feature of popular, self-governing republics, such as Athens and America—namely, that these republics have always accommodated confusion or disorder, within limits, as the corollary to their practices of political and intellectual freedom, their rejection of traditional ideas, and their consequent openness to innovation and non-conformity. Democracy invites its citizens to “live the questions” in a deep and admirable way.

**Disentangling Courage from Manliness**

Instead of defending “manliness” from feminists, in fact, a more honest and constructive approach would disentangle courage from any fossilized associations with femininity and masculinity. For courage manifests itself in diverse spheres of worthy human accomplishment, not only those, such as warfare or acts of daring and aggression, which have historically characterized the display-oriented activities of a certain kind of man. Thus, when Socrates examined courage in the Platonic *Laches*, he wanted to establish an account of “courage” that encompassed “not only those who are courageous in warfare but also those who are brave in dangers at sea, and the ones who show courage in illness and poverty and affairs of state; and then again … not only those who are brave in the face of pain and fear but also those who are clever at fighting desire and pleasure, whether by standing their ground or running away” (*Laches* 191d–e).11

More than this: Plato’s Socrates was an intransigent critic of traditional Greek manliness and yet also a novel embodiment of authentic courage. As he pointed out to Callicles, a young man inflamed by conventional machismo, truly courageous human beings worry less about preserving their own lives through self-aggrandizing political schemes than about living nobly and well, and leaving the mere duration of their lives in the hands of the gods (Plato, *Gorgias*, 512c–e). Socrates developed new models of courage that thoughtfully transcended traditional gender roles.

We would do well to follow Socrates’s example. For liberating courage from manliness enables us to grant respect more proportionately, more precisely, and more justly, to what is genuinely worthy of
respect – namely, activities that are honest, generous towards others, truth-seeking, just, self-respecting, and dedicated to the common good. Granting respect in this way will free us from an all-too-familiar admiration for thoughtless audacity or recklessness, even when recklessness appears to be more noble or beautiful because of its association with “manliness.”

Yet courage is one of the few classical virtues (if not the only one) specifically and emphatically associated with one gender as opposed to the other. Men have long tried to preserve exclusive rights to courage, just as specifically militaristic men have often tried to use their defence of their homelands as a “protection racket” that provides them with disproportionate status and political privileges. This is why we require special vigilance when well-placed authors begin to reassert these atavistic connections. Courage does not belong exclusively to men, nor is it more admirable when expressed by men. In Euripides’s Medea, the title character (of all people) observes that women – virtually all women – show exceptional physical courage in the act of giving birth. It is no secret that women have often been in the front lines of change towards equal civil rights, distributive justice, and the emergence of democracy. Consider not only the American suffragist movement, but also the female protestors, writers, and activists who have agitated for equal pay, non-discrimination, and democracy in the Middle East.

Most of these examples come from democratic contexts or movements, but perhaps critics will reply that Plato’s Socrates was anti-democratic, and therefore that it takes a philosopher, not a democrat, to move beyond the equation of courage with manliness. My response to this thought is as follows: the efforts of Plato’s Socrates to disentangle courage from manliness grew out of the democratic culture in which his thought arose. In Plato’s dialogues, (the character) Socrates advanced in a more self-consistent way the possibilities for openness, self-questioning, and revision characteristic of the Athenian democratic experience. Let me offer a single example to explain what I mean, one to which I return in a different way at the end of the chapter.

In 338 BCE, Demosthenes delivered his well-known funeral oration over the Athenians who had died at the Battle of Chaeronea. The Athenians had lost this battle to Philip II of Macedon, and at the time the Athenians, above all Demosthenes, envisioned their struggle against Philip II as a fight for their democratic freedoms altogether. Amidst many conventional topoi, Demosthenes concluded his speech with a single, but highly significant, twist. He says that, now that he has
given an account of the ethical character and democratic principles that motivated the fallen soldiers, he will explain how their courage was stimulated in this case by referring, tribe by tribe, to the nobility and self-sacrifice of their tribal heroes. The Aegeidae, for example, recalled that Theseus, son of Aegeus, had established equality at Athens; consequently, soldiers from that tribe, Demosthenes says, could never have accepted inequality as the price of cowardly survival. Whatever we might think of Demosthenes’s discussion of the emotional inspiration provided by such tribal heroes, it is crucial that he both characterizes the soldiers’ own heroism as dedicated to democratic ideals such as equality and that he emphasizes the psychological forcefulness of these heroes within the Athenians’ collective social imaginary.

The surprise is that many of these heroes were women. First, Demosthenes mentions the daughters of King Pandion, who took revenge on the Thracian king Tereus for raping Philomela, the sister of his wife Procne. Passing over the more grisly details of this story, Demosthenes concludes, “Therefore they decided that life was not worth living unless they, akin by race, should have proved themselves to possess equal spirit with those women, when confronted by the outrage they saw being committed against Greece” (Dem. 60.28).¹⁶ In the same spirit, Demosthenes offers as an example of heroic courage the daughters of Leo, who “offered themselves to the citizens as a sacrifice for their country’s sake” (60.29), thereby challenging the Athenians to show courage equal to their own. He then proceeds to describe the courageous activities of more traditional heroes such as Ajax and Antiochus, Heracles’s son. Even in ancient Athens, and in a specifically martial context, Demosthenes held up both men and women as exemplars of the courage that he challenged his contemporaries to exhibit in their great wars of freedom.

Democratic courage, in Demosthenes’s presentation, embodied openness to new ideas and willingness to reject or to improve upon tradition where possible. In the Athenian case, this openness extended not only to the inclusion of poor citizens in the military and a corresponding readiness to glorify their contributions, at state expense, in a public funeral and alongside the contributions of their aristocratic social superiors. Rather, and more important for our purposes, the Athenians’ openness raised the possibility of a gender-free account of courage, in which men – even traditional fighting men – could internalize as heroes or role models not only Theseus and the “manly” sons of Heracles, but also the women whose audacious commitment to Athens’s common
good elicited the admiration of orators and soldiers alike. It is true that ordinary accounts of courage, even in Athens, did not always bespeak an effort to rid the city of the traditionally gendered associations of the virtues, and particularly courage. Yet Demosthenes’s speech could have been delivered only in a non-traditional, inclusive, open, and free democracy ready to say and do what made sense at the time – not one inclined to repeat just any misguided platitudes that had been inherited from an outmoded past.

It is genuinely exceptional to find this degree of openness realized within actual political life in an ancient Mediterranean city. By way of comparison, consider Herodotus’s story of the Egyptian King (Pharaoh) Sesostris, who subjugated many foreign nations from the Indian Ocean to Egypt. Herodotus says:

Whenever he encountered a courageous enemy who fought valiantly for freedom, he erected pillars on the spot inscribed with his own name and country, and a sentence to indicate that by the might of his armed forces he had won the victory; if, however, a town fell easily into his hands without a struggle, he made an addition to the inscription on the pillar – for not only did he record upon it the same facts as before, but added a picture of a woman’s genitals, meaning to show that the people of that town were no braver than women. (*The Histories*, 2.102)

This is a far more common pattern among ancient Mediterranean peoples. What made the difference was the Athenians’ democratic regime.

**Manliness and Courage in Early America**

When we turn to early America, we discover that “Publius” and Tocqueville, the authors with whom I primarily concern myself, often conflated courage with virility in a limiting way. (So too, as I mentioned, did the Athenian orators: their liberation of courage from its associations with manliness was only partial, occasional, and incomplete.) Yet it is crucial that, despite cultural contexts favouring traditional gender hierarchies, democracies of the past at least occasionally made space for newer, more progressive accounts of courage. By arguing that women’s courage was exemplary and worthy of admiration by men, they implicitly asserted that courage did not belong exclusively to men. This view was progressive, even advanced, by
comparison with the ideologies of non-democratic regimes, in which the conventionally gendered associations of courage could not even be publicly questioned.

Like Demosthenes, Tocqueville was aware that the democracy he observed exemplified openness to the possibility of women’s courage. In fact, Tocqueville was convinced that the success of the Americans’ democratic experiment depended on the unusual courage and vigour of the country’s women. In Tocqueville’s view, American women were brought up to be rational, autonomous, and courageous – to the same degree, in their own spheres, as men were in their spheres. Hence, even though Tocqueville opposed gender neutrality, he was adamant in praising the tough-mindedness and moral clarity that he saw as characteristic of American women:

Thus the Americans do not think that man and woman have the duty or the right to do the same things, but they show the same esteem for the role of each of them; and they consider them as beings whose value is equal although their destiny differs. They do not give the same form or the same employment to the courage of woman as to that of man, but they never doubt her courage; and if they deem that man and his mate should not always employ their intelligence and reason in the same manner, they at least judge that the reason of one is as sure as that of the other, and her intelligence as clear. Americans, who have allowed the inferiority of woman to subsist in society, have therefore elevated her with all their power to the level of man in the intellectual and moral world; and in this they appear to me to have admirably understood the true notion of democratic progress.

What Is “Democratic” Courage? American Reflections

Instead of talking about manliness, I maintain, we should be talking about courage; and, instead of thinking of either manliness or courage in universal terms, we should strive to understand their regime-specific expressions. If this view is correct, then what should courage be in popular, self-governing democracies? How might courage either consistently manifest or fruitfully counteract or newly improve the essential principles of the regime? It is striking how infrequently the combatants in our contemporary struggle, whether pro-feminist or pro-manliness, refer to the democratic regime assumed as the backdrop of their conversations.
By contrast, traditional American discourse offers a more adequately democratic understanding of courage. *The Federalist* and *Democracy in America* offer three perspectives on democratic courage that are worthy of careful consideration for our purposes. These central ideas are (1) courage as the political virtue by which we establish novel political institutions, free of past ideologies; (2) courage as the civic virtue by which we take initiative and take responsibility for our own lives, in concert with others; (3) courage as the military virtue by which we defend freedom in full awareness of freedom’s importance for living a good human life.

First, Publius explains courage as the collective capacity of the American people to create something new and important in the world. Specifically, the courage of the American republic consisted in rational, independent self-government and thus in the rejection of traditional political ideas or hierarchies. Hence, for Publius, American courage enabled the new nation to vindicate the cause of freedom as opposed to chance and necessity, by expanding the opportunities for self-government and liberty throughout the world.

At the end of his first thematic section (essays 1–14), which discusses the necessity of Union, Publius triumphantly concludes with praise of the Americans’ “manly spirit”:

And if novelties are to be shunned, believe me the most alarming of all novelties, the most wild of all projects, the most rash of all attempts, is that of rending us in pieces, in order to preserve our liberties and promote our happiness. But why is the experiment of an extended republic to be rejected merely because it may comprise what is new? Is it not the glory of the people of America, that whilst they have paid a decent regard to the opinions of former times and other nations, they have not suffered a blind veneration for antiquity, for custom, or for names, to overrule the suggestions of their own good sense, the knowledge of their own situation, and the lessons of their own experience? To this manly spirit, posterity will be indebted for the possession, and the world for the example of the numerous innovations displayed on the American theatre, in favour of private rights and public happiness.

Publius is arguing that the extended popular republic, united by an energetic central government, is the best political solution to America’s need for security and its desire for free, republican institutions. He is duly aware that virtually all previous political philosophers had cast
doubt on the possibility of extended republics. He has conscientiously explored the manifold ways in which modern federations had tended to collapse under the weight of local interests. And he would go on to show, in subsequent essays, that the free republics of classical antiquity had been too turbulent and insecure to provide model institutions for this newly independent nation. In light of these obstacles, he argues, Americans must show themselves to be non-conformists with respect to the entire European political tradition, ancient or modern. They had to think for themselves and to account for the goodness of their novel institutional designs before the entire world. The Americans’ willingness to “dare to be wise,” as Kant had once written, to institutionalize their freedom in ways that made sense for their existing local alliances and political cultures, required the courage of all Americans to act collectively for the welfare of the nation. The courage of republican American citizens lay not only in thinking differently, but also in pragmatically shaking off the burdens of historical legacies, contingencies, and ideals that no longer fit their new situation.

Second, Tocqueville found in America’s more developed political institutions and practices certain democratic expressions of courage and self-assertion that counterbalanced America’s burgeoning commitment to heroic avarice. In his account of democratic jury service, for example, Tocqueville argued that the jury is a pragmatic “school” educating citizens in their civic rights and responsibilities: “The jury teaches each man not to recoil before responsibility for his own acts – a virile disposition without which there is no political virtue.” Both here and in the previously cited passage of The Federalist, we can accept the essential idea and dispense with the “manly” overtones, for what both authors aim to uncover is the disposition of courage in the sense of taking “ownership” of one’s own behaviour. And it is this focus on taking initiative and accepting responsibility that underlies Tocqueville’s conception of courageous democratic citizenship. From our perspective, there need be nothing especially masculine about democratic courage, but there is something essentially democratic about it, in that the quintessentially democratic civic service, jury duty, teaches citizens, in Tocqueville’s view, to take responsibility for their own actions and to take initiative in asserting rights and realizing political opportunities.

This conception of civic courage is democratic both in origin and in practice. In further developments of the same theme, Tocqueville observes that “in democratic countries the science of association is the mother science; the progress of all the others depends on the progress
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of that one.”28 In associations, whether civil or political, ordinary individuals can realize their power to think through and accomplish their own aims through uniting with their fellow citizens. Through such exemplary practices of republican citizenship, all individuals learn to take the initiative, to think and act creatively, and to take responsibility for their own lives in the context of civic friendship. They do so in such a way as to preserve their independence or autonomy, but they also come to recognize the ways in which they are naturally sociable, the ways in which they can enlarge and renew their souls, to adapt Tocqueville’s language, through activities of reciprocity, recognition, and mutual assistance.

Through his analysis of democratic associations, Tocqueville offers a novel conception of distinctively democratic courage. Democratic courage is that excellence of character enabling citizens to take the initiative in constituting groups of like-minded individuals in order peaceably to create socially worthwhile goods. This is a specifically democratic mode of taking responsibility for one’s own life, which Tocqueville carefully distinguishes from the modes of both despotism and aristocracy. Despots, on the one hand, make “a sort of public virtue of indifference,” whereas aristocrats favour individual initiative only among the few.29 Aristocrats also tend to reject innovation and creativity altogether, outside certain highly circumscribed spheres such as the literary or plastic arts. Although Tocqueville spoke in the gendered language that he knew, often describing courage with reference to virility, it is plausible to see in the women’s movement as such, both in organizations such as NOW and in the suffragist movement and elsewhere, precisely the same embodiment of initiative and courageous willingness to take responsibility for or “ownership” of one’s own life that Tocqueville praised in the democratic mother science. It should come as no surprise that Tocqueville praised the American “legislators” for entrusting citizens with the administration of local politics, so that they would come to cherish the common good and come to recognize the social power created by associational activity.30

Third, in the final chapters of volume 2, part 3 of Democracy in America, Tocqueville presents what is perhaps the culmination of the entire work: his own analysis of honour in democratic societies.31 This may be the work’s culmination, I say, because democracies face particular difficulties, according to Tocqueville, in cultivating appropriate pride in their own accomplishments. Democratic societies are, in Tocqueville’s view, all too frequently driven towards quotidian, bourgeois mediocrity.
Hence, it is an urgent question whether democracy can nurture a proportionate and moderate ethos of ambition, whether it can seek honour or even greatness in a suitable way.

In more specifically military terms, in fact, democratic republics face a variety of distinctive problems. On the one hand, they must curb the turbulence of democratic military culture, which is pervaded by a novel competitiveness and bellicosity among the officers. Yet they must also keep alive civil freedoms by resisting the inevitable trends towards centralized power brought on by warfare. And finally, they must ensure that, despite the regime’s egalitarian principles, the citizen-soldiers will show respect to their officers, if they happen to be recruited.

According to Tocqueville, it is impossible, for better or worse, to transform democracy into a glory-seeking, hierarchical, and militaristic aristocracy, which ordinarily encounters none of the foregoing hazards. The only real solution, he says, is the enlightenment of the citizenry: “Have enlightened, regulated, steadfast, and free citizens, and you will have disciplined and obedient soldiers.” Democratic maturity in freedom and self-government will carry a properly moderated and reasoned courage (not a revolutionary spirit) into the army. “Democratic peoples naturally fear trouble and despotism. It is only a question of making reflective, intelligent, and stable tastes out of these instincts.” Thus, democracy can, if properly educated in the practices of freedom, raise the citizenry out of instinctual behaviour and produce reflective and intelligent modes of both self-government and, as we now see, warfare. This will protect the regime against excessive governmental centralization and will produce an army “pervaded by the love of freedom and the respect for rights” characteristic of the people as a whole.

Admittedly, readers might worry over Tocqueville’s disturbingly admiring hints of democratic imperialism, as well as his belief that warfare as such enlarges the soul and usefully shakes citizens from the complacency of their self-satisfied materialism. For us, on the other hand, Tocqueville’s idea that the democratic regime creates habits of mind for democratic soldiers is crucial. He makes the point explicit at the end of chapter 25 in this section. His argument is that military courage is expressed differently in democracies and aristocracies, respectively. Democratic courage is “intelligent,” its “root” lying in “the very will of the one who obeys; it is supported not solely by his instinct, but by his reason.” By contrast, the soldier in the aristocratic armies, that is, the serf, “acts without thinking” and is “a very formidable animal trained for war” who shows the “blind, minute, resigned, and always equable
obedience that aristocratic peoples impose on” their soldiers without trouble. According to Tocqueville, democracy transforms the foundations of military courage, which is now based less on an instinctive drive than on the rational and articulate will of each individual.

What Is “Democratic” Courage? Athenian Reflections

When we ask Publius and Tocqueville to explain the ends of democracy as a regime, we discover a variety of responses, commensurate perhaps with the variety of their descriptions of manliness or courage. Both Publius and Tocqueville saw the Americans’ courageous political experiment as dedicated to protecting private rights and expanding public happiness. It is logically possible, no doubt, to square these ideals with Publius’s notion that the American experiment would enlarge political freedom throughout the world, and even with his idea that “justice is the end of government.” But alongside these stirring words, what emerges most powerfully from our examination of American courage is that neither Publius nor Tocqueville offers a clear or systematic account of the goods, whether common or individual, that courage makes available – or indeed of how courage itself is intrinsically a component of a good human life, if indeed it is so. In order to define the ends of the regime, the American tradition pointed to justice, freedom, private rights, equality, active citizenship, security, and peace. But its most prominent writers offer no coherent explanation of how these ideals might cooperate, if they do cooperate, in the living of a good democratic, or human, life.

Moreover, and more importantly, neither Publius nor Tocqueville is at all inclined to believe that the American citizens themselves will be able to offer an account of how their courageous activities, undertaken individually or as a collectivity, might contribute to or partially constitute a good human life. While the American republican tradition, as we have interpreted it, does offer many attractive ideas about courage and its instrumental functions, neither Publius nor Tocqueville develops the analytical vocabulary that would enable them to explain why democratic citizens, in particular, were well positioned by their regime to live excellent human lives, and how their distinctively democratic courage contributed to, made possible, and partially constituted the excellence of those lives. In order to explain that point, we would do well to return to the democratic practices and discourses of classical Athens.
Despite the ethical and political shortcomings of democratic Athens, it is possible to look to the ancient democratic past in order to recover its most meritorious possibilities. I agree with Timothy Burns (see chapter 1) that the Periclean vision of democratic Athens is unstable to the extent that it fails to consider the injustice of imperialism alongside its self-professed domestic practices of justice. From democratic ideology in general, however, it is possible to recover ideas of democracy, virtue, and human flourishing that we ourselves might find attractive. For our own purposes, we can render these possibilities clear, within a more systematic framework than the Athenians themselves did, in order to see whether their intellectual resources can still bear fruit in our own day. And when we do so, I submit, we can supplement our modern traditions, specifically by uncovering a non-utilitarian paradigm in which courage is understood as both a product of the Athenians’ specifically democratic regime and as an essential human excellence that at least partially constitutes a life well lived.

Let us return to Demosthenes’s funeral oration, delivered after the Battle of Chaeronea in 338 BCE. After praising the fallen soldiers for scorning life and acquisitiveness, and dying in a noble cause, Demosthenes pointedly emphasized that his own role as funeral orator would be easy to fulfil if courage were these men’s only admirable attribute. But in fact, he argues, their goodness consists in their development of nobility and excellence in a wide range of spheres, courage being only one element of their universal goodness. From within democratic politics, strikingly, Demosthenes voices criticisms of acquisitiveness and imperialism in ways that Tocqueville himself would have found persuasive. But, unlike his modern counterparts, Demosthenes is chiefly concerned with the excellences of character that constitute a flourishing life, and he persistently locates his treatment of courage within that rich context. Thus, in addition to their battlefield courage, the Athenians also characteristically exhibited justice, self-restraint, and self-respect based on their appropriate consciousness of their own nobility. Their courage was meaningful and praiseworthy only because it served the purposes of these even higher and more excellent qualities of soul. As the “Athenian Stranger” said in Plato’s Laws (630c–d, 631c–d), and as Demosthenes said from within Athenian democratic politics, courage ranked at most fourth among the human excellences.

Through a long history of democratic discourse, the Athenians had arrived at a proportionate recognition of the significance of their
courage: courage was important, yes, but it should not overshadow or control the other virtues. (Within the ancient Mediterranean context, one might contrast their view with the outlook of Achilles or the “Spartan mother” or the Macedonian king Alexander III, known as the “Great.”) The Athenians reached this level of self-knowledge because of their cognitively rich, rationally articulate understanding of the essence and purposes of courage. Like other Athenians, the soldiers themselves had a self-conscious understanding of their courage and their military goals that was adequate to their brilliant actions. Their courage was informed by a rational account of the goods that they courageously sought. Demosthenes put this point as follows:

Arrived at manhood they rendered their innate nobility known, not only to their fellow-citizens, but to all men. For of all virtue, I say, and I repeat it, the beginning is understanding and the fulfillment is courage; by the one it is judged what ought to be done and by the other this is carried to success. In both these qualities these men were distinctly superior.39

The Athenians’ rational and self-conscious adherence to ideals of justice, honesty, and courage gave special point to Demosthenes’s striking contrast between their physical deaths and their psychological triumph. Whereas these soldiers’ deaths in battle were the product of chance or circumstance, their spirits proved to be unvanquished by any opponents.40 “The freedom of the whole Greek world,” according to Demosthenes, “was being preserved in the souls of these men,”41 because, even in death, they stood fast in their dedication to ideals of freedom, justice, and self-government – ideals that they had raised to consciousness through their democratic discourses, rituals, and political practices.

In Demosthenes’s view, the Athenians’ courage was directly attributable to Athens’s democratic regime, as opposed to the oligarchies and dynasties of their foes.42 In regimes ruled by the few, he argues, soldiers are motivated at most by fear of their masters. They tend to flee danger, because they lack regime-based ideals that motivate, guide, and explain their actions. If they flee, he says, they can always ingratiate themselves with the rulers after the fact and thus be restored to favour, for purely arbitrary reasons. Democracies, by contrast, cultivate a sense of shame, which is embodied in the citizens’ awareness of the regime’s most praiseworthy ideals. This awareness is expressed in the reproaches made by free-speaking citizens against those who fail fully
to exhibit those ideals in practice. By contrast with non-democratic political cultures, the Athenian democracy made praise and blame impartial, public, and just. As a result, democratic free speech, nobility, and courage were linked in a coherent, reflective, and publicly articulated system that gave meaning to the Athenian democrats’ willingness to sacrifice their lives at Chaeronea.

**Conclusion: Courage and Democracy, Ancient and Modern**

The foregoing investigation has uncovered two cardinal points of difference between the Athenian and the American democracies. First, although contemporary observers in both periods identified connections between courage and the regime, the Athenians offered a more robustly democratic account. They presented their rational account of democratic courage as a self-conscious feature of public discourse, which all citizens were meant to comprehend, internalize, and make available to themselves as a guide to practical, context-specific deliberation. By contrast, Publius envisioned the Americans’ manliness as passionate and instinctual, and thus as less dependent on a public, articulate discourse. Tocqueville, meanwhile, agreed with the ancient Athenians that democratic courage was rational and articulate, but he provided little explanation of the democratic discourses that fostered the development of the cognitively rich democratic courage that he found so admirable. It is fair to say that the Athenians more fully “leveraged” the specifically democratic qualities of free speech and equality in developing a regime-specific account of courage.

Second, and more important, Demosthenes (like other Athenian orators) used his funeral oration to develop a distinctive account of nobility or excellence that was meant to be intrinsically good, worthwhile, and dignified. In his vision of the Athenians’ flourishing lives, courage was one of the constituents of the good life, albeit not the most important one. Courage was intrinsically worthy of choice both for this reason and for its orientation towards even higher, and also intrinsically good, ideals such as justice, loyalty, freedom, and equality. This account of human excellence and human flourishing, found incipiently in Athenian democratic ideology, was expanded and developed by Plato and Aristotle and the later ancient and medieval philosophical traditions. It is important that the ancient tradition of “eudaimonism” got its start in the culture of free speech and egalitarian social relations characteristic of the Athenian democracy.
Yet, despite these differences, we have discovered in both Athens and the United States ideals of democratic courage that are specifically related to the regime – ideals that manifest democracy’s central organizing principles. Whether ancient or modern, democracies encourage their citizens to make judgments for themselves about what their specific, contingent circumstances demand. The contemporary debates over manliness and courage are precisely the product of such a non-negotiable commitment to free speech and to thinking for oneself. Whichever arguments are stronger, the debate itself is the sign of a healthy, courageous democracy – one that invites its citizens to live the questions, not to shut them down in favour of traditional, essentializing stereotypes. Exploring courage openly and with an eye towards our most fundamental ideals, such as freedom, justice, and equality, is the best way to pursue the good life in common. This conception of democratic possibilities, integrally tied to democratic courage, should make us hopeful even about conversations that must work, all over again, to show that manliness is far from adequate to the human excellence encapsulated by democratic courage.

NOTES


5 A useful analysis of contemporary perspectives on masculinity can be found in Kenneth Clatterbaugh, Contemporary Perspectives on Masculinity: Men, Women, and Politics in Modern Society, 2nd ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997).


7 Ibid., xx, xxiii.
9 Ibid., 11.
12 For a helpful account of the ways in which activities might gain in stature through association with courage or manliness, see George Kateb, “Courage as a Virtue,” *Social Research* 71.1 (Spring 2004), 39–72.
14 On Middle Eastern democracy, see, for example, Nicholas Kristoff’s article on the pro-democratic uprisings in Cairo: http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/03/opinion/03kristof.html?_r=1&hp.
19 Ibid.
21 While Mansfield and Newell agree that traditional liberalism strove to quash manliness (think of Hobbes’s diatribes against honour), and thus
promoted feminism *avant la lettre*, only Newell pursues Tocqueville’s question of whether democracy can produce great men (e.g., *The Code of Man*, 213–15). Yet, beyond these gestures, few recent writers have explored in any sustained way whether there is a distinctively democratic or republican form of courage, manliness, or femininity.

These texts also offer other, diverse and interesting reflections on courage to which I will not draw attention in the present context. Most important, Tocqueville found that democratic America had, indeed, constructed a novel, anti-aristocratic conception of courage – one devoted not to traditional glory or bellicosity, but rather to risk taking in the service of satisfying the acquisitive passions. Here Tocqueville uncovered an ideal of courage and manliness that was perhaps excessively consistent with the avaricious ends of the democratic regime – and hence an ideal that, through helping selfishness to accomplish its narrow ends, threatened to compromise the civil freedoms for which he so admired America. On these subjects, one should contrast the treatment of Avramenko (note 20, above). Or, differently, Publius found that individual leaders, particularly the executive, needed “courage and magnanimity” in order to resist the temporary passions and ill-considered judgments of the people, and thus to “serve them at the peril of their displeasure” (*The Federalist*, no. 71), while all branches of government required fortitude to resist the potential encroachments of other branches. These requirements of courage were peculiar to American federalism, on the one hand, and distinctive of democracies and republics, on the other, in so far as they called upon individual leaders, in a context of popular accountability, to risk their political futures for the sake of the common good.


*Democracy in America*, 1, 2.10.

Ibid., 1, 2.8.

For further reflections on democracy’s broadening of the “field” of courage to include civic (as opposed to exclusively military) courage, see my essay “Free Speech, Courage, and Democratic Deliberation,” in *Free Speech in Classical Antiquity*, ed. I. Sluiter and R.M. Rosen (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 233–59.

*Democracy in America*, 2, 2.5.

Ibid., 2, 2.4.

Ibid.

For a compatible treatment that differs somewhat in emphasis from mine, see Kateb, “Courage as a Virtue,” 65–7.
32 Democracy in America, 2, 3.22.
33 Ibid.
34 Ibid., 2, 3.23.
35 Ibid., 2, 3.25.
36 Ibid.
37 The Federalist, no. 51.
39 Demosthenes, Funeral Speech, 60.17.
40 Ibid., 60.19.
41 Ibid., 60.23.
42 Ibid., 60.25–6.
43 For elaboration of this point, see my article “Democracy and Political Philosophy” (note 15, above).