



Is Courage a Masculine Virtue?

Tradition across many societies—not to mention psychology and evolutionary biology—holds courage up as a masculine virtue. But in these times, when American women serve alongside men in combat and when most Western women enjoy “emancipation,” can courage still be considered the domain of one sex? Two AEI scholars explore different dimensions of the issue, with Harvey C. Mansfield asking whether we want two tough and aggressive sexes—or would we rather have one tough, one tender? Ayaan Hirsi Ali describes the masculine definition of courage in the tribal Somali society in which she grew up, which she compares with the West’s current ambiguity about gender roles. She is concerned that gender identity confusion bodes ill for courage—at precisely the time when Western societies need it to resist assaults from those who consider us cowardly and effeminate.

Yes, Sort Of . . .

By Harvey C. Mansfield

Courage is not solely for men, but it is mainly for men. The Greek word for courage is *andreia*, which comes from he-man and also means manliness. The Greek philosopher Aristotle was, however, critical of the implication in his language that courage was for men only. He said something not so definite: men find it easier to be courageous than women, and women find it easier to be moderate than men.

We all know of courageous women unafraid to risk their lives in defense of a principle—Ayaan Hirsi Ali, for example. We know of many more women who would defend their children with their lives, the sort of action that made Rudyard Kipling say that “the female of the species is more deadly than the male.” And we know women who can rise to the occasion, overcoming their ordinary characters, like Grace Kelly’s Amy Kane

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No, But . . .

By Ayaan Hirsi Ali

I was born and raised in a society that had a clear definition of man and woman, their roles in private and public life, and perhaps most important, how to raise boys and girls to be men and women. Man was defined as the maintainer and protector of women, his family, his tribe, and his religion. Woman was his supporting actor: obedient, compliant, nurturing, and patient. In that context, I remember no ambiguity about courage: it was a masculine virtue. In fact, in my native Somali language, the words “courage” and “manly” are interchangeable.

A woman can display bravery if she saves her honor or the lives of her children or protects the property of her husband or clan. She can display it if she endures torture, even the threat of rape and death, but keeps secret any information that might compromise her family (father, husband, or the

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in the film *High Noon*, a pacifist who shoots an outlaw who is about to shoot her man.

Aristotle makes this remark in the *Politics* because such inclinations are relevant to politicians who must know the natures of those they rule. But in the *Ethics*, he speaks of courage as a virtue and does not mention this sex difference. The reason is that virtues are not suggested to us but are demanded of us, and Aristotle does not want to give excuses for not being virtuous based on human weakness (you notice he impartially does not excuse men for being rowdy). The ethical way of treating this question is not so forgiving of women as the political way, which is more accommodating of their tender natures.

But do women in fact have more tender natures than men, making them less apt for courage? It is not a question that would have been raised as a public issue before our time. Previously it was taken for granted that men and women were different, especially regarding courage. The same Aristotle who implicitly demanded courage of women also said that courage was especially to be found in battle. One gets “the red badge of courage” in war, and women were not thought to be cut out for war. To kill women in war was considered barbaric because women were by nature noncombatants.

Our thinking today offers two objections to this universal verdict of common sense. The first comes from feminism, particularly the feminism that began with Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*, first published in English in 1953, which denies any and all sex differences in human nature. The second is in our social science, which is hostile to common sense and unwelcoming to “natural inclinations” of any sort.

Since Beauvoir’s book, feminism has been committed to the position that the sexes are not essentially different. To deny this, or to imply that it is wrong, is to be guilty of essentialism, a grave sin in both reason and morality. Essentialism makes reason rigid and morality judgmental. It turns one into a bully hiding behind the excuse that God or nature made things the way they are, leaving men with no choice but to discriminate against women.

Of course, feminism in its latest phase is less radical than the Beauvoir model, and also less interesting. Feminism has succeeded in making its point that women should be excluded from nothing, and so most women think that it is time for détente between the sexes. They find they are attracted to men after all, even to manly men, and they often hesitate or refuse to call themselves feminists. In theory, they are still very reluctant to admit

that women are less capable than men in any regard, for they see no reason to make unilateral concessions that may turn out to their disadvantage. Some women may want to join the military, and though most women would not follow them, they would not prevent them.

Giving women equal opportunity for displaying courage does no obvious harm if the need for courage remains clear. It would not be good to measure the amount of courage we need from the willingness of women to produce half of it. Less obvious harm might result from the loss of tenderness, and the loss of esteem for tenderness, in women.

In practice today, most women, especially younger ones, yield somewhat, admitting if only by implication that natural sex differences do exist. They are willing to let men be men, subject to the age-old criticism that today’s women have begun to indulge in once again. This criticism is not an attack on the chauvinism of the entire male sex characteristic of radical feminism, but rather the polishing of morals and manners that a woman reserves for her man. For “her man”—Sarah Palin’s “my guy”—has reappeared. This is a sign that women are, if only in practice, ready to admit (again by implication) that they do not mind counting on—which means depending on—a man.

For their part, men have largely dropped any objections to having women at work with them. They have no strong objection to women in the military. If some women want opportunity for courage, they perhaps think, let them have it. Most women in the military are not in combat units, and the combat efficiency of American armed forces does not appear to have suffered. There have been a few female suicide bombers among the Islamic terrorists, young and either deluded or conscripted, but it is safe to suppose that if women were the leaders of Islamic radicalism, they would go in for raising consciousness rather than terrorism.

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women to produce half of it. Less obvious harm might result from the loss of tenderness, and the loss of esteem for tenderness, in women. Do we really want two tough, aggressive sexes instead of one tough, the other tender? And do we want to dispense with gallantry in men, which is related to protectiveness in husbands?

Social science, like feminism, has no appreciation for natural inclinations. It tries to isolate what is natural or inherent from what is conventional or constructed so that a certain trait is either one or the other—or a combination of pure nature and pure convention. But courage is never purely one or the other; it is both, working together, human choice giving specificity to nature's given inclinations. The result of too much exactness is social science studies concluding either that there is no room for human choice (women are fated to be timid) or that there is no guide for human choice (women can do anything they please). Responsible choice guided by the inclinations of human nature is abandoned, and social

science offers partial and partisan studies supposedly proving that women are either prisoners or conquerors of their inclinations. Social science sets itself against the impressions of common sense, yet studies in social psychology and evolutionary biology tend to confirm those impressions, otherwise known as “traditional stereotypes.” Social science blunders into popular discourse, destroying the authority of common sense and replacing it with confusion. Not to be excluded from anything open to men seems to be the most powerful desire of women today. Women want to be able to say they can do anything. Men do not feel this about themselves, vaguely aware as they are that women are indispensable. Perhaps the best contribution they can make now to understanding between the sexes is to refrain from asking women to prove they can do anything.

One last point: in the age of sexual liberation, every woman not protected by poverty and extreme old age needs the courage to defend her virtue.



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clan at large). However, her ability to overcome fear, show resilience, and outwit an enemy is praised as a manly virtue. The tales my grandmother told me as a child were full of brave women, but their courage was described in masculine terms: as in “she was fearless, she had balls of steel.” As a child, when I owned up to naughty deeds as an instigator or participant, knowing that physical punishment could follow, my father often exclaimed in admiration, “She is my only son.” This hurt my brother’s feelings, and I preened about with pleasure. What father and brother did not question, however, was that an act of courage was, by definition, masculine—even if it were carried out by a female.

A girl was not raised to be valiant; she was not urged to be heroic. It was not expected of her. If, regardless of her rearing, she were to commit an act that advanced the interest of her family, she was celebrated as a woman who showed the positive masculine trait of courage. If, on the other hand, she became so bold as to question the inferior position that she and her womenfolk were allotted, then she was not seen as brave but as bewitched, inspired by the devil, and bent on creating chaos.

A man who, in times of hardship, fails to fight by hiding or running away is condemned as a “woman,”

effeminate and cowardly. Cowardice is a feminine trait in tribal, nomadic, and Islamic cultures.

As a child and young adult, I bought into our guiding principle that men are more courageous than women. I was raised not to envy men because they hunt for us; they struggle with nature in order to protect us; they cross rivers and take on the high seas; they make war and thus need to assemble and lead an army to conquer, to rule, to destroy what another has built. They do all this for us women and our children, so we would not be sold into slavery or condemned to a life in degradation. More important, the courage required of them, their manliness, is about sacrificing their lives for a higher goal: Allah and their kin.

I was taught that all of men’s activities are full of risk and require one to overcome the fear of death, disease, isolation, and the loss of one’s wife and children. It was at the age of twenty-one that I became disillusioned with the promise of protection from my menfolk. On the border between Kenya and Somalia, just after the civil war began, I saw men with no sense of direction, discipline, or energy to fight. The women walked, gathered food, found water, and told stories of hope and better times to come. They found ways to reach family members dispersed across the world and appeal to them for help.

There were definitely some brave men who delivered on their promise of protection. But the greatest shock came to me when I saw victims of rape (assaulted by the Kenyan border police) who were left in a vulnerable position, unguarded by the men of their clan. And after these women were raped, no male member was brave enough to confront the Kenyan police. They were left alone to die. Their agony and perhaps eventual death were justified as a way of washing the shame off the clan (their male relatives). The moral reasoning for leaving them in their makeshift tents was derived from both the tribal tradition and the Quran. It was here that I saw how religion and tribal custom combine to paint the female victim as the perpetrator. All the promises of protection disappeared in an instant.

Now, living in America, and before that in Europe, it is not as clear to me whether courage (or any other virtue) can be described as masculine or feminine. The difference in physical strength between the sexes explains, at face value, why the military is still a man's world. In the sciences, the higher echelons of the corporate world, and largely in politics, women are represented, but by a minority. That is probably a capacity issue that has more to do with the challenges of balancing motherhood with a demanding career rather than overcoming fear.

There is so much ambiguity over the various roles of women and men in Western society that it becomes hard to answer the question posed except with the banality that "there are courageous men and courageous women just as there are cowardly men and cowardly women." It is interesting for me to see how the struggle in the West to give women equal rights has emancipated women, improved our position, protected us from violence, and given us the opportunity to live free and fruitful lives. It is a far cry from anything I had ever known or thought possible when I lived in Africa.

It is equally interesting to see how much ambiguity there is between men and women in this society where women are emancipated. I have met men who regard themselves as "bisexuals" and "metrosexuals." I have also met and read the works of women in Europe and

America who describe courage as a permanent struggle against male domination in general, even after that struggle has been won many times over here. That sounds to me like struggle for the sake of struggle, with no aim. Indeed, most of these women emphasize the process and do not really care to give a purpose for all the struggling.

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As for the males who are uncertain about their position in the gender divide, their preoccupation is not with courage but is a different kind of permanent struggle: the one to find oneself—in other words, navel-gazing as a state of mind.

The question of courage and its manly denotation is relevant now more than ever for the West. For as people who have never known peace and prosperity long enough to groom themselves to a state of metrosexuality assert themselves in hordes and come to possess weapons of mass destruction, manly courage becomes indispensable for survival, world peace, and order. What do al Qaeda operatives, Somali pirates, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's militia, Hugo Chávez's rhetoric, and even the new Russian authoritarianism have in common? An analysis of their rhetoric quickly shows that they all see Americans and Westerners in general as cowardly, in its feminine connotation. The West's preoccupation with personal expression of gender is causing it to become distracted from an enemy who has never had that same luxury. It would be prudent to keep this in mind.