



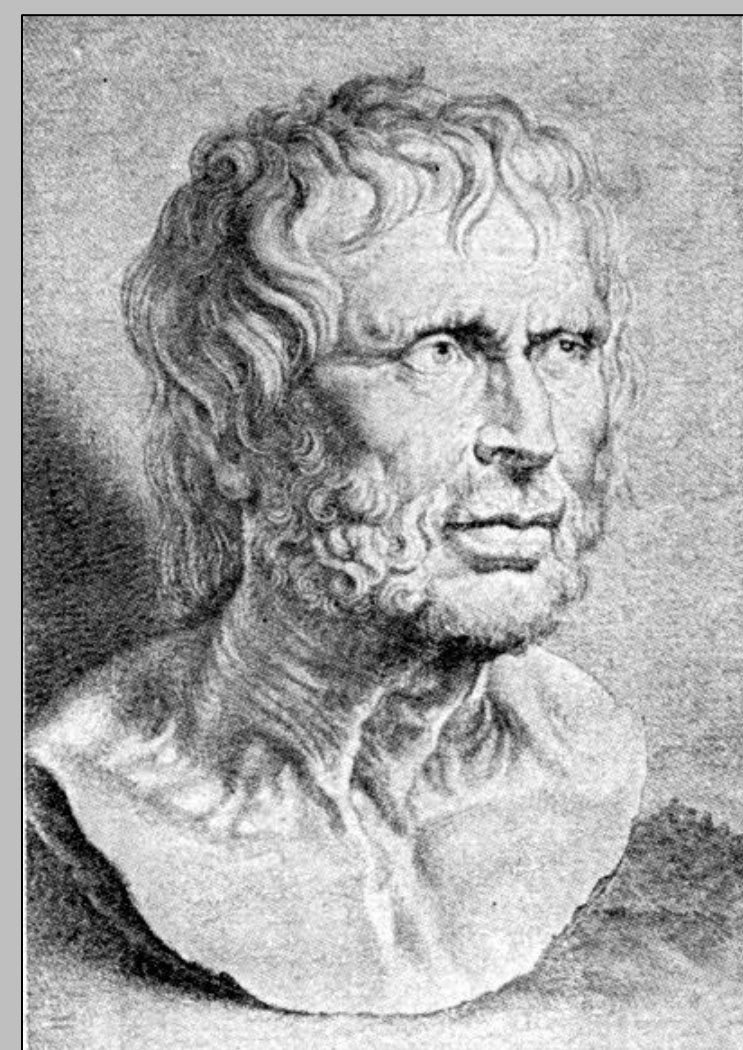
Be Not Afraid: Reclassifying Fear as Vice



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Introduction

The Stoics viewed fear as something we are better off without. Arius Didymus described it as an “excessive impulse that is disobedient to reason” (65A; Baltzy 2010). This has not been the dominant view among contemporary virtue theorists. Most hold that the disposition to fear is neither virtue nor vice; fear is a natural response to danger, and what matters is one’s ability to surmount it when necessary (Roberts 1984; Rorty 1986; Adams 2006). I seek to challenge this common view. I claim the time has come to recognize, as the Stoics did, that fear is a vice. The disposition to fear makes it difficult to direct our behavior in accordance with our values. Value realization is crucial for exercising moral agency and living a worthwhile life. Thus, any trait or disposition that regularly interferes with value implementation is a vice.



“For what prevents us from saying that the happy life is to have a mind that is free, lofty, fearless and steadfast - a mind that is placed beyond the reach of fear...that counts virtue the only good, baseness the only evil, and all else but a worthless mass of things, which come and go without increasing or diminishing the highest good?”

-Seneca, *De Vita Beata*

“Fight or Flight”

Psychologists understand fear primarily in terms of the physiological response experienced by individuals when perceiving threats. Among the symptoms composing the so-called “fight or flight” response are increased cardiovascular activation, shivering, rapid breathing, and nausea (Barlow 2002: 104). Although this reaction seems to be a fundamental element of fear, thinking exclusively in these terms leads to counterintuitive ascriptions. Consider a prizefighter in the final hour before a championship bout. We can imagine the confident challenger sitting in his locker-room experiencing physiological arousal when thinking about the upcoming confrontation while also having positive thoughts of anticipation and a firm belief in ultimate triumph. Although he knows his opponent is capable of inflicting serious damage, he has not the slightest urge to flee the arena or call-off the match. It would be inapt to describe this boxer as afraid. Contrast this with his opponent who feels an impulse to sneak out the back door or fake an injury during warm-ups. This boxer seems a much better candidate for the label of ‘afraid’. Examples such as these suggest that for purposes of agent evaluation the “fight or flight” conception must be amended to include the desire to avoid rather than confront.

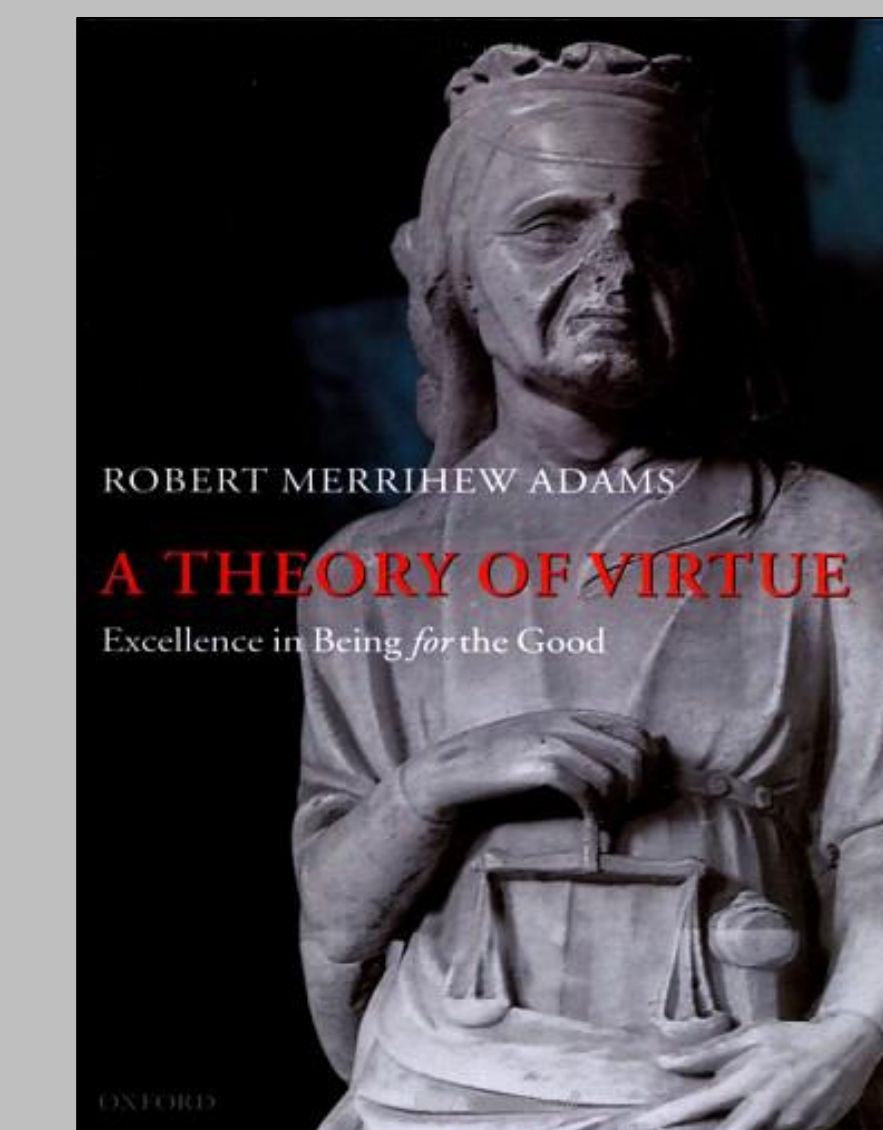


But this is still not enough. Sometimes a desire to avoid danger is a manifestation of the agent’s values. Consider a case involving the all too common liquor-fueled bar confrontation. Suppose Jake bumps into Randy as he makes his way through the crowd. When Randy invites Jake to step outside, Jake experiences the physiological symptoms of the “fight or flight” response, and he has a strong desire to avoid the confrontation. But these facts aren’t enough to warrant attribution of fear because there could be an alternative explanation for the desire to avoid. Perhaps Jake is trying hard to live up to his newly acquired religious or moral convictions. If these convictions lead to the desire to avoid, and in the absence of such convictions Jake would be eager to fight, he could not properly be described as afraid. On the other hand, if Jake were a committed member of an honor culture, the desire to avoid would suggest that he is genuinely afraid. In light of these considerations, I claim that the conception of fear that is most helpful in agent evaluation is characterized by the following conditions: (1) physiological arousal in response to perceived danger; and (2) a desire to avoid the danger that isn’t a manifestation of the agent’s values. Fearfulness is thus to be understood as a disposition to experience (2) in response to the experience of (1).

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Vice: Substantive vs. Structural

At first blush, the disposition to fear doesn’t seem vicious because prototypical vices are traits that reflect selfish or malevolent values. However, some traits are vicious because they make it difficult to implement one’s values (e.g. imprudence, incontinence, etc.). Robert Adams (2006) labels these deficiencies in self-government *structural vices*. The disposition to fear is a structural vice because it puts us at significant risk of acting contrary to our values. Often our values are best realized by facing dangers head-on, and fear undermines our ability to do so. Of course, being disposed to want to avoid danger is generally a good thing, and the “fight or flight” response itself is obviously beneficial. But if we are disposed to want to avoid dangers *regardless* of what our values call for in a given situation, our ability to direct our lives in the way necessary for successful agency is compromised.



Courage, Fortitude, and Cowardice

Fearfulness is the tendency to experience a desire to avoid danger regardless of what one’s values call for. Cowardice is not the tendency to experience such desires, but rather the tendency to succumb to them. An agent who feels a desire to avoid danger when her values call for confrontation displays a vice regardless of whether she is able to overcome the desire. Fearfulness is not as detrimental as cowardice, but it is a vice nonetheless. Courage is traditionally understood as the ability to overcome a desire to avoid danger. The problem with this conception is that it excludes those who put themselves in harm’s way *without* experiencing fear. Genuine courage is facing danger for the sake of one’s values without experiencing an impulse to avoid. This is to be distinguished from fortitude which is a type of will-power exhibited when we overcome our fears in accordance with our values. Although fortitude is admirable, courage is the more excellent trait because it is more reliable. No matter how skilled I become at overcoming the desire to avoid danger when it arises, there is always a chance that fear will get the best of me. But if I have cultivated away my tendency to feel the desire at all, I will be able to act in accordance with my values with a high degree of reliability.

Proposed Conceptual Framework

Alarmed: Experiencing the fight or flight response upon perception of danger.

Afraid: Experiencing a desire to avoid a perceived danger irrespective of one’s values.

Cowardice: Acting on a desire to avoid a perceived danger despite awareness that one’s values would be best promoted by facing the danger.

Fortitude: Overcoming the desire to avoid a perceived danger because one’s values would be best promoted by facing the danger.

Courage: Facing a perceived danger because one’s values would be best promoted by doing so, without experiencing a desire to avoid.