

# The connection between courage and justice based on aristotle's nicomachean ethic...

[Literature](#), [Poem](#)



Courage and justice have been two highly discussed values throughout the semester, and in this essay I will seek to connect the two together as well as relating the ideas in accordance with Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics, The Illiad, and The Epic of Gilgamesh. According to the dictionary, courage is defined as " the quality of mind or spirit that enables a person to face difficulty, danger, or pain without fear". Justice is defined as " the upholding of what is just, especially fair treatment and due reward in accordance with honor, standards, or law".

In The Illiad as well as The Epic of Gilgamesh, we have seen that the definition of courage is something a little different. Generally, courage is considered the physical strength of the main characters and, likewise, their ability to kill, maim, and steal as they see fit. Gilgamesh's worth of courage is measured by the amount of people that he has conquered and holds power over, or how many bloodthirsty monsters he has blindly slain. Achilles' courage was determined in The Illiad by his presence (or lack thereof) on the battle field and, later, the immense loss of life that Achilles was the cause of. Essentially, courage, as shown in these two texts, can simply be measured by two-dimensional actions or accomplishments of the main characters with little to no analysis of context, values, or purpose. This begs the question: where does justice come into play with these two " heroes" and their perceived definitions of courage?

For the answer to this, Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics can provide a bit of insight on courage and justice, and perhaps how these values manifested themselves throughout these works of literature. In regard to the reasons for

our actions, whether they are motivated by courage or for justice, Aristotle examines the two types of action, voluntary and involuntary action.

Basically, voluntary action is considered one that we have control over, such as everyday actions or life decisions, and involuntary action is one that outside powers control, an example Aristotle gives is someone being blown away by the wind. But, as Aristotle mentions, not all actions are this black and white. Aristotle introduces a third type of action, “ non-voluntary”, which essentially means that this is when someone commits an act and feels no sadness or remorse afterwards, whereas an involuntary action involves someone feeling extreme remorse after acting out of ignorance.

In regard to justice, I believe that non-voluntary actions are equivalent to actions that are unjust, in other words, against the greater good or simply what is right and motivated by selfish desires or beliefs. Non-voluntary actions are also actions that are not normally associated with immense amounts of courage, because it isn't considered commendable to commit an unjust act. However, because courage is defined as acting in the face of adversary, we see that non-voluntary, unjust actions do in fact equate to quite a bit of courage.

For example, in The Illiad, Achilles spends a greater part of the beginning of the epic with extreme anger towards Agamemnon, who he is supposed to be fighting on the same side with. Because Achilles' rage and refusal to cooperate with Agamemnon is driven by selfish reasons and desires for power and recognition, his actions are voluntary according to Aristotle, yet unjust. His actions are further unjust because he isn't concerned with the

benefit of his people or the fact that his actions are causing a standstill of progress in the war, but rather the personal glorification and praise that he believes is due to him by his fellow people. However, Achilles' actions are not necessarily cowardly. In standing up against Agamemnon, however wrong his intentions were, Achilles was showing courage in standing up to adversary, or in this case, the high-esteemed leader of the Achaeans. He acted, though non-voluntarily, without fear against the leader that the rest of the Achaeans didn't dare to contest, a feat that would have proved impossible without an abundant amount of bravery and courage.

Involuntary actions, while considered outside of a person's realm of control by Aristotle, I believe are also driven by something greater within a person. Primitive, uncontrollable drives and passions can explain a large portion of what are considered involuntary actions. These actions, however, do not require nearly as much courage as do non-voluntary actions, if any whatsoever.

In The Epic of Gilgamesh, Gilgamesh's actions are considered voluntary for a vast majority of the epic, in direct correlation to the measure of his courage. As Gilgamesh chooses to do various actions, such as ruling as a tyrant over Uruk or slaying Humbaba, he shows courage by electing to do these things that he knows may hold great risks or trials. Although his voluntary actions show a great variance in their measure of just and unjust, there is no denying that Gilgamesh displayed courage nonetheless. However, Gilgamesh's actions take a clear shift towards involuntary after Enkidu's death. When Enkidu dies, Gilgamesh's actions are no longer of his own

choosing or show any sort of deliberation, but instead Gilgamesh is driven by something greater inside himself that motivates him to go to the ends of the earth in search of immortality. His obsessive inner striving to achieve eternal life is undeniably primitive and outside of Gilgamesh's control. However, Gilgamesh loses his sense of courage and justice when he begins his doomed journey on the quest for eternal life. By giving into his primitive wants and succumbing to involuntary actions, Gilgamesh no longer has a definitive goal in mind, whether it be just or unjust, and he doesn't have to stand up to any sort of adversary. Gilgamesh's actions are cowardly in this sense because he gave up on his control and drive of his actions and submitted to the drives deep within himself that he cannot control.

By connecting these three texts with courage and justice, the point that I am attempting to convey is that the values courage and justice go hand-in-hand, but not in the way that most people believe. An action, whether it be voluntary, involuntary, or non-voluntary, is not necessarily just if it is performed with courage and vice versa. Courage does not equal just actions, but just actions do not necessarily equal courage either. By understanding Aristotle's types of actions, it becomes clear the motivations and drives of such actions in regard to courage and justice in works such as *The Illiad* and *The Epic of Gilgamesh*.