



Wilson, A. T. (2020). The Virtue of Aesthetic Courage. *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, 60(4), 455-469. Article ayaa022.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/aesthj/ayaa022>

Peer reviewed version

Link to published version (if available):
[10.1093/aesthj/ayaa022](https://doi.org/10.1093/aesthj/ayaa022)

[Link to publication record in Explore Bristol Research](#)
PDF-document

This is the author accepted manuscript (AAM). The final published version (version of record) is available online via Oxford University Press at <https://academic.oup.com/bjaesthetics/article-abstract/doi/10.1093/aesthj/ayaa022/5879686?redirectedFrom=fulltext>. Please refer to any applicable terms of use of the publisher.

University of Bristol - Explore Bristol Research

General rights

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies. Please cite only the published version using the reference above. Full terms of use are available:
<http://www.bristol.ac.uk/red/research-policy/pure/user-guides/ebr-terms/>

The Virtue of Aesthetic Courage

Alan T. Wilson

Abstract: Theorists have recently been exploring the prospects for a virtue-centred approach to aesthetics. Virtue aesthetics encourages a re-focusing of philosophical attention onto the aesthetic character traits of agents, in the same way that virtue ethics and virtue epistemology have encouraged us to focus on moral and intellectual traits. In this paper, I aim to contribute to the development of virtue aesthetics by discussing aesthetic courage, the aesthetic analogue of one of the most widely acknowledged moral virtues. In addition to proposing an account of the nature of this trait, I also argue that aesthetic courage is vital for any sort of aesthetically virtuous life. It is not possible to possess *any* aesthetic virtue without possessing aesthetic courage. It will, therefore, be important for any future development of virtue aesthetics to acknowledge the central importance of aesthetic courage.

Introduction

Theorists have recently been exploring the prospects for a virtue-centred approach to aesthetics. Virtue aesthetics encourages a re-focusing of philosophical attention onto the *aesthetic* character traits and qualities of agents, in the same way that virtue ethics and virtue epistemology have encouraged us to focus on *moral* and *intellectual* character traits. Candidate aesthetic virtues might include traits such as creativity and integrity, while candidate aesthetic vices might include traits such as unimaginativeness and snobbery.

A key step in the development of virtue aesthetics will be to provide accounts of specific candidate aesthetic virtues and vices, and to explore the relationships between these traits. My aim in this paper is to discuss aesthetic courage, the aesthetic analogue of one of the most widely accepted moral virtues. In addition to proposing an account of the nature of this trait, I will argue that the possession of aesthetic courage is vital for any sort of aesthetically virtuous life. It is not possible to possess *any* aesthetic virtue without possessing aesthetic courage. It is important, therefore, for any future development of virtue aesthetics to acknowledge the central importance of aesthetic courage.

I. Preliminaries

The trajectory of contemporary virtue aesthetics has so far followed a similar path to that set by virtue ethics and virtue epistemology. For both of these earlier examples of a virtue-centred approach, initial attempts at development focused on whether the concept of virtue could be used to explicate some *other* concept. For example, much early discussion in contemporary virtue ethics focused on whether the concept of moral virtue could be used to provide an account of morally right action, one that would rival the dominant approaches of the time.¹ Interest then shifted to providing accounts of specific moral virtues and vices themselves,² and to the theoretical and practical implications of those accounts.³

In a similar way, early discussions in virtue aesthetics focused on whether the concept of aesthetic virtue could be used to explicate the concept of art.⁴ Attention has now shifted to providing accounts of specific aesthetic virtues and vices. So far, this has included discussions of traits such as creativity, good taste, and snobbery.⁵ It is to be hoped that this process will result in a more detailed portrait of the aesthetically virtuous person and of an aesthetically virtuous life. The current paper contributes to this process by presenting an account of the trait of aesthetic courage and by arguing that this trait is of central importance for any development of aesthetic virtue.

It is important to be clear on the concept of virtue that is being appealed to in this paper. One further mirroring between virtue aesthetics and other virtue-centred approaches in philosophy has been the recent suggestion that we need to distinguish between two conceptions of aesthetic virtue.

¹ For example, see Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: OUP, 1999); Michael Slote, *Morals From Motives*, (Oxford: OUP, 2001); and Christine Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View* (Oxford: OUP, 2003).

² For example, see Heather Battaly (ed), *Virtue and Vice, Moral and Epistemic* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), Part 4; and Kevin Timpe and Craig Boyd (eds), *Virtues and Their Vices* (Oxford: OUP, 2014).

³ For example, see Julia Annas, Darcia Narvaez and Nancy Snow (eds), *Developing the Virtues: Integrating Perspectives* (New York: OUP, 2016); and James Arthur et al, *Teaching Character and Virtue in Schools* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

⁴ See David Woodruff, 'A Virtue Theory of Aesthetics', *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 35 (2001), 23–36.

⁵ On creativity, see Berys Gaut, 'Mixed Motivations: Creativity as a Virtue', *The Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 57 (2014), 183–202; Matthew Kieran, 'Creativity as a Virtue of Character', in E. Paul and S. Kaufman (eds), *The Philosophy of Creativity* (New York: OUP, 2014), 125–144; and Alison Hills and Alexander Bird, 'Creativity Without Value', in B. Gaut and M. Kieran (eds), *Creativity and Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 95–107. On good taste, see Dominic McIver Lopes, 'Virtues of Art: Good Taste', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Supplementary* 82 (2008), 197–211. On snobbery, see Matthew Kieran, 'The Vice of Snobbery: Aesthetic Knowledge, Justification and Virtue in Art Appreciation', *The Philosophical Quarterly* 60 (2010), 243–263.

Tom Roberts argues that we should distinguish *aesthetic faculty virtues* from *aesthetic trait virtues*, in a way that mirrors the standard distinction between ‘reliabilist’ and ‘responsibilist’ virtues in virtue epistemology.⁶ Aesthetic faculty virtues include any feature of an agent that contributes towards the reliable production of aesthetically good outcomes. This might include features such as “excellence in drawing skill; perfect pitch; good rhythm; breath control; or the timbre of one’s voice”.⁷ In comparison, aesthetic trait virtues are all character traits, and all involve aesthetically valuable motivations. Examples of candidate aesthetic trait virtues might include creativity, integrity and, according to Roberts, “aesthetic forms of generosity, honesty, and authenticity”.⁸ In this paper, I focus on this conception of aesthetic virtues as character traits, rather than as mere skills or faculties.

Recent discussions in virtue aesthetics have emphasized that these aesthetic (trait) virtues will not only be of importance for those who are involved in the creation of artworks.⁹ Aesthetic honesty, for example, might prompt an artist to produce a work of great integrity and aesthetic value. But aesthetic honesty can also be required to enable an appreciator of an artwork to accurately report on their experience of the work. In a similar way, other candidate aesthetic virtues and vices (such as good taste, aesthetic laziness, or snobbery) are expected to be relevant in *both* the creation and the appreciation of aesthetic value.

I will now move on to developing an account of the specific trait of aesthetic courage. My strategy is to first generate some plausible success criteria for any *general* account of courage. This will be achieved by considering the unsuccessful attempts to define courage that feature in perhaps the most famous discussion of that trait, Plato’s *Laches*. I will then propose an account of the basic nature of courage that, it is hoped, gains credibility by being able to satisfy the required criteria. It will then be possible to account for the specific trait of *aesthetic* courage and to explore that trait’s relationship with other candidate aesthetic virtues.

⁶ Tom Roberts, ‘Aesthetic Virtues: Traits and Faculties’, *Philosophical Studies* 175 (2018), 664–686.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 433.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ See Peter Goldie, ‘Virtues of Art’, *Philosophy Compass* 5 (2010), 830–839, at Section 2.4; and Roberts, ‘Aesthetic Virtues’, Section 3.1.

II. Generating Success Criteria

It is possible to work towards an account of aesthetic courage by first developing an account of courage *in general*. Success criteria for a general account of courage can be generated by reflecting on the discussion in Plato's *Laches*.¹⁰ In that work, the character Socrates, in dialogue with Laches and Nicias, examines several proposed accounts of courage and finds all of them to be unsatisfactory.¹¹ The dialogue ends with the participants agreeing that further study will be required. By considering the three failed attempts that are presented to Socrates, it is possible to generate criteria that any successful account must satisfy.

The character Laches is the first to propose an account of courage, initially suggesting that a courageous agent is one who “is willing to remain at his post and to defend himself against the enemy without running away”.¹² Socrates makes short work of this initial proposal. The problem is that this account is too specific. While soldiers who remain at their posts may well be courageous, this is far from the only way of demonstrating courage. As Socrates explains, we need to know:

not only what constitutes courage for the hoplite but for a horseman as well and for every sort of warrior. And I wanted to include 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.¹³

This provides us with our first criterion for any successful account of courage. It is important to be sensitive to the fact that courage can be demonstrated in a variety of settings and in a variety of ways. An account of courage must not be so specific as to be incompatible with this fact.

In response to Socrates's criticism, Laches moves on to propose a second account on which courage is understood as “endurance of the soul”.¹⁴ Socrates's worry for this account is more

¹⁰ I do not mean to suggest that this is the only way of starting this discussion, or that we ought to assume Plato's broader virtue theory when thinking about courage. Rather, my aim is to use the rival accounts presented in *Laches* to generate success criteria that will, ultimately, be independently plausible.

¹¹ Plato (trans. Sprague) *Laches*, in J. Cooper (ed), *Plato: Complete Works* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 1997), 664-686.

¹² *Ibid.*, 675 [190e].

¹³ *Ibid.*, 676 [191d].

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 677 [192c].

complicated than for Laches's initial effort. Socrates points out that we only find endurance noble if it is knowledgeable and wise. Endurance that is foolish or unwise does not strike us as particularly noble or valuable. However, we would also say that an agent who lacks knowledge often demonstrates *more* courage than one who possesses it. A soldier who endures in the absence of any knowledge that they will be successful, or without knowledge of advanced fighting techniques, ought to be judged more courageous than one who endures in the possession of such knowledge. This, according to Socrates, leads us to a contradiction. We intuitively think that courage is valuable, but the very things that are required in order for *endurance* to be valuable (wisdom and knowledge) appear to make someone *less* courageous. This tells against any account that equates courage with endurance.¹⁵

My aim in this section is not to engage in an evaluation of Socrates's arguments. Rather, success criteria for any account of courage can be generated by reflecting on the insights that underlie Socrates's criticisms. Whatever may be said in defence of Laches's second proposal, the worry for the account is clear. An account of courage must say something plausible and consistent about the value of that trait. If an account fails to do this, then we have reason to reject it. This is the lesson that we can take from the rejection of Laches's second proposal on the nature of courage.

The third and final proposal is presented not by Laches but by the character Nicias, who suggests that courage is "knowledge of the fearful and the hopeful in war and in every other situation."¹⁶ Again, Socrates is unconvinced. That which inspires fear will be future evils, while that which inspires hope will be future goods. But it is agreed by all participants in the discussion that:

there is not one kind of knowledge by which we know how things have happened in the past, and another by which we know how they are happening at the present time, and still another by which we know how what has not yet happened might best come to be... [T]he same knowledge has understanding of the same things, whether future, present, or past.¹⁷

If courage involves knowledge of future evils and future goods, and if no discipline exclusively focuses on the future at the expense of the past and the present, then courage must also involve

¹⁵ Ibid., 677-678 [192c-193d].

¹⁶ Ibid., 680 [195a].

¹⁷ Ibid., 683-684 [198d-199b].

knowledge of past and present evils and goods. And so, the account suggested by Nicias implies that courage involves knowledge of *all* evil and *all* good. This is a problem. According to Socrates, someone who possessed such knowledge would be perfect in virtue, and so it becomes impossible to distinguish the courageous agent from an agent who possesses any (or all) of the other virtues.¹⁸

Again, my aim is not to assess Socrates's argument here. Instead, the discussion serves to highlight a general worry for any proposal. A successful account of courage will enable us to distinguish courage from other valuable traits. In addition to being general enough to accommodate different ways of demonstrating courage, a successful account must not be so general as to make it hard to distinguish courage from any other candidate virtue. Discussion of three rejected accounts of courage in *Laches* has now resulted in three plausible success criteria.

I want to briefly mention one additional consideration. When reflecting on Laches's initial proposal, it became clear that an account ought to be general enough to accommodate the fact that courage can be demonstrated in a variety of ways. We ought also to acknowledge that most people cannot be expected to possess courage relating to *every* possible context or circumstance. As has been well explained by Daniel Russell:

Nor is there any denying the overwhelming evidence that no courageous person (say) is courageous across all areas of his or her life, and it is pointless to stipulate that such a person therefore could not be 'really' courageous in any area at all.¹⁹

What the evidence (and everyday experience) tells us is that someone might be courageous in one way (say, in a particular context or in response to a particular obstacle) while lacking courage in some other way. For example, someone might be courageous on the battlefield and yet display a lack of courage when asked to speak in front of a large audience. Someone might be courageous when standing up for justice in their community and yet lack the courage to be honest in their personal relationships. An account of courage ought to be sensitive to this possibility.

Adding this final criterion to those generated by reflecting on *Laches* results in the following four requirements for any general account of the nature of courage:

¹⁸ Ibid., 684 [199c-d].

¹⁹ Daniel Russell, *Practical Intelligence and the Virtues* (Oxford: OUP, 2009), 150.

A successful account of courage will:

- (1) Be compatible with the fact that courage can be displayed in a variety of settings and in a variety of ways;
- (2) Enable us to say something plausible and consistent about the value of courage;
- (3) Enable us to distinguish courage from other valuable traits; and
- (4) Be compatible with the fact that someone might be genuinely courageous in some ways while lacking courage in other ways.

With these success criteria in mind, I will now propose a basic claim about courage that allows us to account for the general nature of the trait. This will then be refined to provide an understanding of the specific trait of aesthetic courage and of the relationship between aesthetic courage and other candidate aesthetic virtues.

III. Courage as an Enabler

When asking whether or not someone is courageous, our focus may be more or less narrow. In some cases, our interest will be limited to a particular context or a particular goal. For example, we might want to know whether a fellow campaigner will be courageous in the context of public speaking, or whether a prospective teammate will be courageous in the pursuit of victory. In other cases, our interest will be broader, and we might ask whether someone has courage within a particular domain. This might be a domain of life, such as their family life or their public life, or it might be a normative domain, such as the moral domain. Finally, and most broadly, we can also ask whether someone is courageous overall, or all things considered. This suggests three different levels of specificity when thinking about different forms of courage: courage *regarding a particular context or goal*; courage *relating to a particular domain*; and courage *overall or all things considered*.

I suggest that the same basic claim about courage can be made regardless of which level of specificity we are focusing on. It is this basic claim that can then be refined to account for aesthetic courage. That basic claim, as applied to the three levels of interest that have just been identified, is as follows:

- (i) An agent is courageous *regarding a particular context or goal* only when their motivations within that context or towards that goal are not easily defeated by considerations of personal risk.
- (ii) An agent is courageous *relative to a particular domain* only when their domain-relevant motivations are not easily defeated by considerations of personal risk.
- (iii) An agent can be considered courageous *overall* only when their motivations are not generally easily defeated by considerations of personal risk.

For example, an agent is courageous regarding the goal of protecting their family only if their motivation to do so is not easily defeated by considerations of personal risk. An agent is courageous in the context of public speaking only if their motivations (whatever these may be) are not easily defeated in such a context. And an agent is courageous in the moral domain only if their morally relevant motivations are not easily defeated by considerations of personal risk. While this basic claim about courage is fairly straightforward, it requires some clarification before moving on.

First, it is worth highlighting that the defeasibility of a given motivation is not the same as the felt strength of that motivation. It is possible to feel strongly motivated towards some goal and yet for that motivation to be easily defeated. This simply amounts to acknowledging the distinction between apathy and cowardice. In cases of apathy, the agent will not feel a strong motivation towards the goal in question. In cases of cowardice, the agent may well feel strongly motivated, only for that motivation to nevertheless be easily defeated by considerations of personal risk.

Clarification is also required concerning what it means for a motivation to be ‘easily’ defeated by considerations of personal risk. This is a matter of an agent’s motivation being defeated despite being faced with a level of risk that is below a set threshold. There are two issues relating to this threshold on which theorists may be inclined to disagree. The first issue concerns the question of where the threshold of risk ought to be set. The second issue concerns the question of how the level of risk is determined in a given situation. While I aim to remain open on how best to resolve these two issues, I do want to say something about the available options.

Regarding the first issue, an agent ought not to be criticised in terms of courage if the risks that they face are truly overwhelming. To borrow a vivid example from Julia Driver, we can imagine “someone who has resisted Nazi torturers for weeks, who had body parts removed, skin peeled away, but who finally succumbed when driven to the edge of madness by the threat of being eaten

by rats.²⁰ As Driver is surely correct to say, this person can be considered courageous even if their motivation (say, not to provide information to their interrogators) has been ultimately defeated.

On the other hand, some examples do lead us to question the courage of those involved. If a parent's genuine motivation to secure vital supplies for their child is defeated by the slight risk of embarrassment were they to mispronounce the necessary product, then we would rightly judge them to be lacking in courage. These two contrasting examples suggest the extremes between which the proper threshold of risk ought to be set. Of course, competing theorists may wish to set the threshold at different levels within these extremes, or perhaps to set varying thresholds depending on the context.²¹ I will here set aside the question of where exactly the threshold ought to be set and instead focus on examples likely to gain widespread acceptance as being either clearly courageous or clearly non-courageous.

The second issue is how to determine the level of risk in a given situation. It will make a significant difference whether we evaluate the defeasibility of a motivation by considering the *actual* level of risk or by considering the level of risk *as perceived by the agent*. The first would be to focus on objective levels of risk, the second would be to focus on (purely) subjective levels. Of these two options, I believe there is good reason to favour the subjective approach over the objective approach.

By focusing on the level of risk as perceived by the agent, it becomes possible to explain how people can demonstrate genuine courage in situations where the level of risk is lower than they have been led to believe. The victim in Driver's example should be considered courageous even if their torturers were unlikely to be able to carry out their threat. To use a science fiction example, the subjective approach explains how the crew of *Star Trek* can demonstrate genuine courage even when they have been (unknowingly) transported into the holodeck and safety settings are operating within normal parameters.

And yet, perhaps further examples would encourage us to move away from a purely subjective approach – cases where an agent's risk assessment is especially foolish or irrational, for example. This suggests that we should opt for some middle ground between the two extremes. Perhaps we should evaluate courage based on the level of risk that it would be rational to believe was present,

²⁰ Julia Driver, *Uneasy Virtue* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001), 73.

²¹ One option is to vary the threshold of risk depending on the strength of the agent's motivation. The stronger the motivation, the higher the threshold of risk that would be faced by a truly courageous agent.

or the level of risk that would be supported by the best available evidence. While my own preference is for the subjective approach, I will aim to remain open on this issue for now, returning to it only when considering an objection to my account of aesthetic courage later in the paper.

In this section, I have set out the basic claim that I believe is helpful in accounting for the nature of courage *in general*. What remains is to consider whether this view is more successful than the accounts presented in *Laches* and how this basic claim can be refined to account for the specific trait of aesthetic courage. In the process of answering these questions, it will become clear why this approach presents courage, primarily, as an *enabler*.

IV. Aesthetic Courage (and Satisfying the Criteria)

The first account presented by Laches was rejected for being too specific. It is incompatible with the idea that courage can be displayed in a variety of settings and in a variety of ways. When asked to provide examples of someone acting courageously, some may opt for a soldier on the battlefield, or perhaps an outlaw in the Wild West. Others will think of examples from history of those who took a stand to further a just cause – examples such as Rosa Parks. And, on reflection, most would accept that genuine courage can be demonstrated by a patient suffering through a chronic illness.²² A successful account of courage will acknowledge this variety.

On the account suggested here, courage is primarily a matter of the defeasibility of an agent's motivations. Such an account is entirely compatible with a wide variety of manifestations of courage. When we evaluate the soldier as courageous, we do so on the grounds that their motivation to pursue their set objectives, or to serve their country, is not easily defeated by the very real dangers that they face. When we judge that Rosa Parks was courageous, we do so because her motivation to advance the cause of civil rights was not defeated by the risk of arrest, abuse, and mistreatment that she knew was a likely consequence of her actions. And when we judge a patient suffering through a chronic illness to be courageous, this is because their motivation to live as full a life as possible (or to live life in a particular way, for example positively or with dignity) is not defeated by the increased difficulties and risks that they face.

²² Someone who appears to doubt this is Daniel Jacobson, 'Seeing By Feeling: Virtues, Skills, and Moral Perception', *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 8 (2005), 387–409, at 402-403 and esp. footnote 16.

In the examples just given, the levels of risk may be so high that we would be justified in assuming that these individuals are courageous *overall* or *all things considered*. But, importantly, the proposed account does not require that someone be overall courageous in order to be considered courageous in any respect. Rather, the account allows for the possibility that someone could be courageous regarding some contexts or goals but not others. Similarly, someone could be courageous relative to some particular domain but not others. This will be a matter of the defeasibility of their motivations and whether that defeasibility varies depending on the context or depending on the domain. By acknowledging the possibility that someone could be genuinely courageous in some ways but not in others, as well as acknowledging the variety of different contexts in which courage can be demonstrated, the proposed understanding of courage satisfies two of the four success criteria that were generated in Section II.

It will be helpful at this stage to now narrow our focus to the task of accounting for the specific trait of aesthetic courage. As noted above, an agent is courageous *relative to a particular domain* only when their domain-relevant motivations are not easily defeated by considerations of personal risk. For example, in the moral domain, relevant motivations might include the motivation to protect and promote well-being, and the motivation to ensure fairness. Given this, *moral courage* involves having motivations to promote well-being and to ensure fairness that are not easily defeated by considerations of personal risk.²³ Correspondingly, *aesthetic courage* involves being motivated towards whatever is of fundamental aesthetic value, in a way that is not easily defeated by considerations of personal risk.

This account of aesthetic courage is compatible with different views on what exactly is of fundamental aesthetic value (as well as on related issues such as the relationship between aesthetic value and artistic value).²⁴ Possible candidates for the role of fundamental aesthetic value include both beauty and “appreciation”.²⁵ I won’t attempt to resolve that issue here. Rather, different theorists can plug their own understanding of what is of fundamental aesthetic value into the

²³ These moral motivations are provided here as examples only, although their moral significance for virtue theory is defended elsewhere. See Alan Wilson, ‘Avoiding the Conflation of Moral and Intellectual Virtues’, *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 20 (2017), 1037–1050.

²⁴ For the debate on non-aesthetic artistic value, see Dominic McIver Lopes, ‘The Myth of (Non-Aesthetic) Artistic Value’, *The Philosophical Quarterly* 61 (2011), 518–536; Andrew Huddleston, ‘In Defence of Artistic Value’, *The Philosophical Quarterly* 62 (2012), 705–714; and Louise Hanson, ‘The Reality of (Non-Aesthetic) Artistic Value’, *The Philosophical Quarterly* 63 (2013), 492–508.

²⁵ For “appreciation”, see Woodruff, ‘A Virtue Theory of Aesthetics’.

proposed account of aesthetic courage. However, for ease of use, I will sometimes use ‘beauty’ as a convenient shorthand for ‘that which is of fundamental aesthetic value’.

An agent possesses aesthetic courage only when their motivations towards that which is of fundamental aesthetic value are not easily defeated by considerations of personal risk. Why might such a trait be considered valuable? On the proposed account, the value of aesthetic courage can be seen to derive from at least two sources. First, aesthetic courage, as with courage more generally, is instrumentally valuable in enabling agents to pursue their goals. Given our status as dependent and, importantly, as vulnerable animals, achieving anything of value often requires the acceptance of personal risk. The possession of courage enables us to better face those risks and so makes achievement more likely. And the possession of *aesthetic* courage makes *aesthetic* achievements more likely. An artist who is willing to endure hardships in order to create an aesthetically valuable series of works has a better chance of succeeding than one who is easily defeated when faced with the prospect of personal risk. In this way, both aesthetic courage and courage in general are of instrumental value in enabling agents to achieve their goals.

The idea that courage has instrumental value in this way is unlikely to be surprising. However, the proposed understanding of aesthetic courage also reveals a second way in which this specific trait is of value. Aesthetic courage is of central importance due to its relationship with other traits that are themselves candidate aesthetic virtues.

The role that an agent’s motivations play in the possession of aesthetic virtues has been widely discussed in the recent literature on virtue aesthetics. When developing the idea of aesthetic virtues, Alison Hills highlights the “non-cognitive” aspects of virtue, saying that: “the aesthetically virtuous person characteristically has the right motivations... in direct response to aesthetic reasons and aesthetic value.”²⁶ For example, someone who is aesthetically virtuous will “be motivated to create or appreciate valuable works of art because of their value (not, for instance, because they are expensive or admired by the elite).”²⁷ And this motivational aspect has also been acknowledged by others who seek to provide a general account of the nature of aesthetic virtues. Tom Roberts explains how aesthetic (trait) virtues all require the “possession of an overarching concern for the aesthetically good – the beautiful, the elegant, the funny, the novel, the conceptually provocative,

²⁶ Alison Hills, ‘Moral and Aesthetic Virtue’, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 118 (2018), 255–274, at 264.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

and so forth”.²⁸ And, in an earlier paper, David Woodruff argues for an understanding of aesthetic virtues modelled on Linda Zagzebski’s influential approach to moral and intellectual virtues. On this view, all aesthetic virtues require excellent aesthetic motivation.²⁹

Recent accounts of the nature of aesthetic virtues, therefore, agree that in order to possess an aesthetic virtue (as opposed to a mere skill or faculty) an agent must be sufficiently motivated by aesthetic goods. The importance of motivation has also been emphasized in attempts to describe *specific* candidate aesthetic virtues. For example, Matthew Kieran’s work on the candidate virtue of creativity highlights the importance of an agent being intrinsically motivated by aesthetic values: “there is good reason to conceive of creativity as a virtue when agents’ creative successes are driven by deep-seated intrinsic motivations.”³⁰ This is what distinguishes the virtuously creative person from someone who simply happens, by chance, to create aesthetically pleasing artefacts. And the importance of motivation for genuine creativity is also highlighted by Hills and Bird, who explain that: “an individual cannot be thought of as properly creative who sometimes has imaginative new ideas, but when she does so is not motivated to work on them”.³¹ In these ways, the importance of being motivated by what is aesthetically valuable has been acknowledged both by those working on accounts of aesthetic virtue in general and by those working on specific candidate aesthetic virtues, such as creativity.

One more step is required in order to explain the relationship between aesthetic courage and other candidate aesthetic virtues. That step is to point out that, while motivation is important, not just *any* motivation in favour of aesthetic value is sufficient for aesthetic virtue. Instead, aesthetically virtuous motivations must have the following three features. First, an aesthetically virtuous motivation must be sufficiently *persistent*. An agent does not possess virtuous creativity if their motivation to achieve aesthetically valuable ends is problematically fleeting or sporadic. Second, aesthetically virtuous motivation must be sufficiently *strong* so as to actually prompt the agent into action. And, third, the motivation involved in aesthetic virtues must be sufficiently *robust* in the sense that it is not easily defeated by competing considerations. For example, someone does not possess aesthetically virtuous creativity if their persistent and strongly felt motivation to create

²⁸ Roberts, ‘Aesthetic Virtues’, 433.

²⁹ Woodruff, ‘A Virtue Theory of Aesthetics’, and see Linda Zagzebski, *Virtues of the Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

³⁰ Kieran, ‘Creativity as a Virtue of Character’, 133.

³¹ Hills and Bird, ‘Creativity Without Value’, 95.

beautiful music is always overridden by a desire to make as much money as possible, or to please a social elite. In such cases, the potential for virtuous creativity is overridden by the candidate aesthetic vices of avarice and snobbery, respectively. It is only when aesthetic motivation is robust, in addition to being persistent and strong, that an agent can possess aesthetic virtues.³² We can refer to a motivation that has all three of these features as a *deep* motivation.

Aesthetic virtues, then, involve a deep motivation towards that which is of fundamental aesthetic value. Among other things, this requires that a motivation is robust in the face of competing considerations. And one type of competing consideration will be considerations of personal risk. For example, a virtuously creative artist will be motivated to create beautiful artworks in a way that is not easily defeated by considerations of personal risk. A critic with aesthetic integrity will be motivated to stay true to their aesthetic values in a way that is not easily defeated by considerations of personal risk. And, of course, I have suggested that a motivation towards aesthetic goods that is not easily defeated by considerations of personal risk is exactly what an aesthetically courageous agent will possess. Therefore, someone who possesses a given aesthetic virtue, such as creativity or integrity, will also necessarily possess courage regarding the aesthetic domain. Aesthetic courage should be understood as an *enabler* for all aesthetic virtues.

One more example may help to further explain this relationship. Consider the virtue of aesthetic honesty. An aesthetically honest artist is one who is motivated to be truthful in their work, with this motivation being based on a belief in the aesthetic value of truthfulness. However, we can imagine cases where this motivation is defeated. A fiction writer may opt for simplistic and jingoistic narratives due to a fear that more nuanced and truthful accounts will cost them their wider readership and popular acclaim. In such a case, there is a clear failing in the agent's aesthetic character. Some may be tempted to interpret this as a case where the agent does possess aesthetic honesty but is still lacking as a result of failing to possess the entirely separate trait of courage. Instead, we ought to recognise that the aesthetic virtue of honesty is missing in this case – and for the very reason that the agent lacks aesthetic courage. Without a sufficiently robust motivation towards that which is of aesthetic value, the aesthetic virtue of honesty is necessarily absent. The addition of aesthetic courage makes the possession of a sufficiently robust aesthetic motivation possible, and so makes the possession of aesthetic virtue possible.

³² These three features are also required for virtuous motivations in other domains. See, for example, Wilson, 'Avoiding the Conflation of Moral and Intellectual Virtue', 1043.

This reveals the central importance and value of aesthetic courage. In addition to the basic instrumental value that aesthetic courage shares with all forms of courage, aesthetic courage is also valuable as an enabler for other candidate aesthetic virtues. Aesthetic courage is necessary for, and partly constitutive of, aesthetic virtues, including traits such as creativity, integrity, and aesthetic honesty. The proposed account is therefore able to explain the value of courage, and of aesthetic courage in particular. Of course, aesthetic courage is not *sufficient* for any (other) aesthetic virtues. Aesthetic courage alone will not guarantee the possession of all positive aesthetic traits. The current proposal, therefore, does not risk equating all valuable traits with the trait of courage.

If this is correct, then we have an account of aesthetic courage (and of courage in general) that satisfies the success criteria generated in Section II. An agent is aesthetically courageous only if their motivations towards that which is of aesthetic value are not easily defeated by considerations of personal risk. In the process, I have proposed an understanding of the relationship between aesthetic courage and other candidate aesthetic virtues. Aesthetic courage is an *enabler* for aesthetic virtue in the sense that it is not possible to possess any aesthetic virtue without also possessing aesthetic courage.

V. Objections and Implications

Before concluding, I want to consider some possible objections to what has been said so far, and to briefly set out some implications of the proposed account. A first objection stems from the Aristotelian view of the virtues on which every virtue is understood as a ‘mean’ between two opposing vices. While this view is most commonly associated with Aristotle’s work on moral virtue, it has also been appealed to in recent work on virtue aesthetics. Woodruff endorses the idea that every aesthetic virtue has opposing vices of both excess and deficiency when describing the candidate aesthetic virtues of, for example, *sensitivity* (as the mean between “brashness” and “being overly affected”), *creativity* (as the mean between “unimaginativeness” and “disassociatedness”), and *vision* (as the mean between “a limited or narrow focus” and “abstractness”).³³

Courage is also commonly viewed as the mean between a vice of deficiency and a vice of excess. The vice of deficiency is cowardice and the vice of excess is recklessness or rashness. On the proposed understanding of aesthetic courage, it is easy to see that aesthetic cowardice is primarily a matter of having a motivation in favour of beauty that is easily defeated by considerations of

³³ Woodruff, ‘A Virtue Theory of Aesthetics’, 27-29.

personal risk. However, it is difficult to see how aesthetic courage can be distinguished from the corresponding vice of aesthetic recklessness. This poses a potential challenge to the account.

Both those who possess aesthetic courage and those who possess aesthetic recklessness may be motivated in favour of aesthetic goods in a way that is not easily defeated by considerations of personal risk. How, then, can the account distinguish the putative virtue from its corresponding vice? The first, and more controversial, option is to deny that aesthetic recklessness represents any sort of failing regarding aesthetic courage. That is, it is entirely compatible with being aesthetically courageous that one is also aesthetically reckless. An aesthetically reckless agent *just is* an aesthetically courageous agent who has some additional failing. That additional failing would be the lack of some other aesthetic virtue (such as aesthetic insight, fairness or charity) which leads the agent to mistakenly act in ways that are ultimately contrary to aesthetic value(s). This way of explaining aesthetic recklessness (as aesthetic courage plus a failure of some other aesthetic virtue) is compatible with the straightforward account of aesthetic courage that has been proposed here.

The second option is to refine the proposed account to allow for a sharper distinction between those who are aesthetically courageous and those who are aesthetically reckless. This can be achieved by returning to the previously discussed issue of where to set the threshold of personal risk that is relevant when accounting for courage. In addition to a threshold below which an agent's motivation is judged to have been defeated too easily, it would be possible to supplement the account by also including an upper threshold of risk beyond which any undefeated motivations are judged problematically reckless. This would be a natural way of reflecting the idea that aesthetic courage lies between two vices, and would provide a method for distinguishing examples of aesthetic courage from examples of aesthetic recklessness. There are, therefore, at least two options for responding to this first objection.

In addition to challenges directed at the proposed account of the *nature* of aesthetic courage, it would also be possible to object to the proposed understanding of the *importance* of aesthetic courage. For example, it might be objected that other ways of failing in aesthetic virtue ought to be considered. I have suggested that all aesthetic virtues require a deep motivation towards that which is of fundamental aesthetic value. This involves having a motivation that is sufficiently robust in the face of competing considerations, and one type of competing consideration will be considerations of personal risk. But other considerations can also be relevant in undermining a robust aesthetic motivation. Just as an agent might fail in aesthetic honesty due to their aesthetic

motivation being easily defeated by considerations of personal risk (and so a lack of aesthetic courage), so too might an agent's aesthetic motivation be defeated by competing positive desires for wealth or esteem. Not every instance of a lack of aesthetic virtue can be rightly attributed to a lack of aesthetic courage.³⁴

It is important to note that this is not a challenge to the claim that aesthetic courage is necessary for all aesthetic virtues. The existence of other ways of failing in aesthetic virtue would be a challenge for the claim that aesthetic courage is sufficient for aesthetic virtue, but not for the claim that it is necessary. However, highlighting these other types of competing considerations raises an additional point of interest that I want to mention here.

That there are other ways of failing in aesthetic virtue raises the possibility of additional connections between different aesthetic traits. For example, it would be interesting to explore whether there is also an aesthetic analogue of the widely accepted moral virtue of temperance. Perhaps *aesthetic temperance* is necessary for ensuring the robustness of aesthetic motivations in the face of competing *positive* considerations, in the same way that I have argued *aesthetic courage* is necessary in ensuring robustness in the face of the *negative* competing considerations of personal risk. It is possible that future work on this additional trait would continue the process of adding depth to our understanding of an aesthetically virtuous life and of the relationship between different aesthetic virtues (and vices). That idea is consistent with the main argument of the current paper, that aesthetic courage is of central importance to an aesthetically virtuous life, due to it being necessary for the possession of all (other) aesthetic virtues.

One further way of objecting to the current proposal would be by providing direct counter-examples to the claim that aesthetic courage is necessary for all aesthetic virtues. A blueprint for objections along these lines would be as follows: First, identify and describe a character trait that plausibly deserves to be accepted as a genuine aesthetic virtue. Second, provide an argument or an example to demonstrate that someone could possess that virtue without also possessing aesthetic courage. If successful, objections of this sort would tell against the claim that aesthetic courage is necessary for any and all aesthetic virtues.

³⁴ I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for encouraging me to say more on this issue.

In response to such objections, the options will be either (a) to deny that the proposed character trait is a genuine aesthetic virtue, or (b) to deny that someone could possess that virtue without also possessing aesthetic courage (as I did when briefly discussing the candidate virtue of aesthetic honesty, above). How promising these responses are will depend on the details of the specific counterexamples that are provided. It is possible that such counterexamples will arise as work continues on the task of developing virtue aesthetics and, in particular, on accounting for the nature of specific aesthetic virtues and vices. Only when more of this work has been completed will it be possible to fully assess the potential of these counterexamples. I look forward to seeing how virtue aesthetics continues to develop, and whether that development will support or challenge the claim that aesthetic courage is necessary for any sort of aesthetically virtuous life.

The idea of developing virtue aesthetics by developing accounts of specific aesthetic virtues (and vices) is one that motivates the present work. It is also one of the areas for “further developments” that were identified by Peter Goldie when setting out a sort of manifesto for future work in this area.³⁵ My proposed understanding of aesthetic courage also has implications for two other issues that were identified by Goldie.

First, Goldie raises the question of whether virtue aestheticians ought to endorse the “unity of the virtues” as it is set out by Aristotle.³⁶ On that version of a unity thesis, the possession of any one moral virtue implies the possession of all moral virtues. Goldie’s interest appears to be on whether the possession of aesthetic virtue might also be taken to imply moral virtue, a claim that would seem to face potential counterexamples. This idea of a necessary connection between moral and aesthetic virtue is not one that gains support from the account proposed here. However, we can also enquire about the more direct aesthetic analogue of Aristotle’s unity thesis and ask whether the possession of any one aesthetic virtue implies the possession of all aesthetic virtues.

My proposed understanding of the relationship between aesthetic courage and (other) candidate aesthetic virtues does not imply any sort of aesthetic unity thesis. That thesis would require that aesthetic courage be both *necessary* and *sufficient* for all aesthetic virtues, and I have not argued for that stronger claim here. However, the proposal does reveal a related connection in terms of vice. On this account, possession of aesthetic cowardice is sufficient to ensure the *absence* of all aesthetic

³⁵ Goldie, ‘Virtues of Art’, 836.

³⁶ Ibid., 835.

virtues. It is not possible for someone to develop any aesthetic virtues, or to live any sort of aesthetically virtuous life, if they are a coward in the aesthetic domain.

The proposal here also has implications for another issue that was highlighted by Goldie. Goldie asks whether virtue aesthetics will have implications for “aesthetic education”, suggesting that:

for example, it could be important not just to get young children to experience art, but to get them to have the right dispositions as ‘fine observers’, and for this perhaps more tha[n] simple exposure to art is necessary.³⁷

An important next step for virtue aesthetics will be to explore how aesthetic virtues are (or can be) developed, and what implications this might have for aesthetic education and aesthetic self-improvement. This task is likely to benefit from related work on virtue development in other domains.³⁸ What the proposed account of aesthetic courage suggests is that, when it comes to aesthetic virtue development, overcoming the specific vice of aesthetic cowardice ought to be a priority. Developing educational tools aimed specifically at encouraging aesthetic courage may be one promising way of unlocking the potential for aesthetic virtue.

Conclusion

This is an exciting time for work on aesthetic character traits and on the idea of an aesthetically virtuous life. In this paper, I have attempted to contribute to the development of virtue aesthetics by proposing an understanding of one specific trait – the trait of aesthetic courage. In the process, I proposed a basic claim about the nature of courage *in general* that satisfies plausible criteria for any successful account of that trait. I then argued that the possession of aesthetic courage is vital for any sort of aesthetically virtuous life. If this is correct, it has potential implications for future work in virtue aesthetics, including in the area of aesthetic education. It is important that future developments in virtue aesthetics acknowledge the central importance of aesthetic courage.³⁹

³⁷ Ibid., 836-837.

³⁸ For example, Nancy Snow (ed), *Cultivating Virtue: Perspectives from Philosophy, Theology, and Psychology*, (New York: OUP, 2015); Annas, Narvaez and Snow, *Developing the Virtues*; Arthur et al, *Teaching Character and Virtue in Schools*; Jason Baehr, *Intellectual Virtues and Education: Essays in Applied Virtue Epistemology*, (New York: Routledge, 2017); and Alan Wilson and Christian Miller, ‘Virtue Epistemology and Developing Intellectual Virtue’, in H. Battaly (ed), *The Routledge Handbook of Virtue Epistemology* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 483–495.

³⁹ I am fortunate to have been able to discuss my ideas on courage with many colleagues and friends at Edinburgh and Glasgow, and with audiences at Leeds, Sheffield and Southampton. I am grateful for all of these conversations and the feedback that was provided. I am also grateful to the anonymous reviewers for their comments and suggestions.