

Courage and Wisdom in Uncertain and Challenging Times

By Tom Morris

We live in uncertain and challenging times. But then again, throughout history most people have. And it's been a nearly universal discovery by the wisest individuals in all those previous times that the single most important human quality amid turbulence and confusion just may be courage. Compassion might be its match. But without courage, we won't show our compassion well in situations of risk. So again, it comes back to courage wisely deployed into the world. Perhaps then it's wise, compassionate courage that should lead us in all things.

And there's a crucial point to make about this vital core attribute. Courage has nothing to do with a lack of fear or anxiety. It's all about how we react to the fear, worry, or anxiety that we naturally feel in the face of any danger, including the unknowns of radical uncertainty. Do we feed the fires of fear, do we allow anxiety to grow insidiously and uninhibitedly, or do we act inwardly to redirect our emotions, attitudes, and actions in more positive directions? Courage means doing what's morally right for both you and others who are around you. It means prioritizing your values properly, letting go of what's not necessary and protecting what's most valuable. This is what the great philosophers have taught us. And they've also shown us how to follow them and be philosophers ourselves.

Every one of us capable of extended thought is by nature a philosopher, whether we realize it or not. Every one of us has a basic worldview, however well or badly developed. The only question that remains is whether we'll be good philosophers or bad ones—which is to say, whether we'll live from the resources of a powerful and productive worldview or a poor one. We all need a sound philosophy of life, or a basic worldview that will allow us to respond wisely to the ups and downs of our experience with a measure of inner peace. And this is one thing that any deep and useful philosophy will teach us: Anything positive that you think anxiety may help you to achieve can be had without its intervention, as a gift from wisdom alone, and without the worry.

Let me share two quick pictures that philosophy gives us and that can be quite useful in thinking about this. First, imagine life as like a big wagon wheel, rolling and bouncing down the road of time, and picture yourself as a tiny creature clinging to a part of the wheel. If you live out near the far edge of the rim, then as the wheel turns, you'll be lifted high and plunged low in rapid and dizzying succession. But if you can move in closer to the hub, then as the wheel continues to turn, you won't be whipped about to such dizzying heights of exuberance or forced down to such low points of despair. Wisdom is what can put you closer to the hub of the wheel, with the greater measure of stability that can involve.

Picture Two. Imagine an old telescope, perhaps like one you saw as a kid, an old pirate style spy-glass you could hold in your hand and peer through. If you look through the small end like everyone does, it will of course make things look bigger and closer and more imposing than they really are. Turn it around, then, to look through the big end,

and you'll be surprised how the telescope shrinks things down, moves them farther away, and perhaps makes them look much less imposing. Here's the point. We all have in our hearts and minds an emotional version of that telescope. When something bad happens, we most often tend to look through the small end of our inner telescope, like most everyone else does, and that can make things appear much worse than they in fact are. We may need to turn the telescope around and peer through the big end instead, shrinking the appearance of things down a bit, to give ourselves the measure of inner relief and calm we need to make good and wise decisions. Or, we can just become more aware of our tendency to pick up that telescope in the first place, and simply choose to put it down with a confidence that we've come into this world big enough in soul or spirit to handle whatever size challenge comes our way, if we'll just proceed with wisdom, courage, and compassion in everything we do.

In our unusual time right now, we have the need and the opportunity to examine our personal philosophies of life and ask whether they're up to the challenge we face today and could well encounter in different forms in future years. The courage to engage in self examination, to seek new self knowledge, and to work toward developing a robust philosophy of life that can give us both guidance and inner peace will repay us in many benefits for as long as we live, and perhaps even beyond those bounds. And it will involve showing ourselves a little compassion that we can then pass on well to others.

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