

Courage and Cowardice Aren't Always Easy to Tell Apart

There's a funny idea about courage floating around.

People get called courageous for loudly denouncing things they believe are evil. But that alone is not courage.

Yes, taking a stand against evil can be courageous. But only if it is scary, painful, and costly to do so. If there is no cost, it's not courage.

Most of what gets called courageous has no cost and brings no pain. To denounce as evil something everyone already believes is evil, or something with no power to do you bodily or reputational harm, is not courageous.

As a silly example, calling Hitler a piece of shit on Twitter is not courageous. Everyone agrees, Hitler has no power, and nothing bad will happen to you for saying this. Calling Hitler a piece of shit on live radio in Nazi Germany in 1940 would be a different matter.

We like to credit ourselves for courage when we stand against things that cost us nothing. It feels good to pile on when something has been deemed bad in the popular narrative. Gotta make sure to get our name on the record calling bad what everyone else calls bad! But this is easy, and of almost no value to anyone. It can make us smug and lazy and self-righteous and cause us to overlook our own capacity for cowardice.

At all times in all places there are evil things praised or accepted as good. With time and distance they may be seen for the evil they are. Courage is standing against those evils when they are viewed as good by the masses and when it costs you to do so.

Damn. That puts things in a different light. Most of the "taking a stand" we think we do isn't anything more than going with the flow, which is indistinguishable from cowardice.

By the way, you can be courageous and wrong, or cowardly and right. Just because it takes courage doesn't guarantee it's good. But as a general rule, acts of cowardice are far more likely to lead to something bad than acts of courage. And praising cowardice as courage is always a bad thing for social incentives.