

Magnanimity Versus Justice as the High Point of Moral Virtue

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As a student in Leo Paul de Alvarez's course on Aristotle's *Ethics*, I was amazed by the original insights my teacher brought out of the text. It was part of a two-part sequence on Aristotle's politics and ethics which de Alvarez taught almost every year. He distinguished the two by saying that politics for Aristotle was the study of the care or treatment of the soul, while ethics simply studied character and the soul in itself. On that definition, politics is the study that can actually bring about change to a person's character.¹ The *Nicomachean Ethics* had already been assigned to us as one of four texts in the University of Dallas core philosophy course, "Philosophy and the Ethical Life," but de Alvarez's Ethics course gave us the opportunity to consider the text again in a more focused way. He considered the *Nicomachean Ethics* in light of Aristotle's other texts such as the *Politics*, the *Rhetoric*, and the *Eudemean Ethics*, and he also brought up important later commentators on the virtues such as Plutarch and St. Thomas Aquinas.

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¹ And for that reason, the *Poetics* also should be seen as one of Aristotle's political works—perhaps the most political work, according to de Alvarez.

De Alvarez's Ethics class took several surprising turns; one that stood out was our consideration of magnanimity in Book IV. Several recent political philosophers, such as Mary Nichols, have interpreted that section as an ironic critique of the Greek ideal of a magnanimous man, but that is not what de Alvarez offered. Instead, he claimed that Aristotle was putting magnanimity up for serious consideration as a possible maximum limit of moral virtue. Along with justice, magnanimity is one of the "twin peaks" of moral virtue.

Justice and magnanimity are twin peaks of moral virtue because they, like mountains, are prominent and include many other things below them. According to Aristotle, magnanimity is a complete virtue that will include courage, moderation, and prudence:

Greatness of soul, then, seems to be a certain kind of adornment of the virtues, since it makes them greater, and does not come about without them. For this reason it is difficult to be great souled in truth, for it is not possible without the beauty that belongs to goodness. (*EN* IV.3.1124a2–4)²

De Alvarez points out that Aristotle's Greek word for "the beauty that belongs to goodness" was *kalakagathia*, a term that gets a special discussion in the *Eudemian Ethics*. Aristotle writes there that,

[o]bviously, anyone who is to receive such a title [of *kalakagathia*] must possess the particular virtues. In other cases too, it is impossible for it to be otherwise: no one can be healthy in his whole body if none of its parts is healthy. All the parts or most of them and the most important, must necessarily be in the same condition as the whole. (*EE* VIII.3.1248b8–15)

The magnanimous man is also the fine and good man, who not only practices each of the moral virtues, but also directs his efforts toward noble ends in accord with prudence. For Aristotle, the Spartan ideal is an example of a character that fails the standard of *kalakagathia*,

² Throughout this paper, I shall be using Joe Sach's translation of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, which de Alvarez used in class. The other Greek translations I shall use are Anthony Kenny's translation of the *Eudemian Ethics*, and John Dryden's translation of Plutarch's *Lives*.

for though Spartans cultivate the particular goods of the virtues, they direct these only toward a utilitarian and thus ignoble end—victory in battle. Magnanimity aims at individual greatness of soul and the things that should be honored, a noble end.

Later in the *Nicomachean* account, Aristotle indicates that a just man would possess complete moral virtue. He writes that the term “justice” is meant in more than one sense, but in its fullest sense it is

[an] especially complete virtue because it is the putting to use of complete virtue, and is complete because the one who has it is also capable of putting it to use in relation to someone else, and not just by oneself, for many people are able to put virtue to use among those at home but unable to do so in situations that involve someone else...justice, alone among the virtues, seems to be for someone else’s good (*EN* V.1.1129b31–1130a2).

Just as a well-played hand of poker will involve good cards, a just action will involve courageous, moderate, and prudent moral qualities that are played out with other people of varying merit in the community. In that sense, it is the fulfillment of the moral virtues in the social sphere, since it involves whatever rightly ordered actions toward others that prudence demands. Surely this would also involve *kalakagathia* for Aristotle (though he does not explicitly state it), and surely the Spartan ideal would fail the standard because they do not direct their virtue toward the noble end of the common good.

At this point in the discussion of the virtues in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, two questions become unavoidable for the reader (or listener, in the case of Aristotle’s original lecture audience³). First: if these are the “peaks” of moral virtue, why does Aristotle continue his discussion of ethics for another five books? Second, what is a “moral” virtue, exactly?

The answer to the second question contains the answer to the first for de Alvarez. Magnanimity and justice are indeed the peaks of moral virtue, but that is not to say that the life of magnanimity or the life of justice is Aristotle’s best life—or even a happy life, per se. There is more to a happy life than moral virtue. Although in all strictness the pre-

³ De Alvarez would always repeat to us that Aristotle’s lecture audience was composed of *spoudaioi*, or “serious men” of moral virtue.

Christian Aristotle possessed no concept of the “moral” (which derives from a divine command conception of ethics),⁴ modern translators have some justification in calling the early virtues discussed in the *Nicomachean Ethics* “moral virtues” because they deal with what we now call “moral virtue.” Modern translators call the virtues Aristotle takes up in the later books of the *Nicomachean Ethics* “intellectual virtues,” in contrast to the moral. The real distinction in Aristotle’s ideas has to do with the conclusions or objects toward which thinking is directed: what we call intellectual virtues are the product of contemplation about truth, while moral virtues are the product of prudent decisions that necessarily are tied to action. Aristotle’s originality was in the way he made that distinction; users of the Greek language prior to Aristotle often used *theoria* (“contemplation”) and *phronesis* (“prudence”) interchangeably, but he made a concerted effort to use the terms consistently with only the one definition assigned.

The best and happiest life (*eudaimonia*), as Aristotle argues in Book X of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, simply must be characterized by the intellectual virtue of contemplation. There is a heated debate among modern Aristotle commentators about what else a happy life must involve, but it is clear from the text that contemplation is the defining trait of that life. The “inclusive end” interpretation of Aristotle on happiness is that the best life involves all the moral virtues in addition to the intellectual virtues. The “exclusive end” interpretation (or “dominant end” as the liberal John Rawls calls it) is that moral virtues need not be present in the best life for Aristotle as long as philosophical contemplation is present. De Alvarez, following Aquinas and many others, came down on the “inclusive end” side of this interpretive debate, and the justification he offered was the account in the *Eudemian Ethics*. Aristotle says there that the happy life involves wisdom, virtues, and external pleasures (*EE* 1.1.1214b1), not just wisdom.⁵

Something that neither Aristotle nor de Alvarez fully spelled out was how the moral virtues of justice and magnanimity fit back into

⁴ For the best arguments for this historical claim, see G.E.M. Anscombe, “Modern Moral Philosophy,” *Philosophy* 33, no. 124 (1958); and Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).

⁵ For more on this interpretive debate, see C.J. Wolfe, “Review of Aristotle’s *Eudemian Ethics* trans. Anthony Kenny,” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 87, Issue 1 (Winter 2013): 204–207.

Aristotle's final version of the happy life, the inclusive end conception of the good. Most likely, Aristotle did not spell this out because each of our lives is different and involves different talents and opportunities, requiring our own prudence to sort out which virtues to focus on in our lives. What I would suggest is that the virtue of justice is a moral virtue that would be found in every correct conception of the best life, but magnanimity is not. To spell out why, we must turn to the problems of justice and magnanimity that make it impossible to base a life solely around them. The specific problems inherent in magnanimity are insurmountable, but in the case of justice they can be surmounted.

First, consider justice. Justice, in its universal sense, is only perfect if the regime in which an individual lives has just laws. Very few regimes in real life are just, and only one regime is perfectly just—the best regime described in Aristotle's *Politics*, ruled by the *pan basileus* ("universal king"). In real life most cultures are a very mixed bag of good and bad elements, and for that reason Aristotle suggests that rulers should aim at more practicable regimes such as republics. De Alvarez commented on this point that "King John was the best Englishman in Shakespeare, but he is still a bastard." In other words, because King John ordered his social commitments according to imperfect laws, a bad character resulted. This problem inherent in universal justice would seem to indicate that magnanimity is the higher peak, because it is individually achievable and not truly a social moral virtue. Magnanimity would be possible for a private man to practice regardless of the laws of the city.

But the problem of basing an entire life around magnanimity is that it too depends on fortune in a way that is unstable. The magnanimous man depends on lesser souls to honor him; if they do not do their part, he can do nothing about it. And of course, in an imperfect city, the best are not honored as they should be. Another criticism that can be raised against the magnanimous life is that the magnanimous man is too stingy when it comes to honoring others. As such, the magnanimous man would need to be in a city where he did great things and no one else did; he could not be a *primus inter pares*. He thus would also have trouble cultivating the virtue of friendship. The historian Plutarch tells us that the very proud Roman soldier Coriolanus was not honored as he deserved to be, and was driven mad with rage against his

city as a result. When his mother Volumnia begged him to stop attacking his home city, she offered a criticism that applies to any who would aim at Aristotelian magnanimity:

[I]s it the characteristic of a great man to remember wrongs that have been done him, and not the part of a great and good man to remember benefits such as those that children receive from parents, and to requite them with honor and respect?⁶

Most human beings owe their parents an unpayable debt for procreating them and for the care they gave in raising them.⁷ Presumably, a magnanimous man would also ideally to be an orphan, to avoid the debts to parents. At best, Aristotle's account of magnanimity can only apply to a few years of adulthood, not to an entire lifespan. All in all, a truly magnanimous life would seem to be as rare if not more rare than a universal king. De Alvarez in his discussion of Cato the Elder highlighted the fact that he was "small-souled," seemingly the opposite of a great-souled man. At the same time, Cato had many virtues. Considering which life was happier—Cato's or Coriolanus'—helps to demonstrate the inherent problems of reconciling magnanimity with the rest of the moral virtues in a complete life.

Turning back to Aristotle's prescriptions for the happy life, we ought to say that both the pinnacles of justice and magnanimity need to be lopped off, but something of their roots must remain. In the case of magnanimity, a healthy degree of self-regard must be present in an individual to live well. The term "magnanimity" however is by definition superlative; for that reason, it must be dropped and replaced with something else (though perhaps Aquinas went a bit too far in substituting the term "humility"). In English we still do not have a very good word for the role of pride in the good life.

Unlike magnanimity, "justice" is an idea that can be retained in Aristotle's inclusive end conception of the best life, even though

⁶ Plutarch, *The Lives of Noble Grecians and Romans*. Translated by John Dryden, Revised by Arthur Hugh Clough, 1 Volume, Random House. New York, 1864.

⁷ For that reason, the recent philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre calls human beings the "dependent rational animal," thinking that qualifier important enough to add to Aristotle's definition.

universal justice is impracticable to plan for. Perhaps this is a reason why Aristotle chooses to analyze justice as a concept, to break the idea into its parts— commutative and distributive justice. Individuals can practice these in their private dealings, even if they do not live in the best regime with the best laws. They will have to look to the reasons belying the conventional laws to consider natural justice, and use their prudence to determine when unjust laws ought to be broken. Particular justice, then, can be retained as a constitutive part of the “inclusive end,” and is the highest of the moral virtues in that set.

In conclusion: justice is the victor of the twin peaks shootout. With de Alvarez’s help, we can see that the various passages of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* yield a picture of one large mountain defined by contemplation at every step, with an important lookout halfway up the mountain that shows us what is owed according to justice. The magnanimity promontory fell in a boulder slide and is no longer in the picture; in considering our ethical lives we focus on whatever it was less and less. But something of those rocks needs to be part of the mountain still too, when we think rightly.

Personally, I feel obliged to thank Professor De Alvarez for his years of outstanding teaching at the University of Dallas and for sharing his wisdom about ethics. He was not the mountain painter from the valley below that Machiavelli described himself as, but someone who painted from the mountain top of a good life.