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HUMILITY AS A MORAL EXCELLENCE IN
CLASSICAL AND MODERN VIRTUE ETHICS

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF ARTS
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY

BY

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ABSTRACT

This exploration of the virtue of accurate self-appraisal in great people as seen by some philosophers argues that a justified belief in one's fundamental superiority need not entail arrogant or egotistical behaviour towards others, but can harmonize with marked tendencies to respectfulness, generosity and understanding, although not with moral permissiveness. Even if accurate self-appraisal means thinking oneself basically better, this virtue can be consistent with social dispositions that contemporary egalitarians admire.

The proposal to interpret humility as accurate knowledge of one's merits comes from current writers who reject any merit in humility's more traditional associations of self-effacement. The new humility, they claim, can apply to those preeminent in any field, who keep their exceptional merits in perspective in spite of recognizing them. This self-restraint is attributed to an underlying assumption that all persons have equal worth or rights. The thesis disputes the adequacy of this account by noting that moral virtues themselves can be regarded as merits of unrivalled importance and that, with regard to their distribution, people are basically unequal. Consequently, humility in highly moral people might be better seen as a kind of

accurate self-estimate that balances an assumption (the more conscious, the better) of human equality with an equally crucial awareness that one's moral character and concomitant judgments are basically superior. The assumption of equality is claimed to be (1) fully compatible with the belief in personal superiority and (2) not the sine qua non of moral decency in social relations.

Aristotle's megaloopsuchos, or "great soul," and Spinoza's good person, while not egalitarians, know themselves morally preeminent, yet both possess many still admirable beliefs and traits. The same applies to one interpretation of Nietzsche's noble soul. These thinkers suggest the compatibility of self-preference with respectfulness towards all--sometimes especially towards the weakest--people. Kant's egalitarian view downplays any notion of personal superiority, but not convincingly. Aquinas suggests a tension between humility and moral competence in worldly dealings, but only because he tries to uphold the Aristotelian great soul while not jettisoning the recurrent Christian motif of self-denigration.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The basic argument of this essay is that while some individuals can properly regard themselves as morally superior to others, they can nonetheless treat the others in a fashion that is not only moral but exceptionally so, on the conventional associations of that phrase.

On the one hand, this claim may sound trivially obvious, in that it seems to reduce to the assertion that people who correctly believe they are especially moral are people who treat others in an especially moral way. On the other hand, when considered in relation to the current view of what is called humility in the philosophical literature, my claim becomes controversial. The prevalent view in the current literature is that having a morally exceptional character does not entitle one to see oneself as a fundamentally superior kind of person, indeed that one cannot properly believe oneself such under any

circumstances. Furthermore, it holds that someone who did regard his or her character as basically superior to others' in any sense would accordingly tend to treat other people with disrespect, arrogance, contempt, and so forth. My essay is disputing both parts of the prevalent view.

The bulk of my discussion is given to explicating and defending my claim by critical reference to a few selected and prominent figures in the history of philosophy: Aristotle, Aquinas, Spinoza, Kant, Nietzsche. I shall discuss morality largely from the theoretical perspective of virtue ethics (more or less in keeping with the ethical approach of the figures addressed, though less so with Kant's) and focus upon one posited virtue of character, accurate knowledge of one's personal merits relative to those in other people and having a fair sense of the implications of this knowledge. This is the character trait of key concern, given my basic contention. A number of contemporary writers broadly agree in proposing that humility or modesty be reinterpreted to name this disposition. Thus the title of this essay, "Humility as a Moral Excellence..." which, if one took "humility" more loosely (by not adopting the new formal definition), would no doubt seem very incongruous in relation to my thesis. As it is, the title probably still seems infelicitous. This is because I am endorsing only the formal conception of humility generally envisaged by the other writers, while

disputing what they mainly take to be the resulting content of the virtue. If one agreed that humility thus formally defined could never justly entail a sense of fundamental personal superiority, then the resemblance between humility on the new conception and the term as more popularly and traditionally understood would admittedly be stronger.

Most of the current authors, then, tend to the view that there are no kinds of personal distinctions, whether related to moral development or otherwise, which could justify any individual's believing that he or she is superior (or inferior) in some fundamental sense of personal worth to some other individual(s). In this group are, for example, Aaron Ben Ze'ev, Norvin Richards and Gabriele Taylor. They justify this in relation to the well-established modern moral principle which holds that all human beings matter equally. Accordingly, the authors contend that humility as they define it properly entails keeping whatever one's recognized personal distinctions and accomplishments "in perspective" by thinking that none of these personal merits warrant a superior attitude towards other people. Ironically, my position is essentially in agreement with this view if we interpret "a superior attitude" as arrogant, contemptuous and inconsiderate treatment of other people. One contemporary author who seems to incline to a position somewhat more like my own is Daniel Statman. Unlike the others, Statman appears willing

to posit the existence of fundamentally superior personal characters and is interested in the implications of such assessments for the social attitudes and behaviour of such individuals. Statman's way of applying the moral virtue of some kind of legitimate self-privileging in such cases (although he treats this question in a very tentative way only) is to suggest a rather sharp distinction between one's inner valuations and one's outward behaviour. I shall focus in depth on this special case of self-knowledge (true belief in the superiority of one's own moral character relative to others) in such a way that there is, I hope, a clearer sense of consistency between one's beliefs about oneself relative to others and the way one treats others than there is in what Statman begins to offer. My view is that it is because some people are morally superior to others that they are more inclined to treat people who are inferior in this vital evaluative respect in ways that are taken to be even more respectful and thoughtful than what the conventional, more minimal standards of morality would require. It must be added, however, that a crucial feature of the justified sense of moral superiority is that one is inclined to favour one's own moral judgments over those of morally relatively inferior persons; what I call humility in the excellent definitely cannot allow for complacency towards others' wrongdoing.

My claim is that such characteristics as benevolence,

respectfulness, and considerateness, particularly towards those whose attitudes are most likely to make such dispositions difficult to practice, are consistent with an inner conviction that this sort of behaviour is an expression of one's relatively high moral standards. At the same time, I want to hold that none of this is strictly incompatible with the very important principle of universal human equality, one which I accordingly maintain. This compatibility is defended on the grounds that the principle is an ideal one promoting more moral treatment of people which has always coexisted with the empirical awareness that some people are in practice more moral than others. Moral treatment of people cannot mean a failure to discriminate between a person who is habitually morally decent and one who is the opposite. Once one acknowledges the quite familiar occurrence of such contrasting types of people at the same time as one accepts that moral qualities and accomplishments have great human value, it becomes difficult to dismiss the profound significance of comprehensive inequalities of personal moral character. Presumably the a priori intuition of equality is one which helps optimize everyone's opportunities to become morally well-developed by discouraging each agent from supposing that whatever moral deficiencies are found in individuals, social classes, etc., are reflections of "natural" and incorrigible failings, rather than to a significant degree the product of

circumstances which more egalitarian social arrangements as well as a measure of personal compassion can help to overcome, though not eliminate.

As a basic objection to the rationale of my whole essay, one might argue that the importance of comparative estimates of personal character can be overdrawn, and hence reflection on the notion of one's own exceptional worth is a red herring. This point will receive little attention in the body of my discussion, but because its cogency would undermine the meaningfulness and relevance of the whole essay, I briefly discuss it at once.

One form the objection might take would be to claim that although contrasts in the fundamental realized moral worth of different individuals' characters can be drawn, this is an inadequate basis for supposing that moral merits are the most important kind of personal merits (apart from the wholly independent but equally fundamental worth of persons as human beings); instead, moral merits are just one more important kind of personal attribute. It would follow that the correct perception of one's relative moral superiority is not an adequate basis for regarding oneself as a relatively superior human being in any sense.

To discuss this point adequately it would be necessary to address questions such as how to weigh actions of immense social benefit against the most despicable tendencies of personal character (since the skeptic can object that some

agents responsible for the former may also possess the latter features). Rather than trying to tackle this intractable problem, I only go so far as to claim that there is a somewhat plausible case for saying that moral qualities are the most valuable kind of personal qualities, and that a convincing case has not been made that the consequentialist criteria of goodness tend to be at odds with the aretaic ones.

A second variant of the objection would be that while comprehensive contrasts of moral character are legitimate in principle, they are not very relevant in most practical circumstances, perhaps because one cannot be an unbiased judge of one's own moral character relative to others'. Alternatively, perhaps it is undesirable to make fundamental character comparisons in the course of making moral judgments even if it is possible to do so.

The notion of individuals of exemplary goodness who are socially identifiable as such is one which is quite at home in some versions of virtue ethics, although the idea of one's awareness of one's own exemplary nature is perhaps somewhat more controversial.¹ One should concede that it is often morally feasible to assess people's beliefs and actions without giving much thought to the fundamental and relative level of moral attainment in one individual as

¹See the Appendix, sections 3.13-14, for a more detailed discussion of criticisms of virtue ethics' notion of a morally paradigmatic individual.

against another. However, I would also maintain that much moral assessment of others' conduct is closely tied to judgments about the basic character dispositions one is dealing with in the observed person, and, further, that such judgments at least implicitly favour or disfavour the traits discerned in that person in relation to one's own corresponding traits. The second part of this claim is probably less persuasive than the first.

It is not my contention that every specific moral judgment made about an individual should focus only upon the underlying habits or dispositions of character and corresponding sets of assumptions in that individual about the relative importance of different goods, to all of which the specific actions of the agent in question are somehow supposed to refer. Although the aretaic (virtue) conception of ethics places a heavy emphasis on these kinds of broad features of personal character as ways of interpreting and evaluating specific actions, it also acknowledges that moral characters are not rigidly fixed and that one's actions and experiences can in fact influence one's more basic and comprehensive dispositions and beliefs. Therefore it would be a mistake to try to interpret every observation of another person according to some schema of that person's character which, once established, will be the basis for judgment of all his or her future actions. Some attentiveness to evaluation of actions in themselves apart

from evaluation contingent upon a well-established evaluative conception of the particular agent is therefore proper.

Nonetheless, it would presumably be unrealistic and unwise to try to bracket any consideration of overall personal character in trying to pass moral judgment on an agent's actions. This is supported by the view that actions cannot even be understood as actions without the agent having a certain understanding of his or her predicament and having intentions and desires by reference to which the agent would explain his or her own action. Similarly, moral assessment of another person's actions depends upon a moral assessment of the beliefs and desires one infers about the person he or she is scrutinizing, and such evaluations are closely tied to at least implicit beliefs about whether the agent is being courageous, prudent, trustworthy, even basically moral, or the contraries. In other words, moral assessment of people's actions is necessarily tied to moral assessment of people in the broadest sense, even though such assessment is necessarily an imprecise and open-ended process.

However, the objector can continue, is it not possible to disapprove of another's act (interpreted as quite clearly manifesting some habitual and immoral disposition) without making a corresponding judgment about one's own relevant disposition being better, the same, or even worse in moral

tenor? It seems there is no obvious reason why a person having some well-established vice or vices could not recognize the same in another, or even discern different sorts of vices than one's own in another. A could be a good judge of B's failings as could B of A's even though neither one judges herself accurately.

Again to respond, one might reasonably suppose that basic approval or disapproval of another person's acts is more likely to be morally clear-sighted and cogent where the observer has a well-developed sense of what these virtues are about, one that is based on a tendency to adhere to them oneself. This points to a rationalist perspective on ethics in which being relatively good and being relatively knowledgeable about what is good naturally tend to coincide. One can also appeal to the familiar problem of having to promptly and routinely reach action-guiding conclusions about the rightness or wrongness of people's beliefs or actions when the examinable evidence does not appear to offer compelling support for either a favourable or an unfavourable judgment. For example, if one's own general sense of what a fairly well-known person intends to do or did is that the action is deplorable, yet the agent under scrutiny rejects this moral estimate on the basis of an entirely different interpretation of the idea or deed, then I would suggest that it is not realistic to think one can come to decisively reject the agent's self-interpretation as

either a self-deception or a calculated distortion unless this rejection is partly arrived at on the basis of a broader character judgment: the agent being assessed is interpreted in the uncharitable way if by and large he is taken to be the sort of person who has the relevant vices, including bad motives, or at least who tends to be self-deceived even if well intentioned. One might claim that people with the relevant vices themselves also tend to impute bad inclinations and aims to everyone, or at least more often and to more people than is fair. If so, "moral judgment" of others for them is not a difficult task. What I mean to suggest is that a sense of the frequent difficulty of this task is one necessary condition of being a moral person, and that habitual veracity in one's identification of others' vices perhaps also tends to depend on being a moral person oneself. The very tentative fashion in which these claims are made is meant to acknowledge that these issues have not been treated adequately, while hopefully these remarks at least begin to suggest the practical importance of comprehensive comparisons of personal character.

Let me conclude this introduction with a sketch of the structure and function of the essay's components. The first and larger part of Chapter Two surveys the recent discussion of humility that undergirds the revisionist conception of the quality I employ throughout the thesis. Essentially

following the text of my article "The Paradox of Moral Humility" (1996),² this chapter section also draws attention to the puzzling quality of humility thus understood in morally exceptional individuals: if we take the equal worth of all human beings to be a central moral truth, then how does this conviction sit with the equally true belief in the exceptionally virtuous that their characters have superior value to those of many or even most? I shall claim that these beliefs can coexist, and I go on to suggest in the second section of the chapter that a belief in one's fundamental superiority of character can be fully consistent with and indeed complementary to exceptionally moral and respectful treatment of others. That is, non-arrogant behaviour can be the superior person's manifestation of her moral understanding rather than simply being a pose adopted for the sake of smoothing social intercourse, a pose that is at bottom at odds with her inner views of what she really owes to lesser people.

The following chapters largely elaborate and defend this second claim by illustrative reference to the moral views of a few major but quite disparate historical philosophers, in chronological sequence: Aristotle, Aquinas, Spinoza, Kant, Nietzsche.

It is evident from this choice of names that we are

²Stephen Hare, "The Paradox of Moral Humility," American Philosophical Quarterly 33 (1996): 235-41.

sometimes dealing with radically different and incompatible perspectives on the character of moral goodness. I have chosen to discuss the topic partially by reference to these figures for a number of reasons. All of these philosophers have great prestige in the European tradition and address humility (either on its conventional associations or in terms of something like my conception of it) either in passing or at some length. Yet little attention is afforded to their views of humility or of related virtues among contemporary commentators, while the present-day literature on humility seen from a non-historical viewpoint (as discussed in Chapter Two) is also quite brief. These earlier philosophers hence offer a useful resource for discussion of the topic. Because these historical writers do have such divergent theoretical premises, any support the writers lend to my thesis is not likely to be on the basis of assumptions common to them that I fail to examine. In fact, while I think Aristotle and Spinoza can be shown to be in quite different ways in agreement with my basic contention, the opposite is true of Kant, although the way in which he would appear to oppose my view may inadvertently lend plausibility to it as well. Somewhat like Kant's case, Aquinas' perspective on Christian humility involves a tension between two positions that may help us to gain a clearer view of what is and what is not feasible in a revisionist understanding of humility as a virtue, even

though Aquinas shows little interest in focussing upon the viewpoint of exceptionally good human characters.

I must emphasize at the outset that, any appearances to the contrary, my purpose is neither to engage in a project of scholarship that can persuasively defend a certain interpretation of each philosopher's moral conception, nor to offer some argument favouring one philosopher's understanding of ethics over another's. Rather, these chapters attempt to offer a basic exposition of some relevant themes in these thinkers. These expositions naturally turn on interpretative judgments, but my interpretations are hopefully never so unorthodox and tendentious as to appear self-serving in relation to the thesis. My belief is that these authors do help lend plausibility to the overall thesis in a number of quite different, indeed independent, ways. Undoubtedly there are other, additional historical philosophers that might have been put to the service of the discussion, but space makes a selective approach necessary. On the other hand, if we had restricted the discussion to an even smaller number of moral thinkers, perhaps the thesis would seem less plausible because of the lesser extent of conductive support.

Here, then, is a brief synopsis of each of the chapters subsequent to my discussion of the contemporary literature and how my conclusions relate to the thesis as a whole. Chapter Three is solely devoted to an extensive discussion

of Aristotle's moral virtue of greatness of soul. This emphasis is in keeping with the fact that Aristotle's virtue, on one interpretation, conforms very closely to the special instance of what I call humility in morally exceptional people. The chapter argues that the great soul's behaviour and beliefs lack arrogance in any conventionally plausible sense of that trait, unless one begs the question by presupposing that any agent who thinks himself fundamentally superior to most human beings is ipso facto arrogant. The argued absence of arrogance in the great soul is fully consistent both with his moral views and with his understanding of his own excellence.

A recurrent consideration in these chapters is the role and implications of the notion of the equal worth of all human beings. Having claimed in Chapter Two that one can hold that all people have equal worth and also hold that some people have characters of basically superior worth to some others, I am free (if this claim is coherent) to speculate about the compatibility of any moral philosopher's framework with a principle of universal equality, even where no such principle is ever addressed. For example, Aristotle is clearly not an avowedly egalitarian philosopher, but I shall suggest that what is cogent in his ethical reflection is not radically inconsistent with egalitarianism.

Chapter Four (on "Christian humility") is something of

a digression in that the philosopher it attends to the most, St. Thomas Aquinas, gives minimal emphasis to the legitimacy of a notion of anyone's sense of fundamental superiority of character. My original justification for the chapter's focus on Christian humility was that the Christian faith has surely had a strong influence on our conventional sense of humility, particularly with regard to the undertones of self-denigration and social submissiveness that are often attributed to the trait. I try to show that the apparent tension between Christian charity and justice is only a manageable one if self-abasement only pertains to one's notion of his or her relationship to the supreme being; that is, a predisposition to submissiveness before other people (understood as permissiveness towards their wrongdoing) is inconsistent with a coherent Christian moral doctrine. As a result, the only plausible interpretation of Christian humility understood with reference to social relationships is of an imaginative and sympathetic considerateness and respectfulness towards all people that nonetheless takes into account their manifest, particular failings and reacts to these as necessary. This interpretation is at least suggestive of the content of what we are calling moral humility (though not of its dimension of the sense of self-superiority in exceptional people). Christian or at least Thomistic humility finally seems very relevant to my basic thesis in at least one sense: the properly Christian social

attitude involves both considerate respect for the wellbeing of all people and at the same time a willingness to resist immoral conduct in others. The combination of these two sorts of features is arguably at one with a pattern we find in the other major moral philosophers examined.

Chapter Five consists of a necessarily more compressed discussion of three further philosophers, Spinoza, Kant, and Nietzsche. Here the notion of equality, along with that of one's basically superior character, returns. I shall argue that although Kant alone clearly upholds the ideal of equality, his tendency to downplay the notion of realized personal relative moral superiority is not entirely satisfactory, and my critique helps to explicate the view that universal equality of human beings both can and should be understood as compatible with unequal worth of certain moral characters. Spinoza and Nietzsche agree in strongly affirming great disparities in the degree of excellence of different kinds of personal character and in closely tying excellence to knowledge. Both the content and the corresponding social expression of what we are calling moral humility seem to be regarded as very important virtues of character in both these writers. Once again, I shall contend that it is plausible to interpret these writers as upholding the view that those who consider themselves more valuable as individuals will precisely because of their greater merits treat lesser people in ways that are more

sensitive to their positive worth as human beings than are the ways people more routinely treat one another.

Furthermore, those who justifiably think themselves superior to most treat lesser people in a more respectful fashion than do people who enjoy less fundamental kinds of superiority, who tend to condescend towards people with the correspondingly more trivial deficiencies.³

The conclusion summarizes the findings of these investigations by reference to the two questions of (1) the relationship between an accurate sense of one's superiority and one's treatment of other people and (2) the relationship between an ideal of equality and the sense of personal moral superiority. Finally, as the whole essay discusses ethical questions using the framework of character virtues, I have discussed the nature of virtue ethics and its possible relationship to other theoretical ethical frameworks in an appendix. Some of the positions I take in the essay that are subject to dispute wholly within the field of virtue ethics are further explicated and defended by discussion in the appendix, as occasionally indicated by references to it

³I am thinking here of disparities in material wealth, formal education, calculative intelligence, and so forth. All of these sorts of goods can probably be shown to be importantly relevant to one's moral development and attainments, but people who take such factors to be sufficient bases for believing some people are basically of inferior or superior personal merit to others would in my view thereby manifest an ignorance of personal qualities which are in reality more important and decisive than any of these kinds of features: qualities of moral character, which are different from although in various ways relatable to all of these features.

in footnotes.

CHAPTER TWO

HUMILITY AS A MORAL VIRTUE: CONTEMPORARY VIEWS

2.1 The Paradox of Egalitarians Who Know They Are Superior

Until very recently, modern virtue ethics in the secular tradition was largely indifferent or even hostile to the character disposition of humility. The term for many denotes low self-regard or meekness, and it is hard to see what is beneficial to oneself or society as a whole in a tendency to dismiss whatever strengths one does have, especially if this is coupled with permissiveness towards contemptuous treatment at the hands of others. Of course, that such a quality is desirable may follow from theological assumptions about the existence of an omnipotent Creator and a hidden meaning in one's mortal existence. But without this sort of ground, humility thus understood seems at best a saving grace of the mediocre and at worst an excuse for passivity towards human wrongs.

A number of promising new attempts to give a more positive and central role to humility as a secular virtue

reinterpret it as a quality of making accurate self-assessments, often with special emphasis on non-overestimation (as opposed to underestimation) of one's merits.¹ So regarded, humility becomes an excellence of character within anyone's reach but one that is especially fitting to the most accomplished and admired persons, in that they have the greatest temptation (wrongly) to think themselves superior to most because of their undeniable special personal gifts or distinctions. The way these proposals support the claim that it is proper not to overemphasize one's merits is by endorsing some explicit or implicit moral principle of basic equality of worth among persons.² This may be based on the universality of moral reason in a Kantian sense and the notion of equal rights for all (Statman), on the most basic, shared features of lived experience (Ben Ze'ev), or simply given as an implicit axiom

¹1. Norvin Richards, "Is Humility a Virtue?" American Philosophical Quarterly, 25 (1988): 253-59; idem, Humility (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992); Owen Flanagan, "Virtue and Ignorance," Journal of Philosophy, 86 (1989): 420-8; Daniel Statman, "Modesty, Pride and Realistic Self-Assessment," Philosophical Quarterly, 42 (1992): 420-38; Aaron Ben Ze'ev, "The Virtue of Modesty," American Philosophical Quarterly, 30 (1993): 235-46; Nancy Snow, "Humility," Journal of Value Inquiry 29 (1995): 203-16.

²Another writer who implicitly holds this kind of principle and employs a contrast between specific attainments and one's overall worth as a human being is Gabriele Taylor (Pride, Shame and Guilt: Emotions of Self-Assessment (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 12ff). It is unclear whether Taylor would endorse the formal definition of humility, as she seems to think that a humble person could not believe she had special gifts. Perhaps she endorses the definition if the virtue is renamed "proper pride."

(Richards, Taylor). In whatever specific ways someone excels, if she grasps that her accomplishment makes no fundamental difference to her moral worth as a human being, then she will be right in not thinking that her assets warrant "putting on airs" or claiming different fundamental rights or status from that held by the many. The feature of non-overestimation of one's merits is an aspect of the reconception of humility that makes it at least suggestive of the self-effacement more traditionally associated with the trait.³

The difficulty with this revised definition of the general notion of humility is that in one substitution instance it suggests a paradox. In the case of most kinds of achievements--running, painting, amassing a fortune, etc.--it makes sense. But consider a special kind of achievement, viz, moral achievement itself. Moral ability and attainment is certainly an admirable quality that admits of wide variation among individuals. Those people who accurately regard themselves to have exceptionally high

³To avoid confusion it should be noted early on that not all of these writers agree to use the term "humility" to name the disposition we are discussing. Ben Ze'ev argues that "modesty" is the more appropriate term while Statman takes modesty and humility as more or less interchangeable. Flanagan and Driver are both discussing what they call modesty. Only Richards believes that "humility" is more felicitous. Rather than debate fine linguistic points I am assuming that the two terms are close enough in their conventional associations that one can stand for both, although perhaps I would argue the contrary of Ben Ze'ev's claim on linguistic grounds, if forced to take a position on which word is more appropriate to the disposition in question.

moral concern and competence will now have to be acknowledged as a subclass of the humble. Perhaps, for example, they are people who show an outstanding level of adherence to the principle that all people have equal moral worth. Whatever form or forms their exceptional moral development takes, such people of humility, in accordance with the new conception of humility, will strongly affirm the equal moral worth of all, in spite of, indeed especially, knowing themselves morally superior to most. Yet it would seem there is some sense in which people who know they are morally superior cannot also believe that they are everyone else's moral equal. Conversely, it is difficult to see how people who are "humble" (even on the revised conception) could believe, even rightly, that they are morally superior.

This potential paradox is schematically demonstrated as follows. Consider the subject S, who excels in all the virtues (including, ex hypothesi, humility) and knows it. Let M stand for the moral principle that all people have equal moral worth, regardless of their special abilities and distinctions, which vary markedly among individuals. Now for S as for any person,

1. S is humble only if S adheres to M.

However,

2. Moral ability and distinction, which consists in the degree to which one adheres to basic moral principles such

as M, varies markedly among individuals.

3. Those people who have a markedly higher level of moral ability and achievement than most are properly described as morally superior to most.

Therefore,

4. S is morally superior to most.

Therefore,

5. In believing M, in being humble, and in understanding the extent of her own moral achievements, S believes that

5A. All people have equal moral worth; and

5B. S is morally superior to most.

The argument appears to be valid. If S knows he has exceptionally high moral attainments and is thus in some sense morally superior, then if being morally competent and especially if being humble entails that one knows M, S must believe both that he is morally superior and that M (all people have equal moral worth etc.) Are 5A and 5B mutually compatible? If not, then the modern conception of humility would seem to lead directly to a contradiction, to be inherently paradoxical.

Even if in the end we accept the conclusion as one that is not an outright contradiction, there will be startling practical implications. In spite of the strong element of egalitarianism intrinsic to the kind of humility defended by Richards, Ben Ze'ev and Statman, some of the people these authors wish to call virtuously humble will be justified in thinking that their actions are morally superior to others' deeds and that their judgments of what is admirable and

deplorable, right and wrong are inherently more trustworthy than most others' judgments. Moral goodness is a very important kind of personal merit. If (as Richards et al. believe) the moral worth of persons somehow transcends all other kinds of personal worth--remember that this is part of what is taken to be the very basis of humility, as well as a crucial element of morality--then humble people's superior sense of what matters might well lead them to regard themselves as constituting a sort of human elite, as being "first among equals." In fact, the humble will tend to have an inner contempt for the valuations of many people, to be indifferent to the approval or disapproval of the average person. Are we prepared to call these contemptuous elitists humble? If not, we must find how the argument goes wrong. Perhaps the new definition of humility is simply a non-starter because it leads incoherently to a paradox, or perhaps if we accept the new definition of humility we must deny that humility is a virtue.

These difficulties with the new definition of humility as accurate specific and overall self-appraisal relative to others have apparently been overlooked by most of the writers who proposed it. Interestingly enough, the sorts of merits and attainments discussed by the defenders of this new humility are for the most part not moral attainments. Rather the examples mostly raised are of other kinds: intellectual (philosophical writing), physical (competitive

running, mountaineering) and so forth.'

2.1.1 Possible Solutions to the Paradox

In a way this oversight is unsurprising. There is a tendency that owes much to Christianity in modern culture to resist viewing moral goodness as something that can be very self-conscious; virtue ethics as a whole sometimes comes under attack on the grounds that it necessarily entails a narcissistic, self-image-oriented kind of ethical awareness.⁵ On this critical view, virtue ethics can only be salvaged if one does not act virtuously for the sake of being virtuous but rather out of an impartial love for the good. This prescription may be easier to follow if one is not even conscious that one's behavior is relatively good, i.e., better than that of many other people. (We might link this seeming demand for the maintenance of ignorance in

'Flanagan uses the example of "the world's fastest runner" (425); Ben Ze'ev refers in a general way to the "professional work" of highly accomplished people (237); Statman is prepared to speak cryptically of "the true superiority of the agent" (434), perhaps hinting at the notion of comparative judgments of overall personal character, even though he insists that this superiority does not entail that one is "superior in moral status too"; Richards reflects on one's "scaling a difficult mountain" and on one's ability "to write something interesting" in a discipline such as philosophy (254; 256).

⁵See Christopher Cordner, "Aristotelian Virtue and Its Limitations," Philosophy 69 (1991): 291-316; Raimond Gaita, Good and Evil: An Absolute Conception (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan, 1991), Ch. 6. For a possible reply to this sort of criticism, see Michael Stocker's seminal paper, "The Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theories," Journal of Philosophy, 73 (1976): 453-66. This issue is also addressed in the appendix, section 3.14.

moral self-appraisal with virtuous humility on its more traditional associations of self-effacement regardless of one's gifts.) Those sympathetic to this view would be among those who could reject the coherence of my supposition that S knows she excels in the moral virtues, and by the same token they would thereby deny propositions 4 and 5B.⁶

This charge could be countered in at least two ways. One is that it misrepresents virtue ethics to think the virtuous agent pursues virtue only or even primarily in order to shine among her peers; particularly once she has attained genuinely virtuous dispositions, doing what is good should be second nature to her. Another reply more neutral to the issue of virtue theory would be that, Christian influences notwithstanding, moral philosophy whether aretaic, utilitarian, deontological or contractarian has sought for a rationally accessible account of good conduct in the belief that greater moral understanding might facilitate moral improvement in the world. Implicit in the rationalist view of ethics is the assumption that one can in theory recognize the relative development of one's own moral

⁶Julia Driver proposes that the virtue she calls "modesty" consist in underrating one's merits of whatever kind--including denying this virtue in oneself--partly out of the aversion to ethical narcissism and partly because the claim that "I am modest" appears self-defeating. Yet Driver's attempt to overcome what she sees as the incoherence of attributing to oneself humility pays a high price in undermining the broader assumption that goodness is accessible to knowledge. See Driver's "The Virtues of Ignorance," Journal of Philosophy 86 (1989): 373-84. Flanagan's paper (Ibid.) is a critique of Driver's.

faculties.

A second and perhaps more potent way of rejecting the background belief of S is to deny that moral merit is something that admits of clear ranking or perfectibility. Perhaps at best a person can attain a level of reasonable moral competence, so the notion of a "moral elite" is fictitious. Moral truths may be inherently lacking in precision, so that it is impossible for anyone to achieve goodness except to a moderate degree. This again would dispose of the argument; there could be no subject S as defined earlier, and while we could probably still endorse premise 2, premise 3 (and as a result propositions 4 and 5) would no longer make sense. In a discussion of a character virtue, however, the notion that some people lack the virtues others possess is obviously implicit, whether we speak of humility or (less controversially at the moment) courage, justice, temperateness, etc. In any extra-aretaic approach to ethics, one must reasonably concede that some people are much more aware of and concerned about what they think it means to be moral than are others. While almost everyone agrees that it is often difficult to know what is morally best to do, so that it may be impossible to exceed a modest level of moral competence, the mere fact that one consistently reaches that level is a significant basis for distinction, since many fall abysmally short of it much of

the time.'

What of the definition of humility itself? An observer could endorse M but nonetheless reject premise 1. Perhaps being humble, even for the unusually gifted, consists in regarding others as for some reason fundamentally superior to oneself rather than as one's equals. Clearly, the humble person herself would then be unable to endorse M consistently, but perhaps humility is not a virtue and depends upon one's ignorance of a fundamental, impersonal moral principle or upon one's irrationality. Or perhaps humility is not a disposition to compare oneself with others at all, but rather a disposition to take a very modest view of oneself simply in relation to some transcendent and super-personal standard, such as God or some other ideal.

As suggested at the outset, if we opt for the more traditional view of humility as self-effacement in relation to one's fellows, it is hard to see what good comes of the character trait. One likely benefit is that those lacking a tendency to self-effacement may find a salve for their greater need for self-affirmation and for their correspondingly greater tendency to be jealous of others who are thought to possess merits they suspect themselves to lack. (The grounds for the suspicion in the non-humble would have to be straightforwardly epistemic rather than

⁷See the appendix, section 3.8, for a longer discussion of this point.

based on a prima facie inclination to underrate oneself, even though the humility of others would in fact help lead the non-humble to overrate themselves.) But humility's benefit of smoothing social relations would surely then be cancelled out by its tendency to contribute to self-deception generally and in particular to cause those of the humble who were more gifted to waste their strengths through neglect.

The second of the alternative definitions of humility above does not seem to avoid the difficulties that the new conception of the virtue raised at the outset was meant to overcome. It is conceivable that a non-comparative kind of humility could help the gifted further to perfect their strengths by remaining dissatisfied with their attained results.⁹ Setting a higher moral standard for oneself than do others for themselves might lead one to manifest what is conventionally regarded as an outwardly humble attitude. All the same, we would still be tempted to perceive a persistent dimension of wilful ignorance in the "humble," where "humble" is taken to mean being outwardly modest because one is perpetually dissatisfied with one's attainments, even though they are far beyond those of most other people. Either I know my standards are higher than yours or I do not. If I do, then I cannot fairly subject

⁹See Jay Newman's "Humility and Self-Realization," Journal of Value Inquiry 16 (1982): 275-85, for a discussion of good and bad possibilities in tending to focus on one's imperfections.

myself to your will where we disagree on important questions. If I do not, then what is the epistemic basis for my atypically pronounced moral convictions? In the former case, humility would still result in violation of others' values when necessary, so an important element of paradox would remain.

It is worth mentioning that there is some sort of historical ground for the view that a humility having primary reference to a superpersonal ideal still tends to yield in deference to one's fellows. In Christianity the basis for one's low self-estimate is one's sense of God's infinite powers, yet in practice piety can result (at least on the view of some theological writers) in subjection to others as well. Even if the basis for one's relatively marked humility were only a sense of one's (in this case, moral) shortcomings relative to one's own ideal, this humility might well conduce to subjection by others who had set no such exalted standards for themselves.

One could more simply deny humility virtue status without specifying any content to it at all; this would certainly pre-empt the argument. S would then not necessarily be humble (perhaps would necessarily not be so). Premise 1 would be rejected, so proposition 5 would not follow from 2, 3 and 4. But then why is it, as Richards says, that we "find it especially admirable" when the most

accomplished people are humble, whatever "humble" means?' And if humility is a true virtus (strength) or arete (excellence), surely it should be applicable to the most admirable human beings, including the morally most admirable, even more than to people in general.

Yet another way out of the paradox might be to try to take issue only with M, the principle that all people have equal moral worth, by instead claiming that those people who have outstanding capacities have more worth as human beings than those who on the whole or completely lack them.

Clearly, one cannot "only" reject M, because if M falls then so does the reconception of humility. By this route, a genuinely "humble" person of the sort whose exceptional merits were moral (or whatever) would simply conclude on the basis of them that she had superior worth as a person. The only remaining paradox in "humility" thus understood would be that the disposition would then seem even more antithetical to its traditional conception in that there would be no surviving element of non-overestimation of one's attributes. Most who were troubled by the implications of the originally proposed reconception of humility would be even more reluctant to name this disposition "humility." In any case, this move is unlikely to be acceptable to most in the present age. Although Aristotle could be regarded as the father of virtue ethics and Aristotle quite clearly

⁹Richards, "Is Humility a Virtue?" 253.

fails to uphold M, moral egalitarianism has been quite firmly entrenched in our understanding of ethics since the Enlightenment. (It too is anticipated by the Christian doctrine of the equality of all people before God, which may lead some to suspect an incoherence in certain versions of Christian humility.)

I think there is a more satisfying way to dispel the appearance of a contradiction in proposition 5, although this does not remove the surprising consequences of the special instance of humility at issue (i.e., known moral excellence). Let us for a moment look more closely at the way in which the writers on humility justify M. Ben Ze'ev articulates his view of the relationship between moral and extra-moral value by writing that humility is "an evaluative attitude rather than an epistemic state," an evaluation which is "basically noncomputational" in that "the genuine worth" of human beings is "different from what is regarded in a society to be their merits and flaws."¹⁰ One has the sense that he means the respect we feel is in complete detachment from any strengths or weaknesses, moral or otherwise, and that it would not be appropriate to try to weigh people's worth as human beings against their worth as philosophers, mountain climbers or even, presumably, exemplars of virtue or decadence. Ben Ze'ev supports the claim that everyone has the same genuine moral worth with

¹⁰Ben Ze'ev, 237.

reference to the fundamental phenomena of human existence shared by all, such as mortality. Similarly, Statman observes that all people belong to the same moral community and describes "the true belief in the ultimate equality of human beings as ends in themselves...in their having the same moral rights."¹¹ These sorts of features of moral worth do seem to be independent of one's ability to write great philosophy or outrun everyone else. Moral worth of persons and other kinds of individual merit seem to be radically separable. If so, is it plausible to say that M is also wholly independent of variable personal capacities and assumptions that have a vital bearing on one's general moral awareness and practice?

Whatever its bearing on the truth of M, there does seem to be a spectrum in the measure of different people's proficiency at conduct consistent with the posited principle that everyone has equal moral worth. Of course, immoral behaviour does not falsify moral principles; rather, they are the very ground of characterizing behaviour as immoral. The degree of one's adherence to M and other moral principles serves as the basis of the variability of one's moral proficiency and accomplishments. Somehow, one's

¹¹Statman, 434. Statman clarifies his view of the relation between the moral principle of equality and morally superior individuals by saying that "the excellent person justifiably sees himself as superior--morally superior too--to other human beings....[but as a modest (humble) person he] does not think his superiority grants him extra moral rights" (in personal correspondence with author, 22 July 1996).

degree of adherence to moral principles must find recognition in the way one measures personal worth as it relates to moral identity.

Rather than rejecting M, I think the best way to deal with the paradox of moral humility is to make some sort of distinction between two related but separable features of one's moral thought and practice, which might be distinguished as "one's moral worth as a person" (that is, M) and a variable kind of merit, "one's worth as a moral person." Clearly it would be dangerous to lack an unconditional respect for other agents qua human beings that is somehow independent of their demonstrated level of moral attainment. All people are morally fallible, and faithless treatment of others on the basis of their past errors often tends to worsen the others' conduct. This raises the spectre of a slippery slope into collective contempt for persons. A substantial emphasis on charitability, "the benefit of the doubt" and so forth, is likely necessary to make life bearable. In more theoretical terms, the psychopathic or contract killer's fitness to be a full member of the moral community of persons-as-ends may be purely potential, whereas most people's everyday conduct can be judged as showing some higher but variable degree of progress towards ideal moral agency. But in either case, both the casual murderer and the morally typical agent might share in some indefeasible identity as persons who are

therefore to be treated in such ways as recognize their common, fixed attribute of potentiality for fully moral agency. To deny this principle of universal equality on the basis of dramatic discrepancies in realized moral merit would be a category mistake, a point that sometimes seems less clear in the writers on humility than perhaps it should be.

Statman confesses that his own account of humility is influenced by Aristotle's great soul (the megalopsuchos of the Nicomachean Ethics IV.3).¹² My own suggestion that moral humility is a special instance of the new humility also owes a great deal to Aristotle. In a central respect, the great soul illustrates precisely this special case of humility, accurate assessment of one's own relative moral superiority. Commentators often react with distaste to the great soul, seeing him as inwardly arrogant and contemptibly

¹²Statman, p. 429n27 and ff. Statman raises this figure while finding fault with Richards' aspiration that the highly accomplished retain a moderate view of their attainments. Statman apparently thinks that Richards does not indicate clearly enough that he assumes all people do have equal worth. Without some such assumption, Statman reasons, it will be impossible to justify having a limited view of one's attainments, unless one supposes that human doings in general are quite insignificant. Statman's implication here seems to be that the megalopsuchos' sense of his superiority is the reasonable response to one's correct sense of one's exceptional merits as a human being, in the absence of any counterbalancing principle. Perhaps it is significant that the great soul does actually show what Statman calls humility as a "behavioral disposition" (respectfulness and considerateness of others). The great soul tends to "render aid willingly" and "be courteous to those of moderate station" (1124b18-20, Rackham trans.). In spite of not affirming M, Aristotle's sense of excellence of character shows some sympathy to charitability.

self-satisfied. What he especially seems to lack is humility in its conventionally understood, Christian-influenced sense of very moderate self-regard. I would venture to guess that what would likely make Richards, Ben Ze'ev, Taylor and Snow reluctant to concede that he fits their description of "humble" or "modest" is not so much his indifference to M as his willingness to address honestly the fact of what I called the variable worth of moral persons. In addition, the great soul holds that moral merit is simply the most important kind of personal merit. He "claims what he deserves," and for him true honour is "the prize of virtue."¹³ The second assumption, that moral goodness is the most important kind of personal merit, is one that the contemporary defenders of humility might still endorse.

2.2 How Humility Might Work in the Morally Excellent

So far I have drawn attention to the puzzling occurrence of agents who both have exceptionally good moral characters and are cognizant of this fact without this in any way compromising their morally exemplary nature. These agents must be said to embody a certain species of the virtue of humility, if that virtue is defined as accurate knowledge of one's merits relative to those in other people and having a proper sense of how this awareness should affect one's outlook on the world. One might next inquire

¹³Nicomachean Ethics 1123b34-24b20.

as to what this self-understanding in such people is like. If the content of moral goodness is left indeterminate, of course, then the juxtaposition of a moral attitude towards others and an exceptionally high regard for oneself is not obviously contradictory. In subsequent chapters we shall examine a few conceptions of moral goodness in some noted historical philosophers who also take an interest in this question of comparative moral self-assessment and see if the two features can cohere within the frameworks of their moral perspectives. In the meantime, I begin to address this question by reference to Daniel Statman's already raised paper.

As remarked above, Statman is the only one of the contemporary authors addressed (apart from myself) who accepts the legitimacy on some level of the notion of fundamentally superior human beings who, on my view and perhaps also on his, coincide with the most morally virtuous people. When Statman writes of "genuinely worthy" people and of an individual being "epistemically justified in believing one is of high merit," he does not have in mind some specific and limited kind of merit which would bestow a correspondingly specific and limited kind of self-esteem.¹⁴ Rather, Statman is thinking of people as having more or less merits than one another overall. We also saw earlier that Statman explicitly endorses an assumption of fundamental

¹⁴Statman, 433; 434.

human equality, and offers a Kantian-sounding justification for it. How does he go about describing the way in which one's belief in the equal worth of all coexists with one's belief that some people are fundamentally better or worse than others? To answer this we must follow Statman's reasoning patiently, because his somewhat uncertain conclusions are reached in a rather roundabout way.

Statman argues that humility or modesty cannot mean having a relatively low self-estimate if we find the virtue most developed in exceptional human beings who nonetheless have a clearsighted yet non-arrogant view of themselves. This is why he apparently opts for the position (contra Richards and Flanagan) that humility is not essentially a self-assessment. He thinks the only way their conception of humility makes sense is if they also assume that there really is no such thing as a great human being. Otherwise, at least on Statman's critique of Richards' analysis, the most accomplished people really have no legitimate basis to retain humility with regard to their particular area(s) of accomplishment.

Statman develops this point by reference to Richards' argument that most people's attainments are modest by the standards of achievement of the most illustrious individuals in all history (and hence most people should take a moderate view of their attainments). For example, a comparison of one's own philosophical work against a standard such as the

Nicomachean Ethics or the Theory of Descriptions is likely to temper one's view of one's greatness as a philosophical writer. As Statman points out, however, if the person in question happens to be the author of one of these greatest works of philosophy, one no longer has any rationale for resisting pressures to increase his self-regard with respect to his philosophical work.¹⁵ The suspect nature of this criterion of self-appraisal is also illustrated by what happens if a superior achievement unexpectedly follows one's own. At first one's work merits one's own limitless esteem; then one is abruptly forced to reevaluate that work as second-class. Statman also takes issue more generally with Richards' seeming conclusion that even moderately gifted people have empirical grounds for retaining a moderate view of their merits. Why should someone who ranks in the upper tenth percentile on some criterion dwell more upon the exclusive group of people who have surpassed him than upon the much larger one whom he has superseded?¹⁶

Statman reasons that Richards is in fact working on the basis of an overall theory of human value which he professed to lack. This theory would maintain that "ultimately, human value is pretty low."¹⁷ In this way, a marked gap between the higher quality of my work and yours is in the wider

¹⁵Ibid., 427.

¹⁶Ibid., 428-9.

¹⁷Ibid., 429.

scheme of things rather insignificant, and thus in absolute terms a weak basis in itself either for my high self-assessment or your low self-assessment. But Statman does not want to opt for the view that "ultimately, human value is pretty low." This forces him to provide some other sort of justification for one's not becoming "self-important" in manner in proportion to one's relatively great merits or attainments.

Initially Statman seems to conclude that humility simply cannot make sense except within the context of a pessimistic view of human worth in general--that there is no other plausible explanation of modesty in great people. "Beyond religion, the Aristotelian megalopsychia [sic] or Nietzsche's Superman, both rejecting humility, seem much more attractive ideals," Statman writes.¹⁸ At one point he seems ready to opt for the view that humility is simply the given trait of downplaying one's special merits without regard for any justification for so doing. This is what he means by suggesting that humility be reclassified as being more a behavioral disposition than a cognitive one. That is, it is not primarily a mode of (necessarily moderate) self-assessment, but the tendency, however motivated, to resist adopting supercilious behaviour in the face of what is essentially an immoderate (yet realistic) self-estimate. The problem then remains how to justify this choice not to

¹⁸Ibid., 432.

treat lesser people contemptuously. Statman opines that

surely the fact that one is epistemically justified in believing one is of high merit does not imply that one is morally justified in going around and showing off in front of other people thereby making them feel degraded and, at times, dehumanized¹⁹

but the question is, of course, why it is not justified. To this end he seems to offer two arguments. One is that to treat people in this fashion is bad because it is damaging to their self-respect. The other is that such proud behaviour "can easily lead the agent to think--mistakenly--that he is superior in his moral status too....and is not subject to the same restricting moral rules."²⁰ Thus Statman finally inclines back to the view that humility does have a cognitive aspect as well as a behavioral one: the cognitive aspect is "the (true) belief of the ultimate equality of human beings as ends in themselves....in their having the same moral rights"²¹--something like what I called M in Section I--while the behavioral aspect is non-arrogant and egalitarian-minded social conduct that is consistent with holding M.

Statman's reference to Aristotle and Nietzsche is thought-provoking. The implication seems to be that he takes Aristotle's great soul and Nietzsche's overman to be individuals of exceptional worth who are nonetheless un-

¹⁹Ibid, 433-4.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Ibid.

humbly arrogant and contemptuous because of their failure to accept M. Statman says that both these characters are "rejecting humility,"²² by which he seems to mean rejecting having a moderate self-estimate in spite of one's exceptional characteristics. Statman is not explicit about whether these figures are on his view immoral in their social attitudes, but his only reference to the traits of the megalo-psuchos, which seems to be derived from the assessment of Neil Cooper, is that the great soul "[justifiably] has a high opinion of himself and...expects others to acknowledge his worth and grant him the appropriate honours."²³ It thus appears that Statman does fault these philosophical personae for arrogance in spite of conceding some admiration for their self-celebratory natures. I think the formula for the great soul Statman adopts from Cooper here is a serious distortion of the role of the megalo-psuchos.

We shall discuss both Aristotle and Nietzsche in detail (especially Aristotle) in chapters three and five. Granted, neither Aristotle nor Nietzsche show much affinity for the notion of the equal worth of all human beings. Nonetheless, I have already suggested in Section 1 that one can interpret the megalo-psuchos as a person who is decidedly not arrogant and destructive to others' self-respect (where justified).

²²Ibid., 432.

²³Ibid., 429 and n27.

If he is not an egalitarian, why is this so? Presumably there are other possible rationales for treating people respectfully. The question also arises as to what practical implications necessarily follow or do not necessarily follow from accepting M.

The following chapter elaborates my interpretation of Aristotle at length and tries to show how what I take to be the great soul's admirable treatment of people is well integrated with what I take to be his many admirable moral valuations. In other words, my claim will be that Aristotle's moral framework very well illustrates how one might coherently hold oneself to be fundamentally superior to most on moral grounds and yet treat people in general according to admirable and well-advanced moral standards, whether or not one upholds some sort of principle of equality. Provided that Aristotle (or any moral philosopher) does not take a basic attitude of arrogance, disrespectfulness and inconsiderateness towards "lesser" people in general to be a morally good attitude, there is no logical inconsistency in saying that one is on moral grounds a basically superior person and also on moral grounds a disarming, respectful and considerate person. Indeed, it should be fully consistent with the nature of a selfconsciously very moral person that her treatment of other people is even more marked in these traits than less morally exemplary people would be in similar respects.

CHAPTER THREE

THE CASE FOR HUMILITY AS AN ARISTOTELIAN EXCELLENCE

Introduction

This chapter is devoted to an extensive discussion of Aristotle. The reason is as follows. Arguably, Aristotle's great soul embodies the most interesting and provocative instance of what we called humility in great people: accurate assessment of one's own relative moral superiority. Provided that the great soul is Aristotle's moral paradigm, there is no doubt that the great soul precisely fits at least the formal description of humility (as accurate self-assessment and the appropriate corresponding attitude towards others) in the most excellent moral characters. The great soul shares my earlier assumption that moral character is the most important kind of human merit, and he¹ correctly believes that his own moral character is the most

¹In faithfulness to Aristotle, the megalopsuchos invariably takes the masculine gender in my discussion, although this may seem as anachronistic as it would have to refer to Aristotle's great soul in the feminine.

developed. But what of the content of this humility, as Aristotle would see it?

What I want to suggest is that commentators who react to the great soul with distaste, seeing him as inwardly arrogant and contemptibly self-satisfied, are distorting his actual characteristics, a misreading probably partly motivated by a reflexive revulsion to his absence of humility in the traditional, Christian-influenced sense of very moderate self-regard. To the extent my interpretation of the megalopsuchos is plausible, we will not be tempted by the example Aristotle provides to abandon the conception of distinctively moral humility derived in the last chapter on the ground that it leads to morally deplorable thinking and conduct. I hope to make a case for the view that Aristotle's moral theory is reasonably coherent and considerably more worthy of respect than some writers imply on the basis of their interpretation of the megalopsuchos and of Aristotle's ethical perspective in general.

The following takes issue with the alleged arrogance, self-absorption, vanity, self-deception, and a host of other flaws attributed to the megalopsuchos, instead arguing that the great soul does actually show what Statman called humility as a behavioral disposition, as well as possessing it as a cognitive one. Clearly the cognitive dimension does not centre on some notion of the equal worth of all human beings. I think a case can be made for the view that the

great soul is possessed of a basically generous and amicable disposition towards people which does not have much regard for the fact that in the most important sense most people are his inferiors. Instead, the benevolent tendencies with which he is endowed follow naturally from his foremost allegiance to virtue and to the love of virtue as a way of life, and in these senses his general lack of offensiveness is theoretically motivated (cognitive) as well as being socially manifested (behavioral). The assumption of universal equality (or its lack) seems to make little difference to the inner dispositions and outward behaviour of the great soul that Aristotle describes.

3.1 The Essence of Megalopsuchia

Aristotle's megalopsuchia, variously rendered as (most literally) "greatness of soul," "magnanimity," "high-mindedness," "dignity," "pride," and so on, is indisputably the character disposition of choice for any discussion of the relationship between humility and Aristotelian ethics. However, greatness of soul and humility loosely understood are almost always seen as signally antithetical to one another rather than in any way congruent. Greatness of soul is also often considered to be paradigmatic of the whole tenor of Aristotelian moral thought. It is described in unusually vivid terms, and it is claimed by Aristotle to be a sort of crown of all the moral excellences. Yet

Aristotle's portrait of the megalopsuchos has provoked the dismay and contempt of numerous modern commentators from Bertrand Russell to Alasdair MacIntyre.² Why is this so? Apart from the Nicomachean and Eudemian ethics, the main primary sources for the investigation will be the Politics and the Rhetoric.

Megalopsuchia is described in detail in the Nicomachean Ethics at Book IV Ch. 3, in the midst of a serial account of the various individual moral excellences beginning at III.6. Some of these specific virtues, including greatness of soul, are first raised briefly in Book II within the discussion of the nature of virtue in general. A moral virtue for Aristotle is a disposition (hexis) of character (ēthos). The term aretē, "virtue" or "excellence," can apply to a disposition which produces success at any human exercise having to do with any part of the soul. More broadly still, a virtue properly regulates the activity of any thing whatsoever if that activity is in accord with the thing's proper function (ergon). Each specific virtue has its special subject matter; courage, for example, deals with

²MacIntyre finds Aristotle's picture of the great soul "appalling" (A Short History of Ethics, (New York: Macmillan, 1966), 79). Russell (A History of Western Philosophy (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1961), 197-8) sees the great soul as illustrative of the smugness of Aristotle's sense of goodness. More recently Nancy Sherman writes that the great soul seems "calculated," "self-indulgent" and "priggish" ("Common Sense and Uncommon Virtue," in Peter A. French et al., Ethical Theory: Character and Virtue (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 109; 111).

fearful things. At the first formula of greatness of soul (at II.3) we are told that it is the mean "with regard to honour and dishonour."³ Its corresponding vice of excess is vanity (chaunotēs) while the deficiency is "undue humility," mikropsuchia (sometimes more literally rendered "smallness of soul" or "pusillanimity"). But what does it mean to have a virtuous mean with respect to honour? Honour seems a more complex notion than fear, for example, in the sense that it necessarily has to do with relations among people, whereas fear may be a one-sided reaction to an unfeeling object. At this point Aristotle does no more than further restrict the virtue's subject matter to great honour (as opposed to small ones), without explaining what each kind would be in practice.⁴

IV.3 first reiterates that the objects of this virtue are great, later describing honour as "surely the greatest of external goods."⁵ The fullest formula of greatness of

³1107b23-24. All translations in this chapter follow the standard English edition of Aristotle, The Complete Works of Aristotle, Bollingen Series LXXI, 2 vols., ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984). The Nicomachean Ethics is translated here by W.D. Ross and revised by J.O. Urmson. Where I interpolate transliterated words or phrases I follow the Greek text of the Loeb Classical Library Edition (Aristotle: The Nicomachean Ethics (trans. H. Rackham), Cambridge: Harvard University Press, rev. ed. 1934). Reference notes to Aristotelian passages employ Bekker numerals prefaced by the title of the source where the title is not already identified in the text.

⁴1107b24-27.

⁵1123b20. Goods are divided into three kinds at I.7, the external, those of the soul, and those of the body. It appears, however, that the essential contrast is between the goods of the

soul seems to be that such a person "thinks himself worthy of great things, being worthy of them."⁶ Although honour is called the greatest external good, there is some value independent of the honour; the honour is a tribute to the possession of that good. Honour is here termed "the prize appointed for the noblest deeds" and "that which we render to the gods."⁷ Because there is some good independent of and logically prior to honour, the difference between claim and desert has substance. One can readily imagine two different ways in which there could be an imbalance between these two factors. One could claim much and deserve little, or claim little and deserve much. In either of these two ways there is a departure from the mean and yet great honours are involved in one way or another. Thus we expect the former features to characterize the vain person and the latter ones the small-souled.

Aristotle's characterization of various kinds of discrepancy between claim and merit is not quite this tidy. He applies the same term of vice, mikropsuchia, to anyone whose claim falls short of his merits, whether they are

soul and all other goods. Physical beauty is described as an external good at 1099b3, and in a discussion of the importance of things other than moral virtue in happiness in Book VII Aristotle ranges together "the goods of the body," "external goods" and "goods of fortune" against good activity of the soul (see 1153b17-18).

⁶1123b2.

⁷1123b18-20.

great, moderate or little, although adding, more satisfactorily, that the "smallest souled" are those who deserve much. (In the other two cases there is evidently no great object involved at all.) For the contrary vice of vanity, while people who claim much without deserving it are vain, "not everyone who thinks himself worthy of more than he really is...is vain."⁸ This seems to mean that people who only make moderate claims and deserve even less are not to be called chaunos--more in keeping with our logical expectations than the looser usage of mikropsuchos above. Aristotle's apparently greater reluctance to pin a vice on those whose claims are only moderately excessive may be of a piece with his view that underrating one's merits is "both commoner and worse" than overrating them; thus, he is more willing to include all dispositions resembling mikropsuchia under the same label of vice than he is all those resembling chaunotes.⁹ Notice here the stark contrast between Aristotle's sense of appropriateness in self-estimate and the traditional interpretation of humility or modesty, which would probably hold that overrating oneself is the worse error and probably the more common one--indeed that accurate self-appraisal is probably less virtuous than moderate self-

⁸1123b9.

⁹1125a33.

underestimation.¹⁰

Aristotle seems to leave no doubt in the Nicomachean Ethics that the great honour claimed by the megaloopsuchos is merited by his excellence of character:

...he must be good in the highest degree [aristos].
 ..greatness in every excellence would seem to be characteristic of [him]...If we consider him point by point we shall see the utter absurdity of a proud man who is not good [mē agathos]. Nor, again, would he be worthy of honour if he were bad; for honour [hē timē] is the prize [athlon] of excellence [tēs aretēs]. [It], then, seems therefore to be a sort of crown of the excellences; for it makes them greater, and it is not found without them. Therefore it is hard to be truly proud [megaloopsuchon], for it is impossible without nobility and goodness of character [kalokagathias].¹¹

The great soul must possess the greatest of all goods, the internal good of character, in order to deserve the greatest external good of honour. He is the paradigm of moral virtue and, by implication, should provide a key vantage point from which to look upon Aristotelian ethics as a whole. Obviously a pressing question is now that of the nature of the various Aristotelian virtues whose possession makes one good. Aristotle's ethics provides a long list of moral virtues, some of which we shall raise in the course of discussing greatness of soul. Some of those to which Aristotle gives special emphasis are courage, justice, temperateness of appetite (sōphrosunē), practical wisdom

¹⁰Flanagan (Ibid., 428-9) may inadvertently seem to speak for the modernist perspective when he writes that empirical research suggests that "most people dramatically overestimate themselves across a wide variety of situations."

¹¹1123b27-24a5.

(phronēsis), liberality, and forms of friendliness (philia, eunoia, homonoia, etc.). Many of Aristotle's moral virtues are reflected in the character sketch of the great soul, so we can get some feeling for the former by close study of the latter.

3.2 The Ironic Reading

The balance of this chapter will flesh out the character of greatness of soul (and by implication of all the Aristotelian virtues) by addressing two major obstacles to the view that the great soul is a morally unsurpassable human type, either in Aristotle's eyes or in anyone's. A few commentators think Aristotle does not even intend to portray the great soul as the ideal agent, while others think that although he does, the characteristics of the great soul are such that it undermines the acceptability of Aristotle's whole ethical conception, so that this virtue should either be reformed or completely abandoned, unless we are to reject Aristotle's larger ethical framework wholesale.¹² First we discuss the former viewpoint.

¹²The only contemporary writers I have found who make a point of defending the great soul against the second charge are Howard Curzer, in two articles (1990, 1991), and Stephen White (1992). See Howard Curzer, "A Great Philosopher's Not So Great Account of Great Virtue: Aristotle's Treatment of 'Greatness of Soul,'" Canadian Journal of Philosophy 20 (1990): 517-37; "Aristotle's Much Maligned Megalopsuchos," Australasian Journal of Philosophy 69 (1991): 131-51 and Stephen White, Sovereign Virtue: Aristotle on the Relation Between Happiness and Prosperity (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992). There is also one recent English language Ph.D. dissertation devoted to megalopsuchia which is also

In order to do this we ought first briefly to list all the remaining features of the portrait of the megalopsuchos given in IV.3. The great soul is moderately pleased by "great" honours bestowed by discriminating people, though for other honours he cares nothing. He observes due measure in respect to wealth, power and good and ill fortune, not reacting unduly to the latter. Aristotle says that great souls are thought to be haughty and to be rich or powerful, since such people do typically receive many honours. But in reality only the good man should be honoured. Thus also, many people who merely have the goods of fortune try to wear the mantle of megalopsuchia by showing haughtiness and hubris, but their contempt is unjustified, unlike his. The great soul does not seek danger for trivial reasons, but is unsparing of his life for a great cause. He gives generously and willingly but is ashamed to receive benefits, which unlike his own given favours he tends to forget, and he always tries to outdo his benefactor. He is assertive towards those of wealth and power, but courteous to lesser people. He shows no ambition for what is commonly sought after and is frank in expressing his feelings. He cannot live at the will of another unless a friend. He is not prone to admiration because nothing is great to him. The

sympathetic to the trait in some of the same ways I am (see Kevin Patrick Osborne, "Aristotle's Conception of Megalopsuchia," City University of New York, 1979). These viewpoints are discussed below.

great soul does not want to hear compliments about himself, or gossip; he rarely speaks evil except deliberately to give offence. He likes beautiful and useless things, and is thought to be unhurried and deliberate in his gestures and speech since he cares for few things.¹³

Occasionally a commentator will respond to what is found unpalatable or uninspiring in the portrait's features by suggesting that Aristotle knowingly or not is presenting a figure that it is hard to take seriously.¹⁴ That the portrait properly provokes mirth or incredulity does not offer much plausibility on reflection. It would seem ill-considered for Aristotle to aim at comic relief while pressing claims that appear centrally relevant to the vital themes of the Ethics as a whole--a treatise that for the most part seems to be conveyed in a tone of magisterial solemnity. If the portrait provokes amusement in some readers regardless, this more likely has to do with a complicated set of cultural assumptions far removed from the author's own than with any incongruity between IV.3 and the rest of the Ethics--which, as the following argues, is not

¹³1124a6-25a16.

¹⁴For example, Joachim (Aristotle: The Nicomachean Ethics: A Commentary by the late H.H. Joachim (ed. D.A. Rees, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951), 125) suggests that Aristotle is being humorous (though he is nonetheless idealizing the great soul), while G.R.G. Mure (Aristotle, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1932; rpt. 1964), 154-5) more reservedly remarks that the portrait may to present readers seem (again, misleadingly so) a "caricature."

to be found in any case. For example, to convey a strong sense of one's own dignity may seem a little ridiculous from the viewpoint of a society in which the equal dignity of every person is at least in law taken for granted without reference to one's particular character.

A few other observers offer more considered grounds to try to show that Aristotle gives subtle clues to indicate the weaknesses of the great soul, even if he is in many ways admired by Aristotle. All variants of ironic readings amount to a minority view, in that the predominant interpretation holds Aristotle to intend the megalopsuchos to be the moral paradigm, as the Ethics overtly claims. In this case, if the cluster of character traits and motives Aristotle thereby endorses are in reality marked by serious moral flaws, then this indicates fundamental weaknesses in Aristotelian ethics. This thesis is to be thoroughly addressed after dealing with those arguments in support of the view that Aristotle presents the great soul ironically, whether or not the reader is supposed to be amused.

With regard to this more serious kind of irony, there are two recent exponents of the view that Aristotle is subtly critical of the megalopsuchos for the purpose of pointing the audience to a more esoteric thesis. These are Harry Jaffa (1952)¹⁵ and Troels Engberg-Pedersen (1983).¹⁶

¹⁵Harry Jaffa, Thomism and Aristotelianism: A Study of the Commentary by Thomas Aquinas on the Nicomachean Ethics (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952). My page references will be to

In the course of a critique of Thomas Aquinas' Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics, Jaffa suggests that Aristotle purposefully portrays the great soul as defective for the sake of driving home Aristotle's real view of human perfection. In his possession of the moral excellences, claims Jaffa, the great soul is "clearly the political man par excellence," and not a philosopher, since he does not possess excellence in philosophic wisdom.¹⁷

This remark points to a much better known scholarly debate in Aristotelian ethics, that of the relationship between philosophy and politics in eudaimonia or human flourishing. We must briefly outline this debate in order to make sense of Jaffa's views.

3.2.1 Politics and Philosophy

There is an appearance of tension between two positions in the Nicomachean Ethics. The first, expounded in Book I, suggests that the exercise of the moral virtues alone is sufficient for flourishing, barring external misfortunes beyond one's control. Aristotle claims that the aim of political activity is "the highest of all the goods

the Greenwood Press edition (Westport, CT 1979).

¹⁶Troels Engberg-Pedersen, Aristotle's Theory of Moral Insight (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983).

¹⁷Jaffa, 31; 130; 121.

achievable by action [tōn praktōn]"¹⁸ and that the "most authoritative" and "master" science is politics; the telos of life must be the object of this science, viz., of politics."¹⁹ The second position, foreshadowed in passages in Book VI and then developed with full force within Book X, asserts that the best life is that of contemplation. Nor can this mean merely some kind of reflection on moral virtue; in various ways, Aristotle distinguishes between reasoning having to do with moral practice and a more detached kind of reasoning, contemplative activity (energeia theoretikē).²⁰ It is the detached type said to be involved in the most choiceworthy kind of human activity. Aristotle says that while war and politics are the noblest things "among excellent actions," they "aim at an end"--the peace and order of the polis--"and are not desirable for their own sake," whereas contemplation is carried on purely for its intrinsic value.²¹

In recent years, this issue has been discussed in terms

¹⁸1095a16-17.

¹⁹1094a25-29. The standard English edition actually uses "art" rather than "science" for tōn epistemōn. Epistēmē is not usually rendered as "art"; Aristotle appears to be very reluctant (in II.4) to employ technē as a characterization of the moral conduct of politics. Urmson appears to substitute "art" for epistēmē in order to deal with the problem that Aristotle elsewhere (1140a33-b7) suggests that epistēmē and phronēsis are mutually exclusive, which makes it difficult to see how politics can be an epistēmē at all, given that it involves phronēsis.

²⁰1177a12 ff.

²¹1177b15-18.

of two alternative perspectives denoted by "inclusivism" and "dominance." Ackrill (1974) is one of the best known advocates of inclusivism.²² It holds that eudaimonia is access to the experience of the sum total of all things good in themselves, including both the exercise of moral virtue and the practice of intellectual virtues in abstract thought. The dominance position, as defended by Richard Kraut (1989)²³ and others, argues that the defence of contemplation in Book X is decisive and that moral excellences and the well-ordered community to which they give rise are instrumental for the realization of eudaimonia but not strictly intrinsic to it.

It does seem to strain the sense of the Ethics to deny any special priority to contemplation. What is attractive about the dominance thesis is that it allows for a broad consistency in the Ethics as a whole in that the life of statesmanship and of philosophy have some kind of complementarity rather than being disparate goods between which one must somehow choose. The complementary aspect is particularly apparent from the viewpoint of the community as a whole. The moral excellences safeguarding the prosperity of the polis may be practised by persons who are primarily

²²J.L. Ackrill, "Aristotle on Eudaimonia," in Essays on Aristotle's Ethics, ed. A. Rorty (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1980), 15-33; originally published in the Proceedings of the British Academy 60 (1974): 339-59.

²³See Richard Kraut, Aristotle and the Human Good (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989).

statesmen, thus ensuring the necessary conditions for the pursuit of sophia, which may be engaged in by persons who are primarily regarded as "thinkers." Nonetheless, according to the dominance thesis, in an individual life anyone with the capacity for philosophy ideally chooses theōria whenever personal and political circumstances do not dictate that one must concentrate instead on civic affairs (for example, by military service) in accordance with one's commitment to the general good. Even for the individual some combination of roles is quite a likely prospect, as the biographical examples of Socrates and Plato make clear, whether the active or contemplative aspect eventually predominates. Political conditions in the Athenian and Hellenistic periods were quite unstable enough that it could have been difficult to judge which kind of life was available for one, except of course retrospectively.

As Kenny notes, the positions of the dominance and inclusivist exponents have been moving closer together over the past two decades.²⁴ A compatibilist position on politics and philosophy has an important bearing on Jaffa's argument, which partly relies on the assumption of a fundamental opposition between the identities and levels of self-understanding of the statesman, on one hand, and the philosopher, on the other. Jaffa appears to subscribe to a

²⁴Anthony Kenny, Aristotle on the Perfect Life (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992), 93.

cruder version of the dominance view, according to which the paradigm of moral virtue suffers from serious misvaluations. Jaffa describes the great soul as erring by concerning himself with honour above all else.²⁵ The megaloopsuchos is a sort of human substitute for divine heroes. Aristotle mentions a class of men who are brutish rather than calculatedly vicious and an opposing class of those of superhuman or heroic virtue.²⁶ He does not connect this class to the great soul, but Jaffa reasonably suggests a link. One of Aristotle's arguments for the superiority of sophia in Book X is that the divine existence is best, but, he adds, it would be absurd to picture a divine being as possessing moral excellences, as these only make sense in a human context.²⁷ Thus, the great soul, who seeks to merit and receive the highest honours by being preeminent in the moral excellences, is basically misguided. He strives to be godlike, but in such a way that he is actually far from divine excellence. If he understood that philosophic virtue was higher than virtue of conduct, then he would strive to be a philosopher, since in this way he would merit the honour that is his highest aspiration.²⁸ Jaffa leaves open the possibility that the philosopher, the true human ideal,

²⁵Jaffa, 116.

²⁶1145a15-20.

²⁷1178b6-24.

²⁸Jaffa, 116-121.

may be great souled, but Jaffa also insists that intellectual perfection in itself is amoral so that "the highest natural perfection of man is possible without moral virtue," which implies "a grave depreciation of morality."²⁹

As supporting evidence for the incompleteness of the great soul, Jaffa argues that only philosophers can enjoy what Aristotle regards as the best kind of friendship, so this good is denied to the great soul. But Aristotle ranks friendship very highly, saying it is in some sense the greatest external good, an accolade equalling the one he has somewhat confusingly also awarded to honour itself. Since, according to Jaffa, such a valuable good is denied to the man of IV.3, who (at least to some) has a solitary air to him, the great soul is not so praiseworthy after all. As one final clue, Jaffa adverts to another mentioned quirk of the great soul, his apparent lack of gratitude for favours received.³⁰ This aspect has long been paradoxically difficult to see as other than a foible, but on Jaffa's interpretation, Aristotle "does not wish to save the reputation of the magnanimous man, but to save the phenomenon of magnanimity."³¹

In spite of possessing all of the moral virtues, then,

²⁹Ibid., 141; 31.

³⁰1124b12-15.

³¹Jaffa, 141.

Jaffa's megalopsuchos is impoverished by his confused and distorted valuations. This juxtaposition of qualities is suspect and demands powerful arguments, and in addition, a key assumption of Jaffa's, about the preoccupation with honour, is also implausible given the brief passages from Aristotle which we have already seen.³² They suggest instead that the great soul is preoccupied with virtue first and honour second as the just claim of genuine virtue. We shall return to the question of honour later in reference to other commentators.

So far, my claim is that the great soul is more plausibly a philosopher than a statesman if we must choose between the two, but there is no basic value conflict between these two ways of life in any case, if moral excellence is fitted to both. If the great soul does not fancy himself an earthly divinity he can revere moral excellence without thereby compromising his greatness. He

³²Jaffa's critique does raise an interesting problem. If theōria is the highest human activity, why doesn't Aristotle claim that it, rather than moral excellence, merits the highest honours? Perhaps simply because it is more apt to speak of one's social reputation in the context of one's socially relevant attributes. The question ought to be more pressing for Jaffa, given his thesis. Perhaps he would respond that Aristotle prudently avoids complete honesty about his view of the relative merits of politics and contemplation in order to keep on good terms with those in political power who have influence over the fortunes of philosophers. This is the sort of analysis one might attribute to commentators influenced by the Straussian belief in inherent conflict between philosophical and political viewpoints, as seems to be discernible in Jaffa. As intriguing as the esoteric thesis may be, the internal evidence of the Ethics does make the dominance view a viable and less speculative option.

is concerned with virtue primarily and genuine honour, which is accorded only to virtue, secondarily. He does not misunderstand the proper basis of honour or love honour for its own sake. Lastly, I want to reply to Jaffa's argument that the non-contemplative great soul is denied the fulfilment of the highest kind of human friendship.

Even if Aristotle did believe that the greatest kind of friendship was between two contemplators (as Jaffa claims), because the question of whether or not the great soul is necessarily exclusively a philosopher or a statesman seems to be a misguided one, we could not infer from the fact the best friendship is between contemplators that the great soul is essentially denied access to the truest kind of friendship. (And, of course, to the extent the great soul is more naturally a philosopher he would preferentially enjoy such friendships.) In either case, we have already seen that the great soul is explicitly said to be able to form friendships, the only circumstance in which he will live at the will of another person.³³ Yet Jaffa is not the only writer who perceives a tendency to aloofness and isolation in the great soul. W.F.R. Hardie (1968) characterizes the tendency to hang back from many deeds as

³³1124b31. Howard Curzer's inference from the phrase "unless [all'ē] it be a friend" that "he makes his life revolve around friends" (1991, 144) seems rather bold.

"remoteness,"³⁴ while René-Antoine Gauthier (1951), emphasizing the theme of autonomy in IV.3, writes that the megaloopsuchos seems to us "affreusement solitaire," citing also a telling remark in the Rhetoric (1401b20-23) that he disdains the company of most people as if he dwelled alone on Mount Ida.³⁵ What might this isolation mean, and how damaging would it be to Aristotle's notion of greatness in all the virtues?

Aristotle gives ample space to the discussion of the various manifestations of affinity among people, all grouped under the heading of philia. Friendship is no afterthought or welcome addition to virtues of the good community; it is "an excellence or implies excellence...most necessary with a view to living," since "without friends no one would choose to live."³⁶ Legislators think it more fundamental than justice in its ability to promote social concord (homonoia). Indeed, justice is a sort of second-best substitute for the harmony of friends.³⁷ What is its basis, other than a natural affinity between man and man? It consists of

³⁴W.F.R. Hardie, Aristotle's Ethical Theory, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968; 2nd ed. 1980), 65.

³⁵René-Antoine Gauthier, Magnanimité: L'ideal de la grandeur dans la philosophie païenne et dans la théologie chrétienne, Bibliothèque Thomiste, XXVIII, Paris 1951), 99.

³⁶1155a3-5.

³⁷"[W]hen men are friends they have no need of justice, while when they are just they need friendship as well, and the truest form of justice is thought to be a friendly quality." See 1155a23-32.

goodwill (eunoia) that is reciprocated and known to be such by both parties. The sorts of things that arouse our love are those that are good or useful or pleasant to one, and these three types of objects correspond to three different species of friendship." But the best friendships are based only on virtue. Aristotle says that the friend should be loved for his own sake." But only virtue friendships can meet this requirement, because friendships of pleasure or utility are desired only for the personal pleasure or advantage that issues from them, and thus are easily ended when the benefit ends."⁴⁰ The perfect form of friendship is that according to the virtue--and not especially the intellectual virtue--of both, kat'aretēn homoion, although such friendships are rare because such people are rare."⁴¹ The charge that Aristotelian friendship is one for which "the love of the person, as against the goodness, pleasantness, or usefulness of the person...can have no place"⁴² seems to presuppose that one cannot love a person as a person and at the same time love virtue as it is

³⁹1155b18-22, 1156a6-7.

⁴⁰e.g. 1155b31-2; 1156a4-5; a15; b9-11.

⁴¹1156a13-24.

⁴²1156b7; 1156b25-26.

⁴³MacIntyre, A Short History of Ethics (New York: Macmillan, 1966), 80. For MacIntyre, the linkage of love of virtue to love of a person for his own sake curiously reduces to "a kind of moral mutual admiration society" (Ibid.).

practised and esteemed through that friendship, whereas for Aristotle this is the only way one can genuinely love a person.

On this basis we might infer that the great soul's capacity for close ties is not only equal to, but surpasses, anyone else's. Jaffa's grounds for thinking that contemplators do have the best form of friendship are obscure. They have to do with the way that discussion and thought (the modes of contemplation) will be derivative from whatever activity the friends share in, unless that activity is contemplation itself.⁴³ Yet nowhere does Aristotle seem to relate perfect friendship to intellectual virtue, as opposed to virtue in general. Given the way Aristotle situates philia within civic life, there is every indication that the subject matter of the best friendship would involve politics at least as readily as it would theoretical speculation. Jaffa also says that honour "tends to be diminished as it is shared" and that great-souled friends would be constantly competing to outdo one another in giving benefits, which would be an awkward basis for friendship.⁴⁴ But Aristotle asserts that in virtue friendships

those who are friends...are anxious to do well by each other (since that is a mark of excellence and of friendship), and between men who are emulating each other in this there cannot be complaints or quarrels; no one is

⁴³Jaffa, 126.

⁴⁴Ibid., 127-128; 126.

offended by a man who loves him and does well by him..."⁴⁵ Furthermore, refraining from an act in order to allow another person to earn the honour can be an even more honourable gesture than performing the honourable act oneself,⁴⁶ so the opposing considerations of friendly rivalry seem to balance each other nicely.

Jaffa's view that there can be a fundamental difference between the moral fibre of the statesman and the philosopher is not easy to defend on a textual basis, whether one chooses a form of the dominance thesis like Kraut's or an inclusivist thesis like Ackrill's. It seems entirely inconsistent with the general aim of rationalist unity in Aristotelian thought that these two kinds of lives are distinct enough that the philosopher would be able to function without regard for his own and the general good. (For Aristotle, genuine self-interest harmonizes fully with moral excellence, as is argued in I.12.) This is one way in which Aristotle could have advanced the claims of both books I and X without an acute awareness of a practical contradiction being entailed by the concomitant claims. In this regard one should note that it is in Book X that Aristotle asserts that "the man who is contemplating... insofar as he is a man and lives with a number of people...chooses to do excellent acts [kat'aretēn]

⁴⁵1162b6-10.

⁴⁶1169a32-3.

prattein]."⁴⁷

Since there is substantial evidence that Aristotle takes contemplation to be the highest human end and (as argued above) no substantial evidence that the practical virtues of the philosopher and the statesman can be seriously at odds, it may be safest to conclude that the great soul is ideally a contemplative" but in practice might be too preoccupied, at least by the most urgent of political concerns, to philosophize to the extent he would prefer. My aim is to cast doubt on the idea that a proper understanding of Aristotle's ethics should be tied to whether one views the great soul as strictly either a philosopher or a statesman. Any attempt to overcome the sense of inconsistency between Book X and the earlier parts of the Ethics seems self-defeating if it creates an even greater sense of inconsistency between one's comprehensive new interpretation and multiple passages of the Ethics.

3.2.2 Saintly Negligence towards Worldly Goods

Unlike Jaffa, Troels Engberg-Pedersen infers from the account of IV.3 both that the great soul has a "firm belief in the paramount value of moral virtue" and that he is the only agent who "values moral virtue as highly as it in fact

⁴⁷1178b3-6.

⁴⁸For a lengthy defence of this position, see Gauthier (op. cit.), especially 105-116.

should be valued."⁴⁹ What this means is that the great soul is noble or fine (kalos) as well as good (agathos)--a fusion of the enviable and the honourable denoted in the compound term kalokagathos (sometimes rendered "noble-and-good"). The person who is kalokagathos, according to Engberg-Pedersen, values the virtues not merely as instruments of prosperity (as merely good--agathos--people do) but also as goods in themselves.⁵⁰ (Here Aristotle is revising the conventional sense of the term kalokagathos, which would have popularly connoted qualities of the aristocracy, i.e., qualities of what popularly passes for the aristocratic class.) But the megalopsuchos still goes wrong, claims Engberg-Pedersen, this time in mistakenly thinking that moral virtue is the only thing that matters, whereas in reality natural goods per se matter too (as well as contemplation): more sympathetic to Ackrill's inclusivism, Engberg-Pedersen thinks that part of the value of the virtues is that they conduce to the accessibility of the natural goods. Curiously, Engberg-Pedersen chooses the unworldly associations of the phrase "moral saint" to encapsulate the character of the megalopsuchos.⁵¹ Thus, although his valuations "must have had some initial

⁴⁹Engberg-Pedersen, 78.

⁵⁰Ibid., 49-50.

⁵¹Ibid., 75ff.

attraction for Aristotle,"⁵² in the end the great soul's less appealing quirks, such as his reluctance to perform minor deeds, signal his defective understanding of the value of the aretai.

We recall that Aristotle predicates kalokagathia of the great soul in IV.3 without providing any independent account of the quality at that point. For such an account, in fact, one must look outside the Nicomachean Ethics altogether to Aristotle's less influential ethical treatise, the Eudemian Ethics. This is where Engberg-Pedersen derives his explanation of the difference between merely good conduct and conduct that is also noble. Here Aristotle characterizes kalokagathia as "the excellence that arises out of the combination of [all the separate excellences]," a description clearly in agreement with Aristotle's use of kalokagathia at IV.3.⁵³ But in the Eudemian version Aristotle elaborates further. Apparently, there are three kinds of noble things: the moral excellences, acts in accordance with them, and natural goods if they are used by virtuous agents. External goods such as health, wealth and honour are all desirable, but they are only goods in themselves provisionally, because if they are put to the service of the unvirtuous they are harmful.⁵⁴

⁵²Ibid., 80.

⁵³1248b9-11.

⁵⁴1248b29-34.

Aristotle illustrates this point with the example of the militaristic culture of the Lacedaimonians. Aristotle says the Spartan warriors have the "civic disposition": they (like most people) think virtue to be only for the sake of acquiring the external goods.⁵⁵ If one adds to these remarks Aristotle's discussion of the Spartans in the Politics, a more revealing analysis takes shape.⁵⁶ Aristotle says that the successes of the Lacedaimonians in war, attributable to their well-known institutionalized fostering of the virtues related to military prowess, led to wealth and power which was squandered away because the Spartans lacked a more comprehensive range of virtues that would have enabled them both to gain external goods through conflict (as they in fact did) and, further, to use these goods wisely.⁵⁷ In the Politics only, Aristotle explicitly notes in passing that the Spartans are right to suppose that the goods which people compete for (as in warfare) are won more by virtue than by vice.⁵⁸

It is worth emphasizing (precisely because Aristotle does not do so) that Aristotle concedes that the virtues, at least the martial virtues, do tend to yield external goods. Aristotle usually stresses that the exercise of virtue

⁵⁵1248b38-49a4.

⁵⁶Politics II.9.

⁵⁷See also White (Ibid.), 232 ff.

⁵⁸Politics 1271b7-11.

itself and/or the practice of contemplation are the ends of real importance, just as the noble thing is to love virtue for its own sake. But there is no evidence that Aristotle intends to oppose virtue and worldly goods, as the later Christian tradition arguably does in some respects. Rather, the reason for his lack of emphasis is perhaps that he is especially concerned to elaborate a moral theory that clearly distinguishes the external goods from the more valuable internal goods. This is a difficult task in Greek culture; the Homeric tradition of aristocratic warrior-kings and their struggles for supremacy ties excellence very closely to worldly success.⁵⁹ As Urmson notes, "the notion of being a good character even though one's life is thereby circumscribed and diminished is not one which any Greek held."⁶⁰ Aristotle draws attention to this distinction early on in the Ethics in I.12--at least on (Urmson's) standard translation--by contrasting things which are praised (epainetōn) with those that are prized (timiōn).⁶¹ Objects of praise are virtues and acts in accordance with them, while the things that are prized are "something greater and better....no one praises happiness as he does

⁵⁹For detailed discussion of how Aristotle reshapes this Greek tradition, see Arthur W.H. Adkins, Merit and Responsibility: A Study in Greek Values (Oxford: Clarendon, 1960), especially Ch. XV and XVI.

⁶⁰J.O. Urmson, Aristotle's Ethics (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 12.

⁶¹1101b10ff.

justice, but rather calls it blessed, as being something more divine."⁶² Notice that the term rendered as "prized," timiōn, has elsewhere been customarily rendered as honoured. Yet honour is what is due most of all to the megaloψsuchos. If Urmson's sense of the significance of the passage is correct, then the great soul's eudaimonia and his consummate virtue harmonize perfectly so that it is in him that morality and happiness find their synthesis. If so, Engberg-Pedersen's view of the great soul's lack of appreciation for the natural goods external to virtue is definitely misplaced. By claiming that the great soul is the only one who gives proper weight to virtue, Engberg-Pedersen means that the great soul sees virtue as something worthwhile in itself and not only instrumentally as a means to help secure the goods external to the soul. But on the basis of the presumed relationship between virtue and worldly goods it is hard to see how the great soul could not value worldly goods properly if he valued virtue properly: for its goodness as well as its nobility. It is simply that the majority value virtue mainly as instrumental to procuring worldly goods while the great soul knows that virtue in itself is more valuable in that it not only conduces to obtaining and wisely using external goods but is constitutive of the greatest goods of all, which are internal.

⁶²1101b25-6.

The charge that the great soul shows a misguided indifference to external goods, furthermore, does not sit well with Aristotle's remark that the megalopsuchos "will also bear himself with moderation [metriōs hexei] towards wealth and power and all good or evil fortune."⁶³ This is surely what one would expect from a person marked by "greatness in each of the virtues," which for Aristotle include, for example, liberality (between stinginess and prodigality) in the giving and getting of one's material resources and temperateness (between profligacy and insensibility) in the appetites for food and sex. Presumably the other quirks of the great soul add impetus to Engberg-Pedersen's distinctive critique of the megalopsuchos. We shall return to the alleged tendency of the megalopsuchos to avoid doing small praiseworthy deeds later.

3.3 The Moral Critiques of Aristotle's Great Soul

3.3.1 Unsaintly Dependency on Wealth and Power

At this point we pass over to those critics who take Aristotle's doctrine of greatness of soul in earnest, but find the ideal morally suspect on one ground or another. One basis for this view is the belief that greatness of soul is restricted to those of wealth and power. Perhaps this is

⁶³1124a13-16.

not entirely contrary to Engberg-Pedersen's thinking. After all, it may be easy to underrate the importance of worldly goods if one is particularly able to take them for granted, and Aristotle does qualify his claim that only virtue, not riches, merits true honour by adding that "he...who has both [virtue and fortune] is thought more worthy of honour [mallon axioutai timēs]."⁴⁴ Whether Aristotle endorses popular opinion here is unclear. Hardie (1978) remarks that greatness of soul "needs, and is enhanced by, the possession of external goods."⁴⁵ Admittedly, the fact that Aristotle says there are rich and powerful pretenders to megalopsuchia does not imply that the true great soul can do without riches or power. Hardie supports his reading by referring to Aristotle's belief that the exercise of virtue involves the use of external goods and that virtue is honoured on account of the actions which realize it. Aristotle says in Book X that "for deeds many things are needed, and more, the greater and nobler the deeds are."⁴⁶ The greater one's capacity to employ goods in the service of virtue, the more honourable the deeds one ought to be able to perform, given one has the disposition to begin with. Similarly, MacIntyre ranges greatness of soul with munificence or magnificence

⁴⁴1124a26.

⁴⁵Hardie, "'Magnanimity' in Aristotle's Ethics," Phronesis 23 (1978), 64.

⁴⁶1178b1-2.

(megaloprepeia)--the virtue of aptness in one's large-scale expenditures--as twin virtues "only available to those of great riches and high social status."⁶⁷ Aristotle makes clear that megaloprepeia is out of reach of the poor and that their attempt to practice it would be foolish.⁶⁸ (The account of munificence in the Ethics immediately precedes that of greatness of soul.) Nancy Sherman also sees megalopsuchia and megaloprepeia as companion virtues, although her main objection to the virtue lies elsewhere. Sherman thinks that the dependence of what she calls the "grand virtues" upon the possession of externals on a similarly grand scale is mirrored by the role of "power, wealth, friends, experience, technique and equipment for correct perception and choice" that contribute to the possession of any virtue.⁶⁹ That is, Aristotle is sensibly conceding the inevitability of a major role for influences beyond one's control in the development and stability of one's character, even though it makes some sense to speak of one's acquired character as having some autonomy over contingencies that arise.

The unclarity in Aristotle about the relative influences of one's developed dispositions of mind and the vagaries of fate in determining the quality of one's life is

⁶⁷MacIntyre, After Virtue, 182.

⁶⁸1127b27-8.

⁶⁹Sherman, 105.

well known."⁷⁰ We have already noted that the great soul "will be neither over-joyed by good fortune, nor over-pained by evil."⁷¹ In Book I Aristotle opines that it would be "a very defective arrangement" that "what is greatest and most noble depend on fate"⁷² and that "success and failure in life do not depend on [fortunes]," although "human life needs these as well."⁷³ The following passage is certainly suggestive of a position somewhat different from the one endorsed by Hardie, MacIntyre and Sherman:

small pieces of good fortune or of its opposite clearly do not weigh down the scales of life one way or another, but a multitude of great events if they turn out well will make life more blessed (for not only are they themselves such as to add beauty to life, but the way a man deals with them may be noble and good), while if they turn out ill they crush and maim blessedness; for they both bring pain with them and hinder many activities. Yet even in these nobility shines through, when a man bears with resignation many great misfortunes, not through insensibility to pain but through nobility and greatness of soul.

If activities are, as we said, what determines the character of life, no blessed man can become miserable; for he will never do the acts that are hateful and mean. For the man who is truly good and wise, we think, bears all the chances of life becomingly and always makes the best of circumstances...⁷⁴

In light of this, one must grant that the great soul will

⁷⁰Two notable studies that address this issue are Martha Nussbaum's The Fragility of Goodness (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986) and, with a narrower focus, Stephen White (op. cit.).

⁷¹1124a15-16.

⁷²1099b23-4.

⁷³1100b8-9.

⁷⁴1100b23-01a2.

not lose his dispositions simply because he loses his worldly prosperity. To assert that one can only be moderately good with moderate means one would have to ignore these remarks.

Perhaps Hardie, MacIntyre and Sherman mean to suggest that the great soul cannot properly develop the virtues in the first place without such fortunate conditions prevailing. To address this interpretation properly would require a discussion of various passages dealing with the roles of heredity and education in one's moral temperament. Nonetheless, we can point in passing to some clues that Aristotle might not only reject this as a necessary requirement but also even reply that overabundant externals tend to inhibit one's moral progress. In the Ethics Aristotle remarks that "private persons are thought to do worthy acts no less than despots--indeed even more"⁷⁵ and that "even good fortune itself when in excess is an impediment [to happiness]."⁷⁶ Aristotle also discusses in some detail the relationship between wealth and affairs of state (i.e., civic virtue) in the Politics.

In the Politics, the doctrine of virtue as a mean finds an analogy in Aristotle's apparent belief that moderate economic means on the whole best conduce to virtue. In the course of criticizing Plato's equation of moderate living

⁷⁵1179a5-6.

⁷⁶1153b22-23.

with living well, to which Aristotle replies that a person can live temperately and yet miserably, Aristotle suggests that a better formula would be living "not only temperately [sōphronos] but liberally [eleutherios]," in that temperateness alone "will be associated with toil," while liberality alone "will combine with luxury."⁷⁷ Again, in his discussion of three socioeconomic strata that can be used to divide the populace of every state into the rich, the middle class and the poor, Aristotle affirms that the middle condition is best. It is most easily obedient to reason, since the rich, who are "neither willing nor able to submit to authority," tend to arrogance, while the very poor "are too degraded" and tend to be subservient."⁷⁸ Aristotle says this view is confirmed by the observation that the best lawgivers have come from the middle classes."⁷⁹ Especially telling is the remark that "a good life requires a supply of external goods in a less degree when men are in a good state, in a greater degree when they are in a lower state."⁸⁰ The assumption that people of virtue will tend not to be poorest is certainly consistent with the assumption that virtue is partly instrumental to flourishing.

⁷⁷1265a31-5.

⁷⁸1295b15-21.

⁷⁹1296a17-18.

⁸⁰1332a1-3.

While this seems a clear enough signal that great wealth is not likely to lead naturally to moral nobility, it is important not to stray too far in the opposite direction of interpretation. While Aristotle emphasizes that excellence (as opposed to wealth, for example) is "the principle" of aristocracy and that in aristocracy the distribution of offices is properly made on the basis of virtue and not wealth, Aristotle guardedly notes that "the rich [hoi euporoi]...commonly take the place of the noble [ton kalon kagathon]"⁸¹ and that "the notables [tōn gnorimōn]...may be divided according to their wealth, birth, excellence, education, and similar differences."⁸² Some measure of wealth, especially old wealth, may for Aristotle be a presumption in favour of virtue. Presumably this is why Aristotle seems to think it best that there is no income for public officials where offices are open to all, so that "the notables [kaloikagathoi] would be magistrates"; so long as the poor are well governed, they will be content not to participate."⁸³ The poor appear to be more likely to govern to the detriment of the society than are the well-to-do. But this too is only true up to a certain point, if it is true that the middle condition is best.

Aristotle's willingness to give a limited role to what

⁸¹1294a18-19.

⁸²1291b29-30.

⁸³1309a3.

he calls "freedom" (eleutheriotēs) (as well as to wealth) as an organizing principle is also discernible. Eleutheriotēs has the sense of generosity or liberality as well as of liberty. Aristotle identifies six possible forms of government in the Politics III.6, in terms of pairs of contraries, one of each of which is preferable to the other; these are monarchy/tyranny, aristocracy/oligarchy and constitution (polity)/democracy. In general, Aristotle suggests, a state resembling either an aristocracy or a constitution is best. Each type of government represents a different system of valuations; freedom is the key principle of democracy. In a democracy, "everyone lives as he pleases...according to his fancy."⁴ (For Aristotle, radical democracy implies the impoverishment of the rich to level the disparity in wealth and opportunities between them and the poor.) The main criterion of evaluation in an oligarchy is wealth, and in aristocracy, as we said, merit, i.e., virtue. Constitution is described as a mean between democracy and oligarchy; therefore, its organization is somewhat shaped by the principle of freedom and somewhat by the notion of a wealthier minority (the property qualification for election is higher than in democracy proper).⁵ Since aristocracy or constitution is best, virtue or some combination of virtue and wealth are the best

⁴"1310a29 (V.2.)

⁵See Politics IV.3, IV.9.

organizing principles. Yet, on the other hand, a balance between the interests of rich and poor needs to be struck," and where the state is an oligarchy (where wealth predominates and virtue counts for little), measures are needed to attend to the welfare of the poor, just as in democracies (where freedom predominates and virtue counts for little), "the rich should be spared."⁷ Furthermore, a just aristocracy or constitution should have a property qualification low enough so that a majority is always enfranchised."⁸ Whether we speak of aristocracy or of constitution, wealth and virtue remain distinct principles, else oligarchy and aristocracy would converge for Aristotle. He is careful to distinguish between the principles of virtue and of wealth and underline that although both are vital, virtue is the most fundamental of all. "The greatest opposition is confessedly that of excellence and badness; next comes that of wealth and poverty."⁹ Speaking of the organization of states in general, Aristotle stresses that "political society exists for the sake of noble actions, and not of living together" (nor, one might add, of moneymaking!)."¹⁰

⁷See Politics IV.14.

⁸1309a15; a20-1.

⁹1297b1-5.

¹⁰1303b15-16.

¹¹1281a3-4.

From this selective overview of the Politics one might hazard to claim that for Aristotle, while great virtue conduces towards prosperity rather than poverty, and a condition of comparative and long-term prosperity also likely conduces to virtue better than poverty does, there seems no such essential affinity between great virtue and great prosperity, and more likely the latter is an impediment to the former. Thus, the fact that Aristotle professes a meritocratic and (for us) moderately antidemocratic kind of elitism does not seem to entail that he restricts excellence of character to the ranks of either the landed gentry (although there is clearly some presumption in their favour) or the mercantile element (where there certainly is not). The distinction between noble birth--in the sense of tracing one's ancestry to an hereditary ruling class--and self-made wealth is significant for Aristotle in that he expresses an aversion to mercantile pursuits,⁹¹ and the emphasis he puts on the distinction between wealth and merit could in reality partly serve as a means to resist the threat to power posed by entrepreneurial capital. From all these references in the Ethics and Politics it is not clear that Aristotle wishes to limit nobility of character to a hereditary elite. W.J. Bartling (1963), one of whose themes is the aristocratic motif in Aristotle's megalopsuchia, agrees that in the Politics

⁹¹See Politics I.2, VIII.1.

Aristotle espouses a "radical" aristocratism based on merit more than birth or wealth, and finds it remarkable that he "manages to curb his aristocratic bias [that of class prejudice] to the extent he does."²² For Aristotle, people whose lives are given over to incessant pursuit of material gain either by necessity (like the labourer) or by choice (the financier) cannot attain moral nobility. But besides the options of incessant work for gain, on one hand, and the choice of complete leisure for the practice of politics or philosophy, on the other, one might suppose there is plenty of leeway not only for those of noble birth but also for those of moderate means to practice the two higher pursuits to some extent and to develop the qualities of soul more fitting to such activities. "[W]e can do noble acts without ruling earth and sea; for even with moderate advantages one can act excellently."²³

Ironically, it is even possible that what makes megalopsuchia more remarkable in the rich and powerful is that their circumstances make acquisition and maintenance of the virtue more difficult than it is for those whose predicament made greater demands for prudent restraint."

²²Walter James Bartling, "Megalopsuchia: An Interpretation of Aristotle's Ethical Ideal," (Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, 1963), 233.

²³1179a4-7; a12.

²⁴One could make the simple logical objection to my claim (that the great soul need not be rich or powerful and need not be a megaloprepēs) that Aristotle endorses the unity of

What motive is there to learn the reasonably efficient but not petty-minded use of resources (characteristic of liberality) where they exist in great excess? In any case, some great deeds--perhaps even the greatest of all--do not necessarily involve the use of any external resources, except for the strength of one's own body." Those who courageously give their life for the sake of the good choose for themselves "a great prize [mega kalon]." At the same place Aristotle groups one's life with wealth and power and all the goods that men struggle to win as things worth giving up for the sake of nobility.

I have argued in this section that, as a liberal-minded person with regard to external goods, the great soul recognizes the usefulness and to some extent the indispensability of wealth and property, physical health, education, good fortune, and so forth, while he understands that it is the state of one's soul that is most crucial in

virtues, megalo-prepeia is a virtue, hence the megalo-psuchos more than anyone else must be rich or powerful. As I argued in the preceding chapter in regard to weakness of will and the variability in the ends for which one's virtues serve, Aristotle's unity thesis is not so strict. There is also the evidence we have raised to the contrary in the present chapter. Aristotle also has a revealing passage about wealthy imitators of the great soul, people who despise their poorer fellows but lack the great soul's exceptional virtue and are therefore unjustified in their contempt (1124a29-1124b6).

"[T]he brave man will need power if he is to accomplish any of the acts that correspond to his excellence..." (1178a31-2).

"1169a25-6.

determining the goodness (or lack of it) of the uses to which such resources are put. Greatness of soul is essentially restricted to those who are both virtuous and who value virtue above anything else rather than to the traditional aristocratic class. Moderately good fortune over a long period may well conduce to the formation of noble virtue, but the latter is not only clearly distinct from the former but sometimes really separable from it. For Aristotle, moral nobility and worldly prosperity are far from being naturally at odds, but the truly noble soul rightly holds prosperity in disdain in comparison to inner excellence wherever it is found.

3.3.2 Honour as Aristotle's alleged supreme good

As discussed earlier, Jaffa takes the great soul's special regard toward honour as a wrong-headed kind of preoccupation. Other commentators such as Neil Cooper (1989)⁹ and Nancy Sherman, who do unlike Jaffa take the great soul to be Aristotle's paradigm human being, suggest that it is the absorption of the megaloopsuchos with honour that is at the root of many of the tendencies that post-classical standards find unenlightened and frankly repellant. We must agree that the more absorbed the great soul is with honour simpliciter, the more shallow and

⁹Neil Cooper, "Aristotle's Crowning Virtue," Apeiron 22 (1989): 191-205.

precarious his conception of the good appears. If the great soul's greatness turns on his being socially honoured, then he cannot maintain his sense of greatness without everyone else conforming to his belief in his superiority, and we might expect him to be persistently striving to maintain this image in society by whatever means necessary, whether through attempts to win public favour or simple overt domination of others. Of course, the more his self-honour is only a function of the honour others bestow, the emptier the content of that honour becomes. But no one can plausibly deny that Aristotle offers some sort of conception of what merits this honour that saves it from being completely arbitrary and utterly at the mercy of social recognition. It is thus possible for any commentator to distinguish in principle between the self-honour of the great soul and his public honour. Yet some critics still maintain that the great soul's special preoccupation is more with the honour itself--the notion of one's exceptional worth relative to others--even if his worth is not always grasped by others.

One could imagine the great soul having a prime preoccupation with honour that has some sort of independent basis even if he does not tend to arrogant or disrespectful behaviour. The most extreme instance of this would be a person who grasped that no one could reasonably be expected to share in his valuations. Such a person might outwardly

appear to have a perfectly mundane sense of himself, yet secretly suppose himself the greatest person alive. But this is either a humorous caricature of Everyman or a promising if harmless candidate for some category of mental disturbance rather than an object of serious moral philosophical interest.

It is not necessary to reflect upon such a far-flung interpretation of the great soul, however, because writers who fault him with a preoccupation for honour do tend to see him as inclining towards arrogance, contemptuousness, and moral poverty as well as superficiality by more modernist cultural standards. To the extent this prime focus upon honour (rather than upon its justification) accurately describes the great soul, then either the virtue of moral humility in the greatest people is not really a moral quality in any interesting sense (if Aristotle's great soul fully exemplifies the virtue), or Aristotle's great soul is not really an illustration of that virtue (if it is really a moral quality in any interesting sense).

The question at issue, then, is whether these commentators correctly view the great soul's nature and attitudes. I am arguing that the whole complex of traits and idiosyncrasies characteristic of the great soul is more consistent with someone who takes the wholly independent concept of moral virtue to be the supreme value than such traits would be consistent with someone who gave pride of

place to honour itself, and that Aristotle's explicit claims for virtue over honour should decide how these traits are to be read. In a complementary way I am claiming that the great soul is not fairly characterized as arrogant, disrespectful, narcissistic, priggish, hollow, and the like. Hence, megalopsuchia properly understood should be morally attractive to the modern reader and it can also fully exemplify what we called moral humility in highly virtuous people.

Before discussing Cooper's view in particular, it is necessary to comment briefly on the question of the relative roles of the Nicomachean Ethics and the Eudemian Ethics. The Eudemian treatise (EE) has already been used once to explicate the notion of noble-goodness. Generally, however, we have thus far treated Aristotelian ethics as synonymous with the Nicomachean manuscript (NE), even though EE is also specifically concerned with the good life and nowadays regarded as authentic (in the sense of being a transcription of Aristotle's own views if not written by Aristotle himself).⁹ Historically and throughout most of the modern period most attention has fallen upon NE on the grounds that it was assumed of later date, it is more extensive and detailed, and it is perhaps stylistically more accessible. Aristotle's influence on the Western moral tradition has

⁹There is a third, brief treatise known as the Magna Moralia whose authenticity is greatly doubted; we ignore it altogether as do most commentators.

been largely by way of it rather than the other treatise. The critical consensus was challenged by Kenny (1978), who claimed that EE was the later and more definitive."

Kenny's arguments are still disputed, and partly for the reasons already given, we mainly employ the Nicomachean Ethics when discussing Aristotle.

In a comparison of the two main texts there are significant differences in the nonidentical books (both works share three chapters). One is that the excellences of philosophy and of politics appear to be more explicitly harmonized in EE. There are also rather subtle differences with regard to the account of megalopsuchia in the two works, and the impression of the virtue left by the Nicomachean treatise is more consistent with my thesis in this chapter than is the impression of greatness of soul given by the Eudemian. Clearly, then, it serves the end of my argument to give greater emphasis to the better known work, as is still in keeping with the scholarly tradition. If NE is later and more conclusive, then one can discern a process of development in the ethical meaning and centrality Aristotle wants to attribute to greatness of soul.

The great soul in both the NE and EE appears to care little for externals other than honour. In the former we read that "he will also bear himself with moderation towards

"See Anthony Paul Kenny, The Aristotelian Ethics: A Study of the Relationship Between the Nicomachean Ethics and the Eudemian Ethics (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978).

wealth and power and all good or evil fortune"; in the latter, that "as regards honour, life and wealth...he values none of them except honour."¹⁰⁰ The consequence in both is that great souls are thought to be haughty or disdainful (EE says kataphronetikon, NE says hyperoptai).¹⁰¹ But the Eudemian language becomes more pointed. "Contempt [oligōron] seems particularly the special characteristic of the magnanimous man....He would be pained if denied honour....He delights most of all when he obtains honour."¹⁰² Notice how general contempt and a fixation upon honour work together here. Clearly, a person whose most prominent trait is general contemptuousness is not so likely to seem morally inspiring. This is why the speculation that the account in NE IV.3 has superseded that in the Eudemian Ethics is attractive.

By comparison, the more familiar account says that "at honours that are great and conferred by good men he will be moderately pleased....For not even about honour does he care much, although it is the greatest thing...for him to whom even honour is a little thing the others must be so too."¹⁰³ Perhaps the most extreme characterization of the great soul's valuations is a negative one entirely absent in

¹⁰⁰NE 1124a14-15; EE 1232b10-11.

¹⁰¹EE 1232a39; NE 1124a20.

¹⁰²1232b8-13.

¹⁰³1124a5-19 (emphasis mine).

the Eudemian Ethics but in the Nicomachean thrice stated in IV.3: "[F]or to what end should he do disgraceful acts, he to whom nothing is great?"; "Nor is he given to admiration, since nothing is great to him"; "Nor is the man who thinks nothing great likely to be excited."¹⁰⁴ One has the impression that the person who is pained when denied honour (in the Eudemian Ethics) must acknowledge that something is great apart from his own extraordinary merits: public recognition of them. Of course, the Nicomachean great soul does seem to find something, viz. moral virtue--or moral and intellectual virtue--great in some sense.

The hint of obsessiveness towards honour unique to the Eudemian great soul leads Aristotle to acknowledge a possible paradox. "In this way he would seem to contradict himself; for to be concerned above all with honour, and yet to disdain the multitude and reputation, are inconsistent."¹⁰⁵ In one sense, of course, they are not, if one succeeds in inspiring "honour" through manifesting contempt for those by whom one would be honoured. But Aristotle is evidently not interested in so crude a notion of social esteem.

Aristotle seems to think he meets this difficulty of disdain coupled with dependency in the EE by drawing a distinction between the "small" honours of the multitude and

¹⁰⁴1123b32-33; 1125a3; a14-16.

¹⁰⁵1232b14-15.

the "great" honour of men of discrimination. But it would remain true that the great soul is dependent for his self-affirmation upon the opinion of others, the men of discrimination.

There is a similar analysis of honour given in the Nicomachean account set out in II.7:

With regard to honour and dishonour, the mean is proper pride [megaloopsuchia]...and as we said liberality was related to magnificence [in habits of expenditure], differing from it by dealing with small sums, so there is a state similarly related to proper pride, being concerned with small honours while that is concerned with great. For it is possible to desire small honours as one ought, and more than one ought, and less, and the man who exceeds in his desires is called ambitious [philotimos], the man who falls short unambitious [aphilotimos], while the intermediate person has no name.¹⁰⁶

This distinction is recalled at IV.4, immediately after the account of greatness of soul.

The shift in the tone of the great soul's description is curious. Gauthier, who adopts the traditional position on the relative roles of the two ethical texts, sees a hesitation in Aristotle's Eudemian account reflecting an awareness that his response to the paradox is imperfect.¹⁰⁷ According to Gauthier, the weakness is that quirks of fate may deny someone the recognition he deserves on the strongest grounds possible; the Eudemian great soul would find his happiness subject to fortune. In what Gauthier

¹⁰⁶1107b22-30.

¹⁰⁷Gauthier, 62.

takes to be the later and more coherent Nicomachean account, Aristotle has succeeded in affording the morally outstanding person an outstanding level of independence from fortune, a self-sufficiency in harmony with the intrinsic value and supremacy of virtue. Aristotle's conception has shifted from a megalopsuchos who craves his due along the lines of an Achilles or an Ajax to one of Socratic serenity, whose virtue is not tied to public acclaim, even though the great soul knows he merits such acclaim. At the same time, the great soul has become more emphatically identified as the paragon of virtue in the Nicomachean version.

If one supposed that the two ethical works were meant to be essentially in accord with regard to the nature of megalopsuchia, then one might be tempted to favour the Eudemian version on the grounds that "the tension [between caring for honour and thinking nothing really matters much] is more explicitly addressed and resolved" in that version.¹⁰⁸ This appears to be the reasoning behind the remark of Neil Cooper. Cooper does not acknowledge that Aristotle does not use any variant of the phrase "nothing is great" in the Eudemian discussion, and Cooper does not make it clear that Aristotle regards virtue as what makes honour of interest to the megalopsuchos much more clearly in the Nicomachean Ethics. As a result, Cooper seems to see the two discussions as only slightly different ways of

¹⁰⁸Cooper, 196.

expressing the apparent Eudemian view that (great) honour is the fundamental concern of the great soul. If the EE view is definitive, then naturally the Eudemian account appears to do a somewhat better job of conveying this view. If, however, we suppose with Gauthier that the whole perspective on greatness of soul has importantly shifted in the (presumed later) Nicomachean Ethics, then there is less reason to fault Aristotle with an internal tension there. I believe the Nicomachean account better resolves the tension between being at the mercy of public opinion and disdaining that opinion. It does so by portraying the great soul as neither primarily interested in receiving the honour he knows that he is due nor habitually dwelling upon the sense of his own worthiness in comparison to that of most. The great soul identifies above all with virtue and its honourableness, which incidentally devolves to him also.

Cooper claims that the megalopsuchos (in general) "seeks above all to be honoured for his great virtue,"¹⁰⁹ a choice of phrase that casts doubt on the priority of having moral goodness over its public recognition. Perhaps Cooper did not intend to convey in his choice of words here the sense that honour indeed takes precedence over virtue. Cooper cites a Nicomachean passage at 1095b28-9, which says that people in general "seem to pursue honour in order that they may be assured of their merit; at least it is by men of

¹⁰⁹Ibid.

practical wisdom that they seek to be honoured...and on the ground of their excellence." What he does not cite is the immediate continuation of this passage which runs, "Clearly, then, according to [the behaviour of such men] at any rate, excellence is better." He might also in his defence have cited another line from the Nicomachean Ethics, "It is honour that they [hoi megaloi, the great] claim, but in accordance with their deserts."¹¹⁰ As we have argued on the basis of the Ethics as a whole, however, the most plausible way to read this seems to be that great individuals claim honour above all else if one is speaking of goods other than one's inner excellences themselves. "[F]or there can be no honour that is worthy of perfect excellence," Aristotle says, "yet [the great soul] will at any rate accept it since they have nothing greater to bestow on him."¹¹¹ Certainly they cannot "give" him the virtue that his character already possesses.

In fairness to Cooper, he seems partly influenced by the aim of finding a sort of unity in the whole Aristotelian corpus, as he brings to bear Aristotle's brief linguistic observations about greatness of soul in the earlier Posterior Analytics¹¹² as well as the accounts within the two Ethics. This likely contributes to Cooper's perspective

¹¹⁰1123b23-4.

¹¹¹1124a8-9.

¹¹²97b15-25.

on the Ethics. In the Analytics, Aristotle reports two popular views of the quality, refusal to tolerate being dishonoured (what Gauthier called the Achillean model) and sovereign indifference to the vagaries of fortune (the Socratic). There, Aristotle makes no attempt to show how these disparate features cohere, and Cooper perceives the Ethics as a progression from the starting materials of the Analytics.

What makes the greater honours described in the Nicomachean Ethics radically new on our interpretation is that, as Stephen White puts it, Aristotle "revises traditional attitudes towards honor...[in that] moral virtue replaces competitive excellence as the ground for heroism."¹¹³ White goes so far as to suggest that the great soul's sense of what matters may motivate him to repudiate the conventional notions of virtue: "to do what is right even at the risk of public disgrace."¹¹⁴ In the words of Osborne, "That Aristotle grants to such a man the title 'megalopsuchos' and does so because of his earned, inner honor and not externally bestowed honor is an act of great innovation and daring."¹¹⁵

Thus, if the great soul is (as seems the case) the paragon of Aristotelian virtue, there is a world of

¹¹³White, 251.

¹¹⁴Ibid., 261.

¹¹⁵Osborne, 121.

difference between the implications of reading him to be all about honour and reading him to be all about virtue. On the interpretation advanced here, megalopsuchia in the Nicomachean treatise points to the rejection of what is sometimes called a "shame culture"--a society in which it is impossible to understand self-esteem except in terms of meeting prevalent social expectations. The alternative reading is that this pagan ethic does not overcome the moral naivete inherent in the notion of worthiness in a shame culture. The way one reads Aristotle as a whole seems to hang on the way the great soul regards honour more than on any other feature of the Ethics.¹¹⁶

The alleged obsession with honour figures in interpretations of another frowned-upon quirk of the great soul, his characteristic "to be sluggish [argon] and to hold back, except where great honour as a great result is at stake, and to be a man of few deeds, but of great and notable ones."¹¹⁷ Hardie says that this indication of inactivity is "one of the most disconcerting of the traits....It is a picture of remoteness where we might expect persistent devotion to the public good"¹¹⁸ while

¹¹⁶See Cordner (Ibid., especially 296-9) for an illustration of how sweeping claims about the superficiality of Aristotelian ethics can be heavily dependent upon the interpretation that the great soul is fixated upon honour as his end.

¹¹⁷1124b24-6.

¹¹⁸Hardie, "Magnanimity," 65.

Sherman understands by the line that the person "will, as it were, store up efforts for great and spectacular moments" and thinks Aristotle believes that such occasional bursts of brilliance are what "seems to excuse [the great soul] from more ongoing and persistent concern for the welfare of others."¹¹⁹ This manner of behaviour, she argues, is inconsistent with Aristotle's overall ethical theory in that moral conduct must mean "a sustained chain of actions" rather than "one time isolated efforts."¹²⁰ Like Cooper, Sherman also reasons that the megaloopsuchos' concern for honour is what motivates such choices; it is a calculated and priggish interest in selectively pursuing only the greatest honour. Both commentators seem indifferent to Aristotle's remark that it is also the mark of the great soul "to give help readily" and to be "unassuming towards those of the middle class" as well to be "the sort of man to confer benefits."¹²¹ These traits do not seem suggestive of someone who deliberately refrains from doing small good deeds, or of someone who will only go out of his way to come to the assistance of others when they have dire need of it, as Sherman speculates in her illustrations.¹²²

The motivational picture Sherman suggests seems to miss

¹¹⁹Sherman, 105.

¹²⁰Ibid., 99.

¹²¹1124b18-19; b9.

¹²²Sherman, 107.

the point. In the purity and simplicity of his concern, someone whose attention is oriented to the good in its most comprehensive and profound sense may simply not be prone to notice the most trivial cases where there are readily discernible ways to act in support of virtue. Such meticulousness might well seem more apt to a person who was constantly preoccupied with doing what appears honourable (if such activity were always the more honourable course). It is logical to suppose, as Howard Curzer notes, that the megalopsuchos will perform all actions required by virtue.¹²³ That he does not engage in a variety of further actions that would be in conformity with virtue (perhaps including the tireless search for opportunities for benefitting others on a modest scale) may only seem significant on a certain notion of virtuousness that is not Aristotle's, i.e., one very closely tied to maximizing acts of benevolence, what one could call the "social worker view" of goodness.

As just suggested, much practical activity is likely normally engaged in by many out of a desire to earn the small honours; that is, out of the run-of-the-mill ambition Aristotle termed philotimia. Aristotle may create the impression that the great soul should have a moderate degree of this lesser ambition, since he says it admits of a virtuous mean. But we know that "honour from casual people

¹²³Curzer, "Aristotle's Much Maligned Megalopsuchos," 140.

and on trifling grounds he will utterly despise," and presumably this is why "he will not aim at the things commonly held in honour or the things in which others excel."¹²⁴ Such a perspective seems to require a significant measure of practical inactivity in comparison to other people. These commentators probably would not infer from his avoidance of gossip that he has no interest in or understanding of the moral character of his fellow citizens. Similarly, perhaps we ought not to infer from the above lines about ambition that he is indifferent to or ignorant of the moral content of everyday social affairs, and by the same token we should not think he is morally defective if he fails to attempt to do every good deed he could have possibly done.

With a different passage, Sherman points to another quirk of the great-souled that has caused discomfiture. This is the suspect trait of forgetfulness for favours received which Jaffa also cited as evidence of the megaloopsuchos's misvaluations: "They seem also to remember any service they have done, but not those they have received (for he who has received a service is inferior...)." ¹²⁵ By contrast, consider what Aristotle describes in the Rhetoric as the requirements of decency or equity (epieikeia). The Rhetoric says that decency "bids us to remember benefits

¹²⁴1124a10; 1124b23-4.

¹²⁵1124b12-14.

rather than injuries and benefits received rather than benefits conferred; it requires us to be patient when we are wronged."¹²⁶ Since Aristotle discusses the propriety of reciprocation of benefits (charis) in the book of the Ethics on justice as well as in the Rhetoric, the contrast cannot fail to exercise anyone hoping to demonstrate that the great soul excels in every virtue.

Sympathetic readers have tried to ameliorate this tension in various ways. Gauthier thinks that Aristotle himself acknowledges this paradox and tries to explain it at 1167b17-19.¹²⁷ Here Aristotle notes that benefactors seem fonder of their beneficiaries than vice versa, and then proposes as the explanation that the benefactor feels friendship and affection for what is in a sense his "handiwork" [ergon]: "The cause of this is that existence is to all men a thing to be chosen and loved, and that we exist by virtue of activity."¹²⁸ While the beneficiary passively experiences the deed, which is to him at most profitable or useful, the benefactor enjoys an element of nobility in the deed, so that the useful receipt of a favour is nonetheless less pleasant and lovable than the personally useless act of beneficence. The linkage of nobility with overflowing activity is certainly of plausible relevance to the great

¹²⁶1374b16-17.

¹²⁷Gauthier, 93.

¹²⁸1168b6-7.

soul's absence of mind. Bartling also endorses the explanation that "activity is superior to passivity"; furthermore, he suggests, gratitude and other passive qualities are not genuine virtues on Aristotle's perspective.¹²⁹ On Bartling's view the great soul simply is ungrateful, and his generosity is motivated not by love of the other but "by the desire to shine in the splendour of his own noble deeds, and, if at all possible, to outshine others."¹³⁰

Curzer attempts a somewhat more charitable reading. "The megalopsuchos is sad to have been in need of help, but this does not imply or even suggest that [he] is sad to have been helped," offers Curzer.¹³¹ As Curzer points out, the great soul more than repays any favour that is done to him, so that his forgetfulness of the favour seems less blameworthy than it would otherwise; nor need his excessive return of the benefit aim at restoring his superiority. "That the original benefactor goes into debt is a foreseen, but unintended consequence."¹³² But it is perhaps easier to square Bartling's reading with the original text. Why would Aristotle trouble to note in the account of the great soul that conferring benefits "is the mark of a superior"

¹²⁹Bartling, 117.

¹³⁰Ibid., 114.

¹³¹Curzer, "Aristotle's Much Maligned Megalopsuchos," 138.

¹³²Ibid.

and receiving them "of an inferior" and that by overpaying the debt the original benefactor is thus (houtō) indebted?¹³³

Gauthier's and Bartling's reference to activity seems the more credible account of the great soul's forgetfulness. Perhaps the more the megalopsuchos dwelled in his thoughts upon gratitude, the more his basic orientation as an overall contributor to the general good would lose emphasis. But there are other factors that can mitigate the sense of ingratitude here. The passage in the Rhetoric remarks that decency in part bids one remember benefits rather than injuries. There is no doubt that the great soul does not dwell upon any losses he suffers at the hands of others, just as he does not dwell on gains from them. "Nor is he mindful of wrongs; for it is not the part of a proud man to have a long memory, especially for wrongs, but rather to overlook them."¹³⁴ At least one can say there is more decency here than in one who forgets favours received and also dwells upon slights. Another part of the Rhetoric passage read that decency requires us to be patient when we are wronged. We recall that this too is quite apt to the great soul. He is not over-pained by evil, and

with regard to necessary or small matters he is least of all men given to lamentation or the asking of favours; for it is the part of one who takes such matters

¹³³1124b11-12.

¹³⁴1125a4-5.

seriously to behave so with respect to them."¹³⁵

Here again one might be tempted to gather that the great soul stifles his real feelings for the sake of a public pose. But since he genuinely believes that nothing is great--except virtue--and he understands that his character will preserve him from being wretched no matter how ill his fortunes, such misfortunes should cause substantially less concern than they would to most. If this behaviour still strikes one as odd and artificial, one should note

Aristotle's remarks, in his discussion of friendship, that

to see [a friend] pained at our misfortunes is painful; for every one shuns being a cause of pain to his friends. For this reason people of a manly nature guard against making their friends grieve with them, and, unless he be exceptionally insensible to pain, such a man cannot stand the pain that ensues for his friends...¹³⁶

The great soul clearly seems to contradict the other stated condition of decency, that one remember benefits received rather than benefits conferred. Since the great soul seems to meet the other criteria of decency more than adequately, it might be more reasonable to suppose that the way in which he contravenes the third requirement is on the grounds of his exceptional nature permissible and does not thereby compromise his character. If greatness of soul were nothing but having every other virtue, then Aristotle would probably not have seen fit to devote so many pages to a

¹³⁵1124a16; 1125a9-11.

¹³⁶1171b5-8.

distinctive portrait. Generally speaking the megaloopsuchos does embody the various virtues in his own distinctive fashion. For example, he is said not to face dangers on trivial grounds, but to be fully prepared to risk his life in a great cause. Aristotle's discussion of courage in III.6-9 says that this virtue is a mean between cowardice (unwillingness to face any dangers) and rashness (tending to underestimate the danger). Rashness is closer to courage than is cowardice, and those aspiring to be courageous may tend to err on the side of foolhardiness. But the great soul is not aspiring to courage, and it is of no concern to him whether he appears to lack courage to those who have a defective and morally blurred conception of it as a simple tendency not to be afraid.

If this special exemption about the requirements of decency is not made for the great soul, then, he will seem to fulfil the conditions of the virtue of epieikeia in at best a middling way. One might speculate that Aristotle addresses the third aspect of gratitude to the petty-minded, who chiefly dwell on their own shortcomings and everyone else's and who expect more from others than they themselves are willing to offer.

Finally it is worth adding that it does not seem necessary to infer that the great soul is, in any sense meaningful to others, ungrateful. If he is courteous in general, and assuming Aristotle is well acquainted with

conventional wisdom on what politeness requires, then it would appear that the megalopsuchos gives every appearance of gratitude even if he dwells little on what others have done for him. Someone who more than returns the favours done him would on that evidence alone certainly appear grateful, and it would also be consistent with such behaviour to express gratitude outwardly, even if in a restrained fashion ("nor again is he given to praise") and without inward fervour ("[sometimes speaking] in irony to the vulgar [tous pollous]").¹³⁷

3.3.3 Contemptus Mundi

The last especially little-admired feature of the great soul is his tendency to regard many with contempt or haughtiness, even if he does not make these views plain to the people towards whom he holds them. As discussed in the previous chapter, it is entirely consistent with the notion that persons can legitimately be subject to a comprehensive kind of appraisal that leads to judgments of persons as better or worse than one another to posit that persons who have exceptional moral worth and know themselves as such would be fully justified in regarding most other people as their inferiors in this fundamental sense. This is true no matter how alien this line of reasoning seems to readers of Aristotle who have inherited a Christian influenced

¹³⁷1125a7; 1124b30.

viewpoint that such regard is simply unacceptable. Curzer suggests that the generally bad press of the megalopsuchos and the tendency to seize upon every bit of evidence in IV.3 that would lend credence to one's disapproval of the great soul is in part attributable to the unavowed but operative Christian-like assumptions about what is a properly moral attitude to one's fellows.¹³⁸ This explanation is likely close to the mark.

In spite of his reputation for arrogance and pervasive contemptuousness, Aristotle never unambiguously asserts in the Nicomachean account that the great soul behaves in such a fashion, except towards the wealthy and powerful, with whom he is megan.¹³⁹ Although Aristotle acknowledges that the great souled "are thought to be disdainful" (hyperoptai dokousin einai),¹⁴⁰ and more boldly states that a megalopsuchos "despises [kataphronousi] [others] justly (since he thinks truly),"¹⁴¹ Aristotle explains:

it is difficult and lofty thing to be superior to [people of high position and good fortune], but easy to be so towards [the middle class], and a lofty bearing over the former is no mark of ill-breeding, but among humble people it is as vulgar as a display of strength against the weak.¹⁴²

¹³⁸Curzer, "Aristotle's Much Maligned Megalopsuchos," 147ff.

¹³⁹1124b20.

¹⁴⁰1124a19-20.

¹⁴¹1124b5-6.

¹⁴²1124b21-23.

While there is little doubt that the great soul puts a much lower value on many things than most people do, an inward perspective that could readily be regarded as a sort of universal contempt, it is much more difficult to find evidence that the megalopsuchos has a characteristically offensive or insolent manner, except in his dealings with those who would be popularly (but erroneously) supposed the subjects with the greatest claim to honour. Aristotle suggests that there is nothing unseemly in the great soul's deliberate lack of deference towards those of merely conventional social status. Such conduct would clearly demonstrate the great soul's rejection of the more commonplace view that position and power, not virtue, are what really matter, in a way that is neither vulgar nor hurtful--to those whose self-estimate is no higher than it should be. His outward arrogance, selective as it is, ends up appearing to confirm his unconventional sole respect for virtue as opposed to wealth, status, and other mere appearances of greatness.

It is helpful to note here N.R.E. Fisher's (1976) discussion of several dispositions related to the denial of honour.¹⁴³ According to Fisher, Aristotle defines "slighting" [oligōria] as "actualizing an opinion of

¹⁴³N.R.E. Fisher, "Hybris and Dishonour: I," Greece and Rome 23 (1976): 177-93.

something's worthlessness" in the Rhetoric.¹⁴⁴ Sights are divided into three types, of increasing seriousness: kataphronesis, epereasmos [spitefulness], and hybris. Aristotle employs a form of the general term [oligōresein] to describe the great soul's disposition towards honour itself when he writes that the megalopsuchos disdains [oligōresei] honour as understood by the multitude as well as dishonour in any form.¹⁴⁵ We have also seen the feeling of contempt or kataphronesis--the most moderate species of slight--attached to the great soul in EE. However, Aristotle never attributes epereasmos or hybris to either the Nicomachean or the Eudemian great soul.¹⁴⁶ Fisher paraphrases Aristotle's "considered and consistent" conception of hybris in the Rhetoric as "doing and saying things at which the victim incurs shame, not in order that one may achieve anything [else], but simply to get pleasure from it."¹⁴⁷ As Fisher notes, it is the pretenders to genuine honour, not the great souls, who are said to show hybris, although huperoptai and kataphronousin are used of both classes.

¹⁴⁴Ibid., 178ff., cf. Rhetoric 1378b10ff.

¹⁴⁵1124a10-12.

¹⁴⁶In fact Aristotle elsewhere states that a closely related disposition to epereasmos, epikairekakias, is always vicious, hence by definition inapplicable to the megalopsuchos. See 1107a9-17 and 1108b1-10.

¹⁴⁷Fisher, 179.

Fisher believes one finds "implicit in almost all instances of hybris the notion of injured honor."¹⁴⁸ Evidently the object of hybristic behaviour is the person whose honour is always injured. The great soul is the agent who claims and deserves the highest honour, in fact who deserves no dishonour. In one way, one would suppose that this figure would be the most vulnerable of all to the hybris of others, since he correctly believes himself to be worthy of the highest honour. This would be true if the great soul's sense of his own honour were reliant upon public recognition of it. But in practice things are quite otherwise. In the Nicomachean account (as opposed to the Eudemian) there is no indication that the great soul's self-assurance is vulnerable to personal slight: in this sense one could say that he is incapable of being the object of hybris. Fisher's claimed link from his reading of the Rhetoric appears to mean more. Those who are particularly vulnerable to the hybris of others are also more likely to be hybristic themselves: "those who are most likely to defend themselves energetically against attacks on their honour are those also most likely to be tempted to attack the honour of others."¹⁴⁹ On Aristotle's view it tends to be the young and especially the rich who fit both categories. The great soul's conviction of what really

¹⁴⁸Ibid., 180.

¹⁴⁹Ibid., 182.

matters and his confidence in his self-understanding mean that he is supremely invulnerable to such slights, while the irony of the total disproportion between the way such people treat him and what he deserves could hardly escape him.

A final insight is suggested by Fisher's discussion of honour and shame. With regard to the important notion of social rank in Greek society, Fisher describes how it would be considered acceptable to treat others in a manner consistent with their relative status. For example, the behaviour of rulers towards citizens would have to be more contemptuous than would that of someone towards a social equal in order to be hybristic, while inferiors would be practising hybris by merely trying to assert equality with their superiors.¹⁵⁰ By showing a modest demeanour towards those who would properly take themselves to be his inferiors, the great soul seems to possess a sort of respectfulness towards other people, and perhaps even towards human beings as such, that runs counter to cultural convention. (One should concede that, on our interpretation, a particular megaloopsuchos may not be popularly regarded as meriting the greatest deference, in which case his respectfulness towards people will not seem so striking.) To the uncertain extent that the great soul tends to be a person of more conventionally high status, however, he will appear unusually modest.

¹⁵⁰Ibid., 184.

This chapter has tried to do two things. First, it has provided evidence for the view that Aristotle's unreserved moral ideal is the great soul, and by the same token self-knowledge of the unrivalled importance of moral goodness and of one's unexcelled possession of this goodness. This makes for an obvious parallel between the megalopsuchos and what in the last chapter was called humility in exceptionally moral people. Second, the present chapter has argued that the Aristotle's paragon of virtue combines warranted exceptional self-esteem with an array of social qualities which even a modern reader can find admirable: generosity, amiability and helpfulness, an affectionate concern for the genuine good of one's fellows, civility, discretion, open contempt for the arrogant, personal courage in defence of what really matters, detachment from the passing and shallow enthusiasms of the mob, and so forth. In addition, of course, this individual possesses all the other virtues and qualities Aristotle identifies--inner fortitude and stability in the face of adversity, fairness, temperateness, and the rest. My claim is that all of these dispositions are better understood as reflections of a core commitment to what is genuinely moral and noble than as parts of a carefully contrived image which is supposed to fit the conventional view of what is praiseworthy and honourable precisely for the sake of eliciting social esteem. If my reading is tenable, then Aristotle's moral framework

succeeds in properly harmonizing moral humility in the finest human characters with a basic respectfulness and goodwill towards people, even though they are lesser people.

To recall Statman's opening view of the megalopsuchos, we can agree that Aristotle's paragon of virtue "is one who, justifiably, has a high opinion of himself," but it is on my reading of Aristotle very misleading for Statman to add (after Cooper) that the great soul "expects others to acknowledge his worth and grant him appropriate honours."¹⁵¹ Judging from Aristotle's analysis of moral excellence, what Chapter Two calls the moral humility of persons of the highest merit does involve a very firm and positive self-assurance, but it need not involve an insistent and urgent demand for social recognition of that merit. As popular wisdom sometimes has it, as well as for Aristotle, arrogance as a form of behaviour seems to have more to do with a sense of vulnerability in one's self-estimate than with self-assurance. Similarly, general contemptuousness towards people likely is more in keeping with self-contempt, pettiness and a general lack of appreciation for the things that really matter than it is with nobility of soul, true valuations, and taking morality as the highest social good. I am suggesting that a prime concern for the moral good is inherently at odds with general disdain for people as such motivated by the fact

¹⁵¹Statman, 429.

that they are on the whole much less in love with excellence of soul. Clearly those who are less moral would provoke contempt in that respect, but as agents who comprise the moral community and jointly elaborate the meaning of moral virtue, people as such could not be the object of disdain in one who loves moral virtue.

My discussion in this chapter thus far has scarcely touched on the notion of moral equality. As is well known, Aristotle not only does not state that all human beings are potentially able to attain moral and intellectual excellence, but argues that women, slaves, many non-Greeks and so forth are naturally incapable of doing so.¹⁵² These prejudices are apt to strike the modern reader as naive and parochial at best. Nonetheless, we can maintain that Aristotle's conceptual framework, which allows him in opposition to cultural conventions to deny the most genuine esteem to anything (such as riches, political power, great good fortune, pedigree, or popularity) except virtue of character as such, could have consistently and conceivably also led him to the denial of allegedly natural and ineliminable moral differences of sex, ethnicity, ancestral blood, and so forth. If so, these serious flaws in his de facto ethical perspective do not undermine its strengths in principle.

If one considers only those who, on Aristotle's rather

¹⁵²See, for example, Politics I.5-7.

arbitrarily restricted conception, are the only potentially full members of the moral community (Greek freemen), I suggest there is still some scope for the attribution to Aristotle of a notion of equality. All moral agents whom Aristotle does not take to be morally defective by nature--a group bound by cultural ethnicity and gender--merit the same essentially moral regard. One can not imagine the great soul behaving in an exceptionally contemptuous fashion (perhaps even a conventionally contemptuous one) towards the various sorts of people outside this group, but here I would concede that graciousness may be more and more a matter of irony (i.e., dissimulation) than concern for promoting their virtue and the moral good in general, since these classes of people take on the aspect of instruments put to the service of the good of the polis yet who cannot enjoy proportionate returns from that good.

More than casting Aristotle as some sort of prototype egalitarian, I want to suggest that there is nothing in his view of the morally best way of treating free, male, Greek citizens--possessed of the normal variability of moral characters--that is logically incompatible with the principle that all people have equal moral worth, and that this compatibility is reflected in the great soul's moral attitude towards people in general. In the preceding chapter I wrote of M as a principle that promotes human welfare in counteracting the effects of moral fallibility

and in tending to reduce arbitrary and circumstantial discrepancies in individual moral characters (on the optimistic view that people's characters can be improved by the goodwill of others). Inasmuch as I think the great soul's social comportment tends to promote these same ends, there is a sort of functional congruency between this comportment and the ideal principle of equality. That the presence or absence of this assumed principle in an agent's moral reasoning need not be decisive in her general approach to social dealings is significant. I think it reinforces the point that the appearance of incompatibility between M and moral humility is only an appearance, in that the presence or absence of M does not prescribe one's way of living very clearly and some of the same desirable attitudes can be present with or without concern for M.

One may find my suggestion of an incipient notion of equality in Aristotle quite unimpressive or, further, chimerical. Yet in light of the fact that Aristotle has no overt principle of equality, Aristotle's position with respect both to moral humility and the nature of moral perfection should surely make us optimistic about the compatibility of moral humility with moral goodness of a kind to which we can be sympathetic. If Aristotle's ethical theory (with revisions to eliminate ethnocentrism and so forth) did embrace a principle of equality, presumably the emphasis he would put on noble respectfulness towards people

would be as great or even greater than it actually is. The only basis on which one would still lack optimism about the compatibility of moral humility with upholding M is if one held that the belief in basic equality were inconsistent with supposing one's relatively high moral character merited relatively high self-regard. According to my position in Chapter Two, there is no such inconsistency.

We might next inquire as to how relatively high (and to a lesser extent low) self-appraisals figure in the ethical conceptions of some other philosophers, particularly in relation to their views on the question of equality. Before discussing Spinoza, Kant and Nietzsche on this score, however, we turn to the very prominent role afforded to something called humility in Christianity. What are the central motifs of this humility? What parallels can be drawn between Christian humility and the form explored so far?

CHAPTER FOUR

AMBIVALENCE IN CHRISTIAN HUMILITY

Introduction

In Chapter Two it was remarked in passing that the present popular notion of humility as a quality of character in social relations is strongly influenced by the Christian tradition. It is also often popularly supposed that this tradition involves a special positive emphasis on the theological value of one's self-abasement in relation to other people. We have already settled on a revisionist, formal definition of humility as a secular virtue of accurate appraisal of one's merits relative to others, an appraisal which is also consistent with an assumption all people have the same basic worth as persons. This understanding of humility appears to be largely at odds with a presumptive attitude of self-abasement before others. Nonetheless, it will be revealing to explore some perspectives on Christianity to see to what extent a notion of self-abasement adequately describes Christian humility.

I shall try to show that this sense of Christian humility is one-sided, and that, on at least some key interpretations of the faith, it is even an erroneous interpretation of the virtue. At the same time, it is not difficult to see on the basis of some tracts how one might interpret Christian humility as self-abasement and permissiveness towards the moral wrongs of others. Furthermore, we can cite at least one contemporary Christian interpreter of humility as seeing precisely this self-abasement and moral permissiveness as essential to the virtue.¹

The more sympathetic and morally coherent version of Christian humility I shall be developing is largely based on my reading of St. Thomas Aquinas. There are times when even Aquinas' account of humility may raise the suspicion of the former conception of the trait, but in the final analysis I think one must reject this sometimes suggested tendency in Aquinas for the sake of a different conception that can provide coherence with his moral perspective as a whole. The more workable conception is of a respectful and sympathetic attitude towards all people, regardless of their social position and their manifest failings. It is crucial to add that this humility seems to leave ample room for specific judgments against others and the exercise of resistance to their aims where they are wrong. The proper role of self-abasement in this Thomistic version of

¹François Varillon.

Christian humility is that this abasement applies without qualification only to one's relationship with God. The expression of "self-abasement" towards other human beings is in limitlessly sustaining one's respectfulness for all people and concern for their good regardless of how wrong or damaging others' actions have proven, even towards oneself.

To the extent that permissiveness towards human wrongs and presumptively favouring others' needs and wishes over one's own do really constitute a part of Christian doctrine, it appears that the Christian position on humility is incoherent; this understanding of humility is irreconcilable with my reading of the Thomistic conception, and, more fundamentally, it precludes any sort of moral consistency in one's social dealings. In the first place, to suppose oneself more wretched and worthless than any other person is, of course, logically only plausible if it so happens that most people would be correct in not seeing themselves as such. Quite apart from this, for most moral philosophers--including Aquinas--the attempt to live by virtue necessarily involves resisting vice in other people, particularly where one can do so disinterestedly. But such resistance is necessarily at odds with a refusal ever to condemn others' behaviour or intentions on the grounds that they may be "lovingly" reinterpreted in a more positive light and that the other people are in any case less sinful than is oneself.

The conflict between the two versions of humility may help explain both the unclarity surrounding theological humility and the commonly heard skepticism about the value of its practice. I shall claim that, as a disposition that can allow one to take an active role in social and moral concerns, the only plausible interpretation of Christian humility is the second, so the choice of how to dispel the conflict between the two positions is an easy one to make. Limitless deference is coherent and perhaps workable in one's relationship with an omnipotent god, but in regard to other people it is neither.

4.1 "Christian Thought" and Its Reference to Humility

As suggested from the following references to different exponents of the faith with regard to the virtue in question, it is implausible to identify a well-unified "Christian doctrine" beyond somewhat blurred generalities. While there is wide agreement that the New Testament is "acknowledged in the Church as...the normative part [of its tradition],"² some would take exception to the very project of interrogating Scriptural doctrine taken at whatever degree of generality for the purpose of illuminating our sense of a purportedly moral virtue. Joseph Novak (1987) argues that the Christian worldview is radically distinct

²Allen Verhey, The Great Reversal: Ethics and the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1984), 72.

from all other forms of ethical systems, for which he raises at least two alternative taxonomies.³ Whichever taxonomy one considers, claims Novak, Christianity is anomalous. Its "ethics" are not derived from a model of human nature (like Plato's or Aristotle's), nor are its norms based upon convention as in contract theory. Similarly, the two viable alternative models of ethics MacIntyre claims to reductively isolate, an Aristotelian and a Nietzschean, are both incompatible with Christianity, because in it, "the ego is [not] the principle and aim of moral action"; rather, as a person "recognizes his inability to be the source of his own righteousness...he turns his 'moral agency' over to [Christ]."⁴ Accordingly, Novak faults Anscombe's identification of Christianity with lawlike commands for which the concept of justification is irrelevant. Christianity is not a matter of commanding laws at all because its fundamental message is love, which cannot logically be commanded.⁵

Novak is not alone in doubting the commensurability of "ethics" with Christianity. Verhey notes that theologians such as Rudolf Bultmann claim that Jesus teaches no ethics and provides no morality, instead revealing "a reality to

³Joseph Novak, "Ancient Greek Ethical Theories and the New Testament," in Ethics and Justification, ed. Douglas Odegard (Edmonton: Academic Printing and Publishing, 1987), 117-146.

⁴Ibid., 133, 130.

⁵Ibid., 135.

which people must respond, in their moral decisions too."⁶ But this position is dubious. In marked contrast to Novak's claim about human nature and Christianity, MacIntyre himself considers the Christian and Aristotelian views of the human situation to have a key parallel in that they share "the same logical and conceptual structure....which allows Aquinas to synthesize Aristotle and the New Testament."⁷ By this he means that both belief-systems include a conception of a natural human proneness to error, a telos of perfected human nature, and some scheme that can effect the transition from the former to the latter. How one responds to Novak's point much depends upon which features of ethics are taken to be essential. While, as Novak notes, Aristotle's term for moral character (to ēthos) is entirely lacking in the Greek New Testament,⁸ it would be hard to deny that one's attempt to live according to the Gospel would necessarily have a profound impact on the content of one's discernible ethoi (habits). Perhaps the most convincing test of whether biblical religion constitutes an ethical system is in the extent to which the doctrines could be realized in the world; since Aristotle held that most people fail to live the life of virtue proper, one must be wary of drawing a conclusion from the truth that Christian norms appear to

⁶Verhey, 7.

⁷MacIntyre, After Virtue, 184.

⁸Novak, 123.

many "unworldly." (There is a sense in which its tenets undoubtedly are unworldly--that is, they have to do with the salvation of the immortal soul--but the other sense, in dispute, concerns whether Christianity promotes an orientation in one's mortal life on earth that is essentially unworkable on earth.) The charge of unworldliness is essentially one of Christian irrationalism. Humility is a case in point, in that Christian humility as (purportedly) meekness, unwillingness to judge others negatively and so forth may be allegedly implicated in self-destruction and the triumph of evil in the world. If there is legitimacy to such a charge, the only defence--that it is the welfare of one's spirit in the afterlife which is decisive in rationalizing one's worldly conduct--may again appear to vindicate views like those of Novak and Bultmann.

Having dealt with this objection, a second, less surmountable difficulty remains. What bearing do debates about interpretation of Scripture have upon one's description of Christian doctrines? Again, Verhey sounds the note of caution. "The New Testament presents no unitary and monolithic ethic," he writes,⁹ canvassing a variety of proposed strategies for deriving ethical standards from this pluralistic text. Among these strategies are using "the whole Scripture as a control for the use of any part" (Brevard Childs) and selectively adopting only those

⁹Verhey, 73.

elements that now seem appropriate (Jack Sanders).¹⁰ There is a parallel difficulty with regard to the variable genealogies of different scriptural tracts; for example, the Sermon on the Mount is likely "Matthew's literary creation" (fashioned out of originally disparate sayings) and thus "the quintessence of Matthew's ethic" although it is often identified as paradigmatic of Jesus' teachings.¹¹

Finally, there is the further complication that even if Scripture is taken to be in some way or another authoritative, Christian belief has been strongly shaped by the work of diverse Patristic and Scholastic authors such as Augustine, Benedict, Bernard and Aquinas. I shall give particular emphasis to Aquinas in this discussion. Aquinas provides the most comprehensive and probably the most influential attempt to provide the greatest possible concordance between philosophical rationalism and Biblical revelation. He may also illustrate my claim that there are two quite different and seemingly opposing senses of humility accessible to the Christian. Aquinas inclines toward the more coherent and rational interpretation of humility, but at the same time does not appear quite willing to repudiate fully the other reading. This is, at least, the impression given by numerous passages in the Summa Theologica, which I have taken the liberty of gathering

¹⁰Ibid., 166; 160.

¹¹Ibid., 9, 85.

without making any serious attempt to address Thomistic scholarship.

4.1.1 The New Testament

Humility is not one of the three fundamental theological virtues, faith, hope and love (agapē or caritas), but as humility is usually taken in a religious context to be in opposition to pride, which is basic to all sin, humility is nonetheless a centrally desirable disposition. There are numerous exhortations in the New Testament to be humble (tapeinos) and to practice the sorts of behaviour one would characterize as meek and forbearing. In Matthew, Jesus counsels, "Do not resist evil; but whoever strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other to him also," and to return one's enemies' hatred and injustice with kindness, indeed love, because anyone can love one who loves him in return.¹² This is reiterated in Mark's "[b]ut love your enemies...hoping for nothing in return"¹³--and also in Paul's Letter to the Romans:

Bless those persecuting you; bless, and do not curse....Repay no one evil for evil....If possible, as far as is in you, seeking peace with all men; not avenging yourselves [mē heautous ekdikountēs],

¹²Matthew 5:38-9; :46. All English quotations and transliterated Greek words or phrases from the New Testament are based on The Interlinear Greek-English New Testament (Volume IV of The Interlinear Hebrew-Greek-English Bible), gen. ed. and trans. Jay P. Green (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1980; 2nd ed. 1985).

¹³Luke 6:35.

beloved...for it has been written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay,' says the Lord."¹⁴

The apparent attitude of submission is inseparable from the double command to love one's fellows and God, and perhaps also from the heavenly reward for faith. In the Kingdom of God worldly relations are radically inverted. "And whoever will exalt himself [hupsōsei heauton] shall be humbled [tapeinothēsetai]; and whoever will humble himself shall be exalted"; "Blessed are the poor in spirit [hoi ptōchoi tō pneumati], for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven."¹⁵

Interestingly, just one sign of the possible qualification of humility as a desirable trait is present, at Colossians 2:18. Commentators agree that some kind of humility is rejected here, but are uncertain as to what exemplifies this bad humility. Paul may be cautioning against following the example of the extreme asceticism of the gnostics. Paul says, "Let no one judge you unworthy, willing in humility [thelōn en tapeinophrosunē] and worship of the angels, pushing into things which he has not seen, being puffed up by the mind of his flesh without a cause."

In the same Letter at 3:12-13 Paul returns to the more prevalent positive associations of tapeinophrosunē.

"Then put on as the elect of God, holy and beloved, tender feelings of compassions [oiktirmōn], kindness [chrestoteta], humility [tapeinophrosunē], meekness [praoteta], long-suffering [makrothumian], forbearing

¹⁴Romans 12:14-19.

¹⁵Matthew 23:12; 5:3.

one another [anechomenoi allēlon] and forgiving yourselves kai karizdomenoi heautois]."

Such exhortations give no explicit treatment of the comprehensive, practical manifestations of properly humble behaviour. Exactly what does this sense of humility mean? One might readily gather the impression from these passages that Jesus commends permissiveness and compliance towards those who practice injustice and persecution before one's eyes, especially where the humble observer is the victim of these practices. According to the widely employed New Jerome Biblical Commentary, this inference is simply wrong.¹⁶

Of Matthew 5:39, Jerome says that

Jesus teaches non-resistance to evil in the sense of avoiding physical violence or damages. This leaves open the possibility of psychological or moral resistance [as practiced by Gandhi]....The goal is to shame the opponent into a change of heart. This presupposes the requisite dispositions in the opponent, which are not always present. In such difficult cases recourse to other biblical principles may be necessary...¹⁷

Explaining non-retaliation in the context of the overall biblical principles, Jerome offers the following:

We can trace a five-stage evolution in biblical thinking on this topic [of retaliation and love of enemies]: (1) unlimited revenge (Gen. 4:15, 24); (2) talion or limited revenge (Deut. 19:16-21); (3) the silver rule, "Do not do unto others what you would not have them do unto you" (Tob 4:15; Hillel, b. Sabb. 31a);

¹⁶The New Jerome Biblical Commentary, ed. Raymond E. Brown, S.S., Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J., Roland E. Murphy, O. Carm., fwd. Maria Cardinal Martini (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1990). (Hereafter referred to in the text as Jerome.)

¹⁷Ibid., 643-4.

(4) the golden rule (Matt. 7:12, more positive than the silver, reaching out to do good, taking the initiative to create an atmosphere of good will); (5) loving one's enemies, an invitation to moral heroism and sanctity. This last is the loftiest level. Is it lacking in ethical sobriety, as its critics have suggested? It can be quite effective (Gandhi). It need be no more unsober than a general strike is. The question that remains is: Is it the only legitimate rule of conduct for Christians in conflict situations? Are the earlier stages of biblical teaching simply cancelled out? No. Rather, the earlier stages represent a permanent resource for believers when appropriate. It depends on the moral level of the opponent which level of biblical ethics should be employed. Given this range of options, you can govern with the Sermon on the Mount, despite Bismarck's skepticism, provided you also include the earlier moral stages which it presupposes. The sermon is not the whole of biblical revelation but does represent a summit of moral wisdom whose validity proves itself in daily life when wisely applied.¹⁸

There is a complementary assessment offered in relation to Matthew 5:46 (which was about returning loving kindness for wrongs). According to Jerome

This verse liberates us from the need to be everyone's censor, but it does not free us from all the need of judgment....in adult life, we cannot escape the obligation to make some judgments even on the moral character of others....Jesus warns against usurping the definitive judgment of God, who alone sees the heart. By contrast, our judging must be tentative, partial and inadequate...¹⁹

The general viewpoint of Jerome suggested thus far may appear to be complicated by a later passage of commentary upon Romans 12:19 stating that "Both the desire for revenge against (outside) enemies and the pursuit of it are excluded from Christian conduct....The Christian should leave to God

¹⁸Ibid., 644.

¹⁹Ibid., 646.

the retribution of evil and pursue only the good."²⁰

Reluctance to endorse a desire for revenge per se (as opposed to a desire for bringing about the state of affairs which vengeance hypothetically makes possible--the restoration of justice) seems comprehensible in the light of the prior excerpts. That there can be a definitive exclusion of the pursuit of vengeance under any circumstances which is nonetheless consistent with the spirit of earlier remarks in Jerome seems to depend upon one's understanding of the term "vengeance." There is a tendency to view vengeance as one's glorying in inflicting reprisals upon one's opponent, which surely would be in fundamental contradiction with any role for agape at all. Yet revenge may also more guardedly connote the simple repayment of harm with harm, and if it is necessary to inflict some sort of harm upon a wrongdoer to thwart his doing further wrongs, then a proper place for vengeance ought to be necessarily entailed by the view of Christianity suggested elsewhere in the commentary.

Aquinas, for example, is much more forthright in treating "vengeance" (vindicatio) as a virtue. One's surprise in discovering this is soon tempered by Aquinas' careful delineation of the concept as the infliction of a

²⁰Ibid., 863.

penal evil (malum poenae) on one who has sinned.²¹ What is crucial in this instance is the inward disposition of the subject who is the instrument of vengeance. "Taking delight [delectari] in evil done to another is in fact a type of hatred [pertinat ad odium], the opposite of that charity with which we are bound to love all," Aquinas remarks.²² The point of vengeance as defined here is rehabilitation or at least restraint of the wrongdoer so that justice is upheld and God honoured. What, then, of meek forbearance? Aquinas preserves the role of this attitude by distinguishing the identity of the victim from that of the agent of retribution. One should act to right wrongs when one is not the object or the sole object of the wrongs. If one is, then retribution should be left to others. More strikingly, according to Aquinas charity itself gives rise to vengeance where "one seeks to right wrongs against God or neighbour because charity causes him to see these wrongs as done to himself."²³ In other words, Aquinas sees no inconsistency between loving all of one's fellowmen and both judging and punishing them, where one does so in a

²¹Summa Theologica II II Q.108, art. 1 corpus. All English and Latin references to the Summa are to the Blackfriars edition: St Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae, gen. ed. Thomas Gilby O.P., Latin text and English translation; London: Blackfriars (Eyre & Spottiswoode), 1964-66. Present quotation from vol. 41, trans. T.C. O'Brien.

²²Ibid.

²³Ibid., art. 2 repl. obj. 2.

legitimate capacity and without malice. There is a wide range of topics in which Aquinas effects the same kind of skilful accommodation between Scripture and what one might call a rationally more developed social and political philosophy. As one of the foremost Christian theologians, Aquinas has presented an accommodation between spiritual faith and civil life which must have some bearing on what we are to say about the meaning and place of Christian humility.

We have now already seen two distinct interpretations of humility, each of which succeeds in countering the charge that this disposition results in destructive complacency towards human wrongdoing. Jerome suggests that (presumably limited) revenge is warranted where nonviolent resistance to evil is ineffective, while Aquinas suggests that the key feature in the Christian spirit of moral intervention is not one's choice of action so much as the inner disposition accompanying the act: an emotional detachment from the potentially egoistic and sadistic delight in inflicting punishment. This detachment is partly facilitated by relying on others to be the instruments of retribution where one is the victim of the wrongdoing.

Self-defence against unwarranted personal attack is only one special kind of case where the nature of one's humility has an obvious impact on one's response to moral failure in others, but one might conceive comparable

prescriptions of humility in other kinds of cases. In response to this tentative rebuttal to the assumption that Christian humility is unworldly and socially unworkable, a question arises. This is whether there are any influential Christian writings that prescribe behaviour that is basically incompatible with either of these interpretations. Arguably some passages in Aquinas and Bernard do pose this problem. These are passages suggesting that humility as self-abasement simpliciter (without particular reference either to God or people) does not admit of excess. Although self-contempt and self-loathing do not rigorously entail passivity towards the failings of others, there seems to be a reasonable risk of this result.

Aquinas' bold synthesis of Christianity with many elements of Aristotelian thought has helped enable those sympathetic to the Thomist view of the virtues to argue eloquently against an insipid and devitalized notion of Christian morals. Writing of fortitudo, Josef Pieper, for example, observes that "it cannot be denied that a timid Christianity...has misconstrued [endurance] in the sense of a vague and resentful passivism" and that in this conception "patience...has come to mean an indiscriminate, self-immolating, crabbed, joyless and spineless submission to whatever evil is met with."²⁴ In the same vein, Peter Geach

²⁴Josef Pieper, The Four Cardinal Virtues: Prudence, Justice, Fortitude, Temperance (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1965), 128-9.

writes that charity has also been mistakenly applied "to a fatuous complacency towards [wrong]." ²⁵ By way of introduction to Aquinas, we now turn to a few recent commentaries on Thomistic humility for a very sketchy survey of recent perspectives on his view of the virtue before exploring Aquinas' own discussion of its nature and role. What we find is that Aquinas is sometimes seen to uphold self-denigration without definite limit in relation to other people and sometimes emphatically denied to do so.

4.2 Aquinas

4.2.1 Carlson and Pieper: Christianity

And Self-Denigration

In his short monograph on Thomistic humility, E.S. Carlson (1949) is prepared to caution that "It would seem Billuart goes too far when he writes that 'a man can without error, and ought to consider and pronounce himself viler than all, unworthy of God's gifts, and of no use whatsoever.'" ²⁶ One who regards himself the vilest of all and good for nothing certainly seems suggestive of the logical limit of self-abasement. It also seems that such self-dismissal would preclude both critical judgments of

²⁵Peter Geach, The Virtues (The Stanton Lectures 1973-4, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 84.

²⁶Sebastian Carlson, The Virtue of Humility (River Forest, IL: Studium Generale S. Thomas Aquinatis, 1949), 39-40 (emphasis mine).

others and attempts to set others straight. Carlson says that it would have been better for Billuart to use "may" than "ought to" in the phrase "ought to consider...himself viler than all." Carlson explicitly endorses three orders of humility (sufficient, abundant and perfect) which are cited by Aquinas. The passage runs:

Perfect humility has three degrees. The first is to subject [subdere] ourselves to those who are above us, and not to set ourselves above our equals [non praeferre se aequali]: this is sufficient.²⁷ The second is to submit to our equals, and not to set ourselves before our inferiors [minori]; this is called abundant humility. The third degree is to subject [subesse] ourselves to our inferiors, and in this is perfect righteousness.²⁸

This is a gloss on Matthew 3:15. Aquinas uses the passage to pose an objection (subsequently overcome) to the notion of humility as having twelve distinct degrees. It is unclear whether Aquinas himself endorses the passage, since he is only raising it as part of an objection to a different claim and refutes the objection. Obviously it also makes a key difference here whether we are to understand "superiors," "equals" and "inferiors" only in terms of social rank or station or, more crucially, also or perhaps alternatively in terms of measures of overall moral character as well. If it is perfect righteousness to subject oneself to a moral inferior then humility might well have dubious implications for a humble person's capacity for

²⁷Emphasis mine.

²⁸II II Q.161, art. 6 obj. 4.

general moral rectitude.

For his own part, Carlson says that the most moderate level is the only one "strictly necessary for one's salvation," while the most advanced he terms "the acme of Christian humility." He adds:

The conviction that one is the worst of sinners is a mark of virtue so lofty and rare that modern students of St. Thomas' thought to see in it a special gift of God, given only to the predestined few."

Carlson tries to explain the sense of this lofty and rare conviction by suggesting that those with the gift greatly exaggerate the extent of their relatively minor failings so that they come wrongly to imagine that those failings are really greater than other people's. Yet, paradoxically, he also approves of Augustine's remark, also endorsed by Aquinas, that "humility is to be placed on the side of truth, not on the side of falsehood."²⁹ By endorsing the wording of Billuart's remark except for the choice of "ought to" rather than "may," Carlson seems to agree with Billuart that there is no error involved in somehow humbling oneself beyond everyone else.

In spite of Carlson's intentions, he does not succeed in showing how moral excellence (in this case, the most extreme form of humility) and one's faculty of moral discernment can coincide. Carlson offers a suggestion

²⁹Ibid., 42.

³⁰Ibid., 40. See Q.161, art. 2 obj. 3 and repl.

Aquinas makes about the hidden possibilities of others as a rationale for the acceptability (though not the requiredness) of thinking oneself "the worst of sinners" and "viler than all."³¹ Borrowing from Sylvius, Carlson elaborates on the idea of hidden possibilities a little further. One may justly suspect that "his neighbour shows much more gratitude to God for his talents"--even if they are in certain respects less than one's own--"than he does for his own, and [that his neighbour] uses them to better advantage."³² Carlson continues that it may be that "if even the greatest sinner received the graces [one] has received, that sinner would now be swinging along God's highway with giant strides, not toddling and tumbling as he is doing."³³ Carlson seems to have caught himself in a contradiction now. If one sees oneself as the worst of sinners, how is it possible to regard another as the greatest of sinners?

Surely, as a credible epistemic basis for the belief that one is worst, purely possible discrepancies that run contrary to all the actual appearances simply cannot be rationally decisive. Carlson does not discuss any capacity to continue acting as if one had the prerogative to make specific adverse judgements of others whom one deems

³¹art. 3 repl. obj. 1.

³²Carlson, 40-1.

³³Ibid.

(rightly or wrongly) to be on balance superior to oneself. Admittedly, what he says does not clearly rule out that possibility. Perhaps it is possible for one to find fault with another and yet be no less willing to act in opposition to that fault at the same time as one believes one's own overall faults to be even greater. Yet if one is capable of making errors of judgment about overall relative merits and flaws, errors that are allegedly not only excusable but admirable, even if not obligatory, presumably such errors may carry over into one's perception of others' specific traits and deeds as well. Perhaps other commentators can better explain and defend Aquinas' own views.

In the estimate of Pieper, Aquinas' conception of humility and its role is without such difficulties. Pieper asserts that "The ground of humility [in Aquinas] is man's estimation of himself according to the truth." He goes on:

In the whole tractate of St. Thomas concerning humility and pride there is not a single sentence to suggest an attitude, or principle, of constant self-accusation, of disparagement of one's being and doing, of cringing inferiority feelings, as belonging to humility or any other Christian virtue....

Humility...looks first to God....[it] is not outward behavior, but an inner attitude.³⁴

Clearly, at this point it is apt to explore Aquinas' own treatment of humility and related dispositions within the framework of his morality and theology in order to attempt to resolve this doubt.

³⁴Pieper, 189.

4.2.2 Humility as a Thomistic Virtue

Aquinas is attempting to achieve a rapprochement between Aristotelian ethics on the one hand, Christian doctrine as conveyed through Scripture, the thought of Augustine, and various other devotional authors on the other. In order to do this he identifies a second, wholly extra-Aristotelian category of virtues which supplement the moral virtues as Aristotle understands them: the theological virtues, which are faith, hope and love. According to Aquinas, Aristotle's whole discussion of virtue has reference to people's civic life only. Thus, Aquinas can find room for distinctively Christian traits such as humility which Aristotle gives no indication of recognizing (that is as Christians essentially understand humility in part--as some kind of self-abasement) provided that such virtues have fundamental reference to the human relationship with God rather than with other mortals. In accord with Pieper's view, Aquinas writes that humility "considered as a special virtue...mainly concerns a man's subjection to God," adding, "for whose sake he also submits himself to others."³⁵ Yet complications are already apparent. In spite of primarily involving one's attitude to God, humility is a moral virtue (a part of temperance or moderation) rather than a theological one, and subjection to God is said

³⁵Q.161, art. 1 repl. obj. 5.

to result in some sort of according subjection to other people.

In terms of its priority, humility comes in importance after the theological virtues and after justice and prudence, the two foremost moral virtues, but before all other moral virtues.³⁶ At the same time one must stress that for Aquinas all of the moral virtues are tightly interdependent. One can have either a natural or a learned inclination towards certain kinds of conduct that agree with a certain virtue ("incomplete virtue") while lacking conduct that accords with all other virtues, but one cannot have a moral virtue proper (a "complete virtue" or "a habit tending toward a good deed well done") without having all the other virtues as well.³⁷ (The only exceptions are magnanimity and magnificence, which may or may not in particular cases be fully realized by being superadded to one's possession of the other moral virtues.)

It appears to follow that in interpreting Thomistic passages on humility in its genuine or complete form as a virtue, one should assume whenever possible that acting humbly towards other people means acting in conformity with justice and prudence as well as all the other moral virtues. Justice and prudence are the foremost moral virtues in the following way. Justice means giving what is due, and every

³⁶Ibid., art. 5 corp.

³⁷I II Q.65, art. 1 corp.

act in conformity with virtue is a kind of giving what is due. Thus every moral action is in a broad sense properly describable as also a just kind of action."³⁸ For Aquinas, prudence or practical wisdom (prudentia) determines the choice of both means and ends in moral conduct, and is thus the intellectual component of all moral activity, as the exercise of every virtue has reference to such choices."³⁹

Aquinas chiefly discusses humility in one Quaestio of the Summa (II II Q.161) which I have already cited a number of times. There are three "parts" to the human soul, the vegetative, the sensitive, and the rational, while the soul's powers are divisible into five genera (vegetative, sense, appetitive, locomotory, and intellectual).⁴⁰ Both knowledge and appetite are aspects of the rational part of the soul and of the sensitive part of the soul: knowledge and appetite in the rational part do not move the body except by mediation of the knowledge and appetite of the sensitive part of the soul.⁴¹ The sensitive appetite is "a passive power" which is precipitated by the apprehension of some object. Sense appetite is further divisible into two kinds, aggressiveness or the "irascible appetite" and desire

³⁸Ibid., Q.60, art. 3, corpus.

³⁹Ibid., Q.66, art. 3 obj. 3 and repl. See also Q.65, art. 1.

⁴⁰I Q.78, art. 1.

⁴¹Questions on the Soul, trans. and introd. James H. Robb (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1984), Q.9, ad 6.

or the "concupiscible."⁴²

For impulses of either the irascible or the concupiscible appetite in relation to some object, there are two kinds of complementary regulative virtues necessary, one kind restraining the appetite from excess and one encouraging it to overcome deficiency. Humility (humilitas) is an example of the restraining kind in regard to the concupiscible appetite. A part of temperance, humility serves "to temper and restrain the mind" towards what seems desirable but is beyond one's capacities, "lest [the appetite] press forward immoderately to high things." Magnanimity (magnanimitas) is a part of fortitude rather than temperance. In regard to the irascible appetite, it serves to overcome the perceived difficulty of attaining an object which really is in reach. Magnanimity works to "stiffen the spirit against hopelessness and hearten it in the pursuit of great things in accordance with right reason."⁴³ The complementary regulative virtues of humility and magnanimity also each have counterpart vices, pride (superbia) in the case of humility and small-mindedness (pusillanimitas) for magnanimity. "Pride is so called because a man thereby aims higher than he is," writes Aquinas, while he tells us that pusillanimity is a matter of

⁴²S.T. I Q.80, art. 2 corp.; Q.81, art. 2, corp.

⁴³II II Q.161, art. 1, corpus; see I II Q.60, art. 4; Q.61, art. 2.

an agent's refusal "to extend himself to achieve an aim commensurate with his powers."⁴⁴

Aquinas implies that humility and magnanimity do not oppose one another in practice, in that "both agree in maintaining right reason": when it is appropriate to restrain one's irascible striving for something (i.e., when one should humbly desist from some attempt at a good which is too great for one's abilities) it is not appropriate to encourage and fortify that striving--to try to be magnanimous--and vice versa.⁴⁵

However, Aquinas uses humility in a second, distinct sense. It is not only present in the operation of appropriate self-restraint from pursuing a great good. Humility is also described more broadly as "a praiseworthy abasement."⁴⁶ Aquinas mentions the words of Abraham (Genesis 28:27) that "I will speak to my Lord, whereas I am dust and ashes" and a line from Isaiah (40:17), "All nations are before Him as if they had no being at all." Aquinas adds to the latter that "In this way, humility may be competent to every man."⁴⁷ It seems that it is the comparison between any human being and God that is the basis of a proper perspective on one's weakness.

⁴⁴Q.162, art. 1 corp.; Q.133, art. 1 corp.

⁴⁵Q.161, art. 1 obj. 3 and repl.

⁴⁶Ibid., art. 1 repl. obj. 2.

⁴⁷Ibid., art. 1 repl. obj. 1; repl. obj. 4.

Aquinas believes that whatever strengths human individuals possess are gifts from God, whereas the person is responsible for whatever failings he or she possesses: "All that is defect is of man, all that is health and perfection is of God."⁴ Writing of pride, Aquinas endorses Gregory's four marks of the sin, the first of which is in thinking that one's goods are from within rather than gifts of God, and the second that one's God-given goods were earned rather than bestowed gratuitously by the divinity.⁵ Thus, the greater one's personal qualities, in a sense the more fitting an attitude of humility is to that person. That is, the more a magnanimous person is, the more grateful to God that person should be for having these gifts. In some sense, that person is the more humble in refusing to proudly misinterpret one's excellences as reflecting one's own glory rather than God's.

The referral of human strengths to God and human weaknesses to mortals does provide Aquinas with a framework of strictly personal comparisons of merit, but presumably one must be careful not to misinterpret the claims Aquinas makes in this regard by forgetting that humility and by the same token the vice of pride have primary reference to one's awareness (or lack of awareness) of God's role. For example, Aquinas observes that

⁴Ibid., art. 3, corpus.

⁵Q.162, art. 4.

Whatever contributes to exaggerated self-esteem induces pride; for instance, dwelling on other people's failings. The converse also holds, for, as Gregory notes, holy people by a like attention to the virtues of others set others above themselves.⁵⁰

The point seems to be that the attitude one takes towards one's fellows is guided by the more fundamental attitude one has about one's relationship with God. Thus, if there appears to be an inconsistency in the way one regards another whose weaknesses are greater, the more fundamental concern may explain the apparent inconsistency.

The proper extent of this generalized self-deprecation reflecting a deference to God is somewhat unclear. There is a pitch of general self-abasement which is not commended. Man must assume "the lowest place according to his mode," but not something beneath that mode; for instance, "when man, not understanding his honor, compares himself to senseless beasts, and becomes like to them."⁵¹ Yet Aquinas says that Abraham shows proper humility in calling himself "dust and ashes" in comparison to God. He also determines that "we ought to be respectful to all because of God [debemus nos subicere omnibus proximis propter Deum]."⁵²

In the third article of the question on humility, Aquinas interestingly poses the objection that some people are "of the highest rank [in supremo statu]" and they

⁵⁰Ibid., art. 3 repl. obj. 2.

⁵¹Q.161, art. 1 repl. obj. 1 (Psalm xlviii. 13).

⁵²Ibid., art. 3 repl. obj. 1.

seemingly cannot "without falsehood, subject themselves [subiicere absque falsitate] to inferiors."⁵³ (Logically, of course, it would appear leaving God aside for the moment that only the lowest-ranked person or people could justifiably possess the view that one has a prima facie duty of subjection to everyone else.) Aquinas' reply is provocative. Using the distinction between what is from God in a person (the good) and what is one's own (the defect), Aquinas first says that humility does not require that "in respect to that which is God's in himself, a man should yield before that which may seem to be God's in another" (unless, presumably, the other person's God-given gifts outshine one's own divinely bestowed gifts). Furthermore,

humility does not demand that a person should yield that which he has of himself to that which is of man in his neighbour, otherwise each one of us would have to repute himself a greater sinner than everybody else...⁵⁴

Again, this claim again presumably presupposes that what A has of himself is of a comparable level of weakness to what B has of himself. Aquinas also implies with reference to Augustine's Rule (which warns against excessive humility as breaking the authority of ruling) that it is humble to act in accordance with the good, whether the other person takes offence at one's choice of action or not.⁵⁵

⁵³Ibid., art. 3 obj. 2.

⁵⁴Ibid., art. 3 corp. and repl. obj. 1-2.

⁵⁵Ibid., obj. 3 and repl.

This part of Aquinas' reasoning is easy to understand and unexceptionable. It shows that he appreciates that because everyone has defects, whether the kind and extent of these defects varies from person to person or not it would be logically indefensible for everyone to suppose that he or she had a duty to be humble because of being worse than the rest. (One also suspects that Carlson was inattentive to this article.) However, since Aquinas also believes everyone should practice humility with other people, he cannot consistently endorse the view that humility means regarding everyone else as less contemptible, fallible, useless, etc. than oneself.

Now, what of one's proper attitude where one's own God-given qualities appear greater in number or strength than another's, and one's mortal imperfections less? Aquinas' response emphasizes the possibility that another's good attributes and one's own flaws may both be hidden. "We can make no mistake if we set what is of God in our neighbour above what is of ourselves in us."⁵⁶ As far as this goes it is logically consistent with what Aquinas has said already, but it begs the question as to what one should conclude in a comparison where what is of God in oneself (good) seems clearly to outweigh what is of God in the neighbour, and what is of human imperfection in oneself less than the human imperfection in the neighbour. Aquinas cites

⁵⁶Ibid., art. 3 repl. obj. 2.

here Augustine's gloss on Philippians 2:3. The scriptural passage reads, "doing nothing according to party spirit or self-glory, but in humility esteeming one another to surpass [oneself]." The gloss of the passage runs as follows:

We should not esteem by pretending to esteem; but by thinking quite sincerely that there can be a hidden worth in another greater than ours, even though we display a worth greater than his.⁵⁷

Aquinas seems to be pressing his sense of humility to a taxing limit here. Does he then mean that it is necessary to esteem another's specific or general qualities better than one's own whether the evidence supports this judgement or not? Would this not be creating a contradiction with the previously raised remark to the effect that one's own strengths are not inferior to others' simply because the former strengths are one's own? Unless one can esteem what is imagined to be hidden in the other person without that esteem impairing one's ability to judge the other's failings and intervene to stop them if possible, then the esteem becomes misleading. Yet Aquinas may simply be saying that one can find fault with another in a very thoroughgoing way, and yet still find esteem for that person.

The answer Aquinas might give is that he is not advocating self-deception in the matter of personal comparisons where the evidence is abundantly clear; rather, he recommends (as in the passage referring to Gregory cited

⁵⁷Lombard's gloss, PL 192, 232 as reported by St. Augustine, Questions lxxxiii, 71; S.T. Q.161, art. 3 repl. obj. 2.

earlier) that one not allow reasoned comparative judgments that favour oneself over others to promote the sin of self-exultation, or pride. Indeed, in order to have a clear sense of the difference between overt evaluative contrasts in characters and hidden possibilities in them, the honest awareness that one is superior to another in this respect or that must be present.

Perhaps the distinction Pieper advanced between actions and inward dispositions can also clarify Aquinas' sense here. On the assumption that humility must conform with justice, prudence and all the other moral virtues, this principle of imaginative self-disfavour is simply intended as a means for preserving one's respect and appreciation of others regardless of their manifest failings. Recalling Aquinas' discussion of vengeance, one can conceive of making negative judgments of others and even of taking the initiative to correct or penalize their behavior, yet without delighting in these measures and intervening in a spirit of concern for their own goodness and regret at the necessity of such forced intervention. Similarly, perhaps, one can conceive of some meaningful sense of humility even where one has no substantial doubt about the veracity of one's own sense of the other's error. The role of God is then the ground of the unwavering sense of respect and charity towards the other person as another of God's creatures, albeit one who has strayed further from the

faith. The more acute one's sensitivity to the unmanifested or neglected possibilities in others, perhaps the more humility one's nonetheless morally discriminating treatment of others possesses. In short, universal humility would be tantamount to a respect for all human beings that does not level any recognizable disparities in moral character, social standing, talents and so forth from person to person.

The most troubling passages in Aquinas with regard to this interpretation of his doctrine are those in which he appears to stand by the most exaggerated language of self-abasement--language which is typically the legacy of Christian writers other than Aquinas himself. In the last article of Q. 161, Aquinas presents and does not take exception to Benedict's twelve steps of humility--"the Rule of the Blessed Benedict," as Aquinas refers to them--which include "to believe and profess oneself lower than others [credere et pronuntiare omnibus viliores]" and "to think oneself useless for anything [ad omnia indignum et inutilem]."⁵⁴ Here, too, Aquinas endorses Anselm's view of the tone of humility. Aquinas accepts the authority of the number of Benedict's grades (twelve) in preference to Anselm's seven, but Aquinas makes a point of affirming the content of Anselm's seven grades which include, (1) "to recognize how contemptible you are" and (2) "to grieve over it," as well as (4) "to wish [others] to believe it" and (6)

⁵⁴Ibid., art. 6, obj. 1.

"to suffer oneself to be treated with contempt" and (7) "to be well content with such treatment."³ In Aquinas' reply to the objection that Anselm recognizes seven grades of humility rather than twelve, Aquinas says that all of Anselm's seven degrees "come under the sixth and seventh [of the twelve] enumerated by Saint Benedict." Aquinas views all of Anselm's degrees as having to do with seeing and accepting "one's lowliness [propriae abiectionis]." He asserts that "because to hug one's own failings would be blameworthy," this attitude "is excluded by" Anselm's second grade (to grieve for one's failings). Finally "We may go so far as to accept...the seventh degree." One might object to this endorsement that to seek to persuade others that one is contemptible does seem akin to embracing one's own failings--though not in the sense Aquinas probably meant--and so does loving feeling the contempt of others. One way to make sense of these prescriptions from other authors endorsed by Aquinas is to regard them as rhetorical devices to inhibit a self-satisfaction stemming from whatever recognizable attainments one has over others.

It is little wonder that passages like these provoke skepticism about a claim like Pieper's that nowhere does Aquinas describe Christian humility in terms of cringing inferiority feelings or an attitude of constant self-

³The Latin text of Anselm's last two grades runs, "ut patiatu
contemptibiliter se tractari...ut hoc amet." See 161 art. 6, obj.
3.

disparagement."⁶⁰ Surely the defender of Thomistic humility must concede that Aquinas is sympathetic to an attitude of self-abnegation, although (as I am arguing) not to servile conduct that is at odds with virtue as a whole. Perhaps Aquinas himself would not always have chosen quite the same phraseology as he is prepared to accept from other authorities; one might think he is accepting their language by viewing it as figurative and qualified. One can assert himself to be vile and "useless" to the limit of one's imagination--provided one understands by this at bottom "in comparison to God," and one does not make oneself useless in practice. One can assert that each person ought to regard others as better than oneself, but not in such a way that one behaves in violation of justice or prudence. One only claims herself to be worse than the next person as a means to avoid becoming complacent and narcissistic about one's real and perhaps superior virtues, which may nonetheless be evident to oneself, so that at the same time and in some manner one must continue to grasp that one is perhaps better than the next person in some way. There is some latitude with regard to the realities which one chooses to emphasize in interpersonal comparisons, provided that one not in the process lose grasp of the realities.

⁶⁰Newman (1982, Ibid., 280) expresses skepticism on this point.

4.2.3 Is Thomistic Humility a Balanced Disposition?

Jay Newman offers the same sort of reservations about Pieper's unalloyed confidence with regard to the salutary character of Christian humility.⁶¹ Newman also argues that there is an interesting asymmetry in the relations between Aquinas' virtues of humility and magnanimity: Aquinas' humility does not seem to admit of excess as readily as does his magnanimity, while humility seems to stand alone as a virtue whereas the value of magnanimity depends on its compatibility with humility.⁶² The significance of this asymmetry for Newman seems to be that although Aquinas wants to portray Christian humility as a balanced disposition of character (thus his attempt to incorporate humility into a neo-Aristotelian framework of virtues), Aquinas cannot quite succeed at this attempt because Christian humility simply is not a balanced disposition of character. (Recall that for Aristotle, virtues tend to be situated between opposite kinds of vices, one of deficiency and one of excess.)

At the beginning of my discussion of Aquinas' own text it was stated that humility is a virtue which can be paired with a vice of excess, pusillanimity, while magnanimity is paired with the vice of pride. On the other hand,

⁶¹Ibid., 278-9.

⁶²Ibid.

Aristotle's ethics portrays most virtues as means between twinned opposing vices. Aquinas' humility and magnanimity are opposed to vices, but as they are initially described, these traits are not clearly portrayed as means, each one in relation to twin vices. Aquinas seems sensitive to this difficulty in Q. 162 (art. 1, obj. 3 and repl.). The objection reads that "a sin is contrary not only to a virtue but to an opposite extreme of vice as well, as appears from Aristotle. There is, however, no opposite extreme [of vice] to pride, which, accordingly, is not a sin." In his reply, Aquinas suggests that there is some contrary, vicious deficiency in relation to pride conceived as excess: "And so the vice which verges on an utter lack of pride lies close to the vice of pusillanimity," Aquinas concludes, while pusillanimity "is opposed to magnanimity by deficiency."³ It is not possible for Aquinas to equate an excess of humility with pusillanimity without also equating humility and magnanimity, which were defined differently although in a complementary fashion. This is because Aquinas has chosen to contend with a total of four character traits (humility, magnanimity, pusillanimity and pride) so that he cannot neatly organize these traits into one triad or two non-overlapping triads. His solution seems to be to describe both humility and magnanimity as means which are both paired with the same vicious excesses, save for the fact that the

³Q.162, art. 1 repl. obj. 3.

vice of excess for one virtue (e.g. pride for magnanimity) is the very same vice, save of deficiency, for the other virtue (for humility). Aquinas does not in his reply to the objection further state that there is an opposite extreme of vice to pusillanimity, pride, but this is the implication.

Aquinas says that pusillanimity as a failure to strive for a difficult good "is the direct opposite by default of magnanimity [proprie opponitur magnanimitati per modum defectus]" but "as meaning an attachment to things below our dignity" is the opposite by default of humility." What this seems to mean is that it should be possible to regard Aquinas' virtue of humility in one way as involving a greater attachment to the things worthy of us than does another, less desirable disposition--pusillanimity. In this sense humility is a balanced disposition that admits of excess, contrary to Newman's critique.

Aquinas defines the vice (that is, the sin) of pride as that whereby one's will "aims above, supra, what he really is."⁶⁵ At just one point he concedes that "there is a good and an evil pride [superbia bona et mala]," in that it is no sin to love one's gifts insofar as one is conscious that they are the measure of God's grace." Normally, as we have seen, Aquinas understands this quality of character as

⁶⁴Ibid.

⁶⁵Q.162, art. 1 corp.

⁶⁶Q.162, art. 1 corp. and repl. obj. 1.

the error of attributing one's merits to one's own agency rather than God's, or, if one prefers, the error of overestimating one's capacities or one's worthiness to attain a certain difficult good. Though there is no further mention of "a pride that speaks [God's] glory which he bestows,"⁶⁷ in effect Aquinas does discuss this pride at some length: it is magnanimity. Since humility and magnanimity are complementary and in a sense one and the same virtue--striving or refraining from striving, both to the extent commensurate to one's abilities--one could also liken the virtue of humility to this good form of pride. Aquinas describes pride as an inordinate appetite for one's own superiority. This implies that the virtuous mean consists in a love of one's God-given merits that does not lead to the presumption of superiority over others. Again, this is tantamount to both magnanimity and humility in one of the senses of each.

In concluding the discussion of Newman we can comment on a key passage in his argument:

At the heart of [Aquinas'] analysis lies a simple model: a person should strive up to a certain point (or range of points, P, but no further; greatness of soul is a matter of striving all the way up to P, while humility is a matter of not striving beyond P....it follows that one can and should be both humble and great of soul....But the Christian virtue of humility does not require one to strive all the way up to P; a man can be humble without being great of soul. It can be argued that the less one strives...the more humble he is; it can even be argued that the Christian ideal of humility

⁶⁷Ibid., repl. obj. 1.

is not very different from what Aristotle regards as the vice of deficiency, smallness of soul."

This passage may pose an ambiguity in that it is unclear whether by "the Christian virtue of humility" Newman has in mind no more than the virtue as Aquinas presents it overall, or as understood by other writers in addition to him. Newman is at least willing to concede that "the humility that Aquinas has in mind [is] Christian,"⁶⁸ for the reason that Aquinas claims to incorporate the Benedictine and Anselmian depictions of the term, but this implication does not quite give logical equivalence. At any rate, I am supposing that Newman means that Christian humility as presented overall by Saint Thomas "does not require one to strive all the way up to P." It seems the only evidence Newman is employing in support of this claim is the startling language of Benedict and Anselm embraced by Aquinas. But, as we saw, Aquinas can perhaps be interpreted in such a way as understanding both one's "uselessness" and subjection to everyone else as consistent with the requirements of prudence, justice and the rest.

4.2.4 Gauthier's Defence of Aquinas

In the opinion of R.-A. Gauthier (1950), Aquinas' definitive solution (as found in the Summa) to the problem

⁶⁸Newman, 278.

⁶⁹Ibid., 279.

of trying to justify humility as a virtue in the context of its apparent nonexistence in Aristotle's writings is to claim that the complementary virtue of magnanimity regulates hope and despair in the human field while humility does so strictly in the divine.⁷⁰ Humility, an essentially religious virtue, is tied to "l'horreur sacrée" and "la crainte révérentielle"; it belongs properly to all persons, including the greatest, because they are properly as nothing in comparison with God.⁷¹ But it is not the role of humility to judge the fitness of one's real capacities; rather, it is that of magnanimity.

Gauthier defends this argument with a passage from Aquinas' text on magnanimity which agrees with Question 161 in noting that magnanimity and humility are not opposed because they proceed from different considerations. The passage Gauthier cites contains one of the very rare indications Aquinas gives that magnanimity can impart a proper role for contempt directed towards one's fellows (when they fail in moral virtue):

In the same way, magnanimity thinks little of others in so far as they fall short of God's gifts....So we read in the Psalms of the just man, In his eyes the reprobate is despised, and this is the contempt of the magnanimous person. But he praises those who fear the Lord, and this is the honour accorded by the humble man. Clearly, then, magnanimity and humility are not opposites, though they seem to incline in opposite directions because they

⁷⁰Gauthier, Magnanimité, 459-62.

⁷¹Ibid., 460.

have different purposes in mind.⁷²

In Gauthier's view, Aquinas' account of moral virtue is without precedent among prior Christian authors in the humanistic emphasis it places upon one's worldly relations and conduct and the way it conceives of human virtues as belonging to human beings as well as being made possible by God. Gauthier sees Thomistic magnanimity as robust and, because it is consecrated by humility, the high point in the evolution of Christian thinking on a properly human striving for greatness. Gauthier puts it thus:

"Soit donc un seul et même homme, à la fois humble et magnanime: en tant que magnanime, il mesurera ses forces, et, les ayant trouvées suffisantes, il se jugera digne de la grandeur et entreprendra...en tant qu'humble, il se jugera indigne, sans le secours de Dieu, de toute grandeur..."⁷³

Not only does Gauthier see Thomistic humility and magnanimity as the most attractive and valuable Christian conception of these qualities, but he clearly prefers it to Aristotle's vision of magnanimity:

Mais, en même temps que l'humilité infuse, que est l'humilité chrétienne proprement dite, abaisse le chrétien plus bas que le païen n'avais jamais songé à s'abaisser, la magnanimité infuse qui est proprement la magnanimité chrétienne, l'exalte plus haut que le païen n'aurait jamais ose s'élever."⁷⁴

Much as I claimed earlier, Gauthier believes that since

⁷²S.T. II II Q.129, art. 3 repl. obj. 4.

⁷³Gauthier, 461.

⁷⁴Ibid., 464.

humility is proper to everyone, it must be consistent with the most magnanimous of thoughts and deeds. In a way that also recalls Pieper, Gauthier conceives humility and magnanimity as complementary in that humility in the magnanimous tempers the attitude with which one strives to do great but difficult things, while not in any way tempering the magnanimous person's readiness to do them.

Gauthier's emphasis on relating humility to one's relation to God, magnanimity to relations with other people, is not meant to gloss over those passages in which Aquinas explicitly applies humility to one's fellows, but rather to reinterpret them. At the same time, Gauthier has no doubt that Aquinas misunderstands pagan and particularly Aristotelian thought in believing that there is in them any important role for what is conventionally regarded as humility. On Gauthier's view, Siger of Brabant comes closer to divining the Aristotelian perspective by seeing the closest equivalent to Christian humility in Aristotle as the content of a realistic self-assessment that would be fitting to mediocre people.⁷⁵

4.2.5 Aquinas: Conclusion

In this section I have tried to show how interpretation of Thomistic humility is difficult, while arguing for a certain reading of it that holds Aquinas' virtue to consist

⁷⁵Ibid., 467-76.

in honestly and accurately seeing one's strengths and weaknesses (both broadly, as a human being, and more narrowly and distinctively as an individual) in such a way that one has both a sympathetic and respectful regard for other people and a readiness to act to prevent or correct others' wrongdoing, to the extent one has the competence and valuations to do so. In all of these broad respects, in fact, Thomistic humility resembles Aristotle's greatness of soul as discussed in the last chapter. One key difference to be noted is that Aquinas does not give much emphasis to the way humility manifests itself in exceptional human beings. I shall return to this point shortly.

Interpretation of Thomistic humility is difficult because Aquinas occasionally appears to endorse the most extreme portrayals of humility provided by earlier writers of the faith, who seem to see it (at least at times) as a principled if incoherent self-condemnation and self-denial in relation to all other human beings regardless of one's particular identity and circumstances. Examination of Aquinas' own developed doctrine of humility, however, exposes what is for the most part a far more balanced and moderate view of the virtue which appears (unlike the extremist interpretation) both internally coherent and in keeping with a worldly and rationalist conception of moral goodness. The difficulty is in squaring the former element with the more prevalent latter one. The ambiguity in

Aquinas' writings on humility does lend the character trait to incompatible interpretations, as we saw in Carlson's view when contrasted with Pieper's. The inconsistencies in Carlson's presentation of Aquinas are, I would contend, in agreement with the untenable nature of the extremist conception. Aquinas offers a number of explicit formulae that are at odds with the radical reading of humility: his prescriptions not to presuppose that one's own weaknesses and strengths are more and less pronounced (respectively) than another's, simply because they are one's own; his judgment that acting to enforce God's rules is in keeping with humility.

In directly focussing on Thomistic passages, I contended that Aquinas' own doctrine of humility sees the virtue in two distinctive but complementary ways. On the one hand, humility is about self-restraint and self-criticism. It recognizes the relatively pronounced weakness of all human beings alike in comparison to god, the provider of whatever excellences human beings do possess, and on this basis justifies one's reluctance to condemn others easily, to dwell on one's own moral strengths even if they are apparently lacking in others, to glory in inflicting punishment on wrongdoers, and so forth. On the other hand, humility is the companion virtue of magnanimity and, in concert with that virtue, demands that each agent both think of herself and conduct herself in accordance with her real

merits and capabilities (whether they are relatively great or small) rather than her vainly striving to exceed these natural limits or wretchedly falling short of them. In opposition to what I take to be Newman's contention, and in agreement with Gauthier's stance, I want to deny that humility and magnanimity as portrayed by Aquinas are asymmetrically related. For Aquinas one can take humility too far, just as one can be deficient in a magnanimity which would be fitting to one's individual capacities. The relatively greater an individual's capacities are, the more humble and magnanimous that person necessarily is, provided that he possesses self-knowledge. He is magnanimous because he has certain strengths, relatively great ones at that, and realizes and respects them in himself (by not neglecting them also); he is humble because of his profound gratitude for these gifts and his sense that he stands to lose more than most people do if he neglects, misuses or misregards them. Even a person who properly takes her personal merits to be relatively slight would in virtue of that true belief be "magnanimous" in a loose sense of the term, in that what few merits she does possess she must correctly believe herself to possess and must employ, else she would not be humble in the second sense of striving in precise proportion to her abilities.

Clearly, the definite dimension of self-restraint in the magnanimous as Aquinas understands them turns here on

his religious beliefs. If Newman means to say that the asymmetrical character of the relation between the virtues arises from the fact that magnanimity (unlike humility) does not have a second, distinctive significance based upon the metaphysical presuppositions of the believer, then one would have to agree. (One might try to take issue with this by claiming that Christian magnanimity can have a second sense relating to metaphysical theology, perhaps by pointing to certain elements of Christian belief such as the godlike nature of the human faculty of free will and man's unique position in Creation as being made "in god's image," but the overall tone of the Christian perspective on the place of humankind in the world does not plausibly allow one to claim that there is in absolute, metaphysical terms as much of a Christian presumption for self-respect or self-esteem as there is for self-effacement.)

In the absence of theological assumptions, then, one might wonder if there is some secular basis for moderation or restraint in magnanimity in excellent individuals. In discussing Aristotle, I tried to suggest how a basic concern for virtue, which goes in tandem with a basic commitment to promoting the human good, can also yield in the adoption of moral attitudes such as charitability, generosity and considerateness, even towards people who are markedly inferior in their characters or their culturally understood status. This, I think, is one way of answering the question

in the affirmative: a well-developed secular moral framework such as Aristotle's provides a theoretical basis for restraining or moderating what might otherwise be the more unbridled character of social activity in individuals who happen to see themselves (correctly) as preeminent in social terms.

When discussing Aristotle, I also suggested that the modern ideal of equality and our reluctance to endorse the notion of a justified sense of personal superiority are both related to our Christian inheritance. This is supported by the New Testament's writings, which promote both the notion of the brotherhood of man (we are all sinners) and that of avoiding the sentiment of personal pride. We have said little so far about Aquinas' position on the question of the legitimacy of comprehensive comparative judgments of moral character. By defining magnanimity and humility in the way he does, Aquinas can hold that, in a certain sense, magnanimity is commensurate to every person just as humility is. This is liable to be misleading, however. The definitions of the two regulative virtues--one as restraining the concupisibile appetite and one as enhancing the irascible appetite--are formal, and thus could have very different expressions in different sorts of people. One agent's proper degree of magnanimity could be much more or less than another's, even though this is counterbalanced (on my reading) by the correspondingly greater degree of

humility that first person should also have (humility in the sense of gratitude to God).

Yet it is quite evident that Aquinas' writings in the Summa do not give much positive emphasis to a sense of one's possible fundamentally better character. While nowhere in Aquinas' writings do we find an explicit rejection of Aristotle's stated views as opposed to creative reinterpretation of them, the emphasis has clearly shifted away from Aristotle's upon the justified self-honour peculiarly characteristic of the megalopsuchos. In his Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics, Aquinas almost appears to accept line by line Aristotle's views of the great soul. "The maganimous person justly despises the wicked....but many, who are without virtue, manifest disdain and honour indiscriminately," Aquinas writes.⁷⁶ Does this not mean that the magnanimous person justly despises many, or the many? Aquinas does not appear willing to articulate this idea.

I have previously maintained that one could accept equality and recognize fundamental disparities in character merit at the same time. Let us now also try to apply this question to my interpretation of Aquinas. One way of discerning a notion of equality in this philosopher would be to observe that he seems to emphasize ways in which people

⁷⁶Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics, trans. C.I. Litzinger (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1964), sect. 758 (331).

are alike (in their finitude, dependency and distance from divine perfection) more than ways in which they differ (as in some being far more moral than others). Drawing this observation does not lend any additional credence to the contention in Chapter Two, however, in that Aquinas does not in this respect illustrate how a notion of equality could harmonize with a strong element of human inequality. There is simply little emphasis on the element of personal inequalities in the passages of Aquinas considered here.

Perhaps Aquinas thinks the notion of equality warrants more emphasis than does the notion of fundamental discrepancies of character worth in view of the human tendency to prefer and privilege oneself over others. The greater emphasis on humility than on magnanimity can be seen as another strategy to deal with this human tendency. Because Aquinas does appear to focus little on the notion of the unique and uniquely important consciousness of the magnanimous person, there is little to be gained by pointing out that he seems to some extent to be in logical agreement with Aristotle on the existence and identity of what I have called exceptional persons of moral humility. That is, although the genuinely magnanimous person is presumably a rare and distinctive individual in Aquinas just as he is in Aristotle, in Aquinas this individual's existence is merely acknowledged (in the Commentary, rather than the Summa) rather than used as an object of meditation on the nature of

moral excellence.

We began the discussion of Christianity with some brief references to biblical passages and scholarship before turning to a rather long discussion of Aquinas. Even if Aquinas' analysis of humility is the most interesting and relevant one Christian philosophy has to offer for the present essay, it would be patently unfair to leave the impression that a detailed discussion of that writer sufficed as an examination of humility in Christianity. While there are undoubtedly a host of other authors one could examine to this end, I shall next briefly discuss just one more classic source and two contemporary writers, in the hope that these three offer at least some further evidence in support of the more sweeping claims this chapter is making about ambiguity and sustainability of Christian perspectives.

4.3 St. Bernard on Humility

St. Bernard of Clairvaux's Steps of Humility is sometimes cited as a paradigmatic text of self-abasement (most importantly, before one's fellows as well as God) in Christian humility.⁷⁷ Bernard's Steps is a more extensive meditation upon the twelve steps of Benedict's Rule, which

⁷⁷Bernard of Clairvaux, The Steps of Humility, trans., introd. and notes by George Bosworth Burch, Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1940; rpt. Harvard University Press 1963. See, for example, Norvin Richards' reference to Bernard, in *Ibid.*, 253.

we raised earlier in discussing Aquinas.

Bernard defines humility as "that thorough self-examination which makes a man contemptible [vilescit] in his own sight."⁷⁸ The influence of this self-contempt upon Bernard himself is in evidence. In his preface, Bernard confesses to having feared that "a useful discourse would violate whatever humility I have"; yet he settles upon writing on the grounds that "humble silence would nullify what utility I have."⁷⁹ (Notice here the tension between humility and one's usefulness, seemingly confirming our earlier speculation that an attitude of self-denigration may easily be at odds with undertaking morally useful actions.) Bernard's sequence of increasing levels of pride from a state of perfect humility are curiosity, frivolity, foolish mirth, boastfulness, singularity [singularitas], conceit, audacity, excusing one's own sins, hypocritical confession, defiance (of one's superiors), freedom to sin and habitual sinning.⁸⁰

There are even in Bernard, however, certain qualifications which are neglected by those who choose to convey Bernard's humility in simple and extreme terms. Bernard concedes that the humility he describes is unattractive, and he deals with this aspect of humility by

⁷⁸Ibid., 125.

⁷⁹Ibid., 121.

⁸⁰Ibid., 173-223.

claiming that it is in some sense merely instrumental. The exercise of humility is placed only within the first of three distinct phases of consciousness, of which the second is love and the third contemplation. The first stage is "bitter and purging [purgatorius cum amaritudine," accompanied by sorrow, remorse, and the fear which prevents one from experiencing love."⁸¹ Love [caritas] is by contrast "sweet and consoling," yet still inferior to "the more abundant sweetness of contemplation."⁸² Bernard himself claims to be "laboriously crawling on all fours beneath the lowest" of the steps, and hopes for physical infirmity if from it he "should begin to progress, for in health I can only regress."⁸³

Another provocative feature is a dualistic view of the relationship between justice and judgment, on the one hand, and a Christian spirit towards one's fellows on the other. At one point Bernard writes that human beings can never overcome their failings without divine help. When they realize this, "they flee from justice to mercy [by following] the precept of Truth: Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy."⁸⁴ Here Bernard delineates three stages of truth corresponding to the three phases of

⁸¹Ibid., 129.

⁸²Ibid.

⁸³Ibid., 173-4.

⁸⁴Ibid., 153.

awareness. The first stage is "knowing yourself."⁸⁵ Self-love is an obstacle to self-judgment. But through "the toil [labor] of humility," one is enabled to see one's failings clearly, and thus proceed to the next and higher stage of knowledge, "knowing your neighbour."⁸⁶ Others are flawed just as oneself is, but having "the emotion of compassion" towards one's fellows is the proper response to the fallenness of all.⁸⁷ Finally there is the third stage of truth, "knowing God," in which "the eye of the heart is purified....by the ecstasy of contemplation [excessum contemplationis]."⁸⁸ Later, Bernard describes the appalling villainy of sinners whose fearlessness comes from a belief that God is merciful. "But what greater iniquity, than that the Creator should be despised by thee for that very reason for which he deserves to be loved the more."⁸⁹ Bernard continues that God's perfection implies justice, which includes retribution, "since a just is better than an indulgent kindness; indeed, kindness without justice is not a virtue at all."⁹⁰ In the later discussion of God, Bernard

⁸⁵Ibid., 149.

⁸⁶Ibid., 159; 153.

⁸⁷Ibid., 159.

⁸⁸Ibid., 157; 159.

⁸⁹Ibid., 187-9.

⁹⁰Ibid., 189. The Latin reads in full, "Absit tamen ab ejus perfectione, ut quia dulcis est, justus non sit, quasi simul dulcis et justus esse non possit: cum melior sit justa dulcedo, quam

appears to imply that retribution and justice in general is God's prerogative, but earlier, speaking of the movement from justice to compassion, Bernard is presumably conceding (with a frustrating lack of directness) some role for human judgment of human wrongs, even though the point seems to be that such judgments are overcome.

While describing the tenth step of the descent into pride, defiance, Bernard remarks that the first six steps can be classed together as "contempt of brethren [fratrum]," the next four as "contempt of the master [magistri]," and the last two as corresponding to "contempt of God." These last two steps can only be descended once one is exiled from the monastery. There is, however, a sense in which contempt of one's worldly superior parallels contempt of God. Bernard writes that when one ascends the steps from the bottom, "The third step...is reached when a man, for the love of God, submits himself with all obedience to a superior [majori]." Distinguishing between contempt of one's equals and contempt of one's superiors may recall the gloss on Matthew 3:15 mentioned by Aquinas, a passage we briefly raised in reference to Carlson. In the gloss, minimally sufficient Christian humility was said to mean subjecting oneself to one's superiors and not holding one's equals in contempt. The first six stages in falling away from humility which Bernard enumerates seem to fall below

remissa; imo virtus non sit dulcedo sine justitia."

this standard of minimally sufficient humility, since one holds one's equals in contempt. Conversely, one who occupies the highest level in the realm of humility but has not transcended it in the attainment of a higher love or contemplation might, by the same token, simply practice subjection to or merely even non-contempt for one's equals. Could Bernard mean, in other words, that the limit of humility means treating one's equals equally in the manner of the minimally sufficient humility suggested by the gloss on Matthew? If we take the liberty of indifferently applying terms like "equals," "inferiors" and "superiors" to either social rank or simple merit of character, then one could read Bernard's passage, too, as merely prescribing deference to those for whom deference is due and not for the others. This would be in barest form the same as the notion of secular humility developed in Chapter Two: having degrees of esteem for oneself and others in accordance with relative merits. Bernard's most developed form of humility is no more than an accurate assessment of one's worth relative to others, although the absolute estimate of human worth in general is obviously influenced by the presence of God. (Furthermore, of course, Bernard seems to see humility in general only as a stage on the way to something better.)

Notice also in this regard that Bernard's opening formula for humility does not describe in relation to whom one is contemptible, i.e., God or both God and other people.

The more plausible assumption--one which has not thus far been precluded by Bernard's subsequent discussion--is that the self-deprecation has fundamental reference to God only.

Bernard says very little about the possibilities in judging other human beings (save to say that non-judgmental loving compassion is a better response to the fallenness of all). He certainly gives no sign in the Steps of recognizing comprehensive relative moral assessments of individuals. Thus it seems hazardous to assume that "inferiors" and "superiors" relates to anything more than conventional social station. Nonetheless, there is some plausibility in seeing relations of social rank as analogous to relations of character rank. One might assume that a non-deferential attitude was appropriate to someone who appeared to be a habitual sinner (in Bernard's phrase) in much the same way that one might assume a non-deferential attitude was appropriate to a social inferior, even if the forms of non-deference are different in each case. If Bernard is implicitly acknowledging that, for persons who have not yet transcended the realm of judgment and humility, a respectful attitude to others is due in some cases and not in others, then his view of humility seems even less extreme than Aquinas', not more.

A non-literal reading of Bernard's depiction of the experience of humility is suggested by the fact that if we take his more extreme claims of self-denigration at face

value, they become incoherent. If Bernard really believes that he is too corrupted to possess any humility at all, what is the basis of his confidence that his treatise will be useful in accordance with his presumption of the truth of its claims? According to the author of the Steps, the final downward movement away from humility is ceasing to believe in God. At this stage the sinner is also said to achieve a certain inner peace--albeit one that "will plunge him at last into the depths of hell"--because the conflict between religiosity and sin is essentially overcome in him.⁹¹ But far from appearing complacent with his self-alleged moral turpitude, Bernard expresses his longing to surpass all of the stages of humility by entering into the higher realm of compassionate, universal love. Assuming Bernard honestly believes he lies beyond the pale, he appears to be self-deceived by the standard of his own conception of humility.

Another difficulty raised by Bernard's account concerns the relation between humility and love. If one could be humble in Bernard's sense (whatever that means) and loving at the same time, then perhaps one could retain the capacity and will to make correct judgments of others and influence them appropriately. But it seems more likely from Bernard's text that the phases are mutually exclusive. In this case, the problem of one's vulnerability to evil at the hands of others where one's judgment of them is suspended remains; it

⁹¹Ibid., 221.

has been shifted to a new plane where the term "humility" no longer applies. Since not everyone has attained the state of living in charity, non-judgmental compassion towards some may fail to be reciprocated and instead lead to ill-treatment at their hands.

In a sense, what is at stake here is the interpretation of Christian doctrine as a whole. It certainly still seems conceivable that the higher piety involves a loving readiness to suffer and even to die for and from the sins of others just as Christ is taken to have done. The promise of the final reckoning and of an otherworldly personal existence might well serve as the essential basis for the legitimacy and meaningfulness of this sacrificial gesture in one's mortal life. Is there a relevant limitation on the analogy with Christ? Christ is the Son of God in a way that no other subject is. Christ was not meant to atone for the sins of humanity so that human beings would in turn bear interminably the burden of atonement for each others' sins, but the free persistence of human beings in sin may demand such ongoing acts of complete worldly sacrifice. If humility and charity are taken to be fully commensurate with refusal to submit to unnecessary evil, as Aquinas and the Jerome commentary to some extent suggest, perhaps the reenactment of Christ's sacrifice is unwarranted: if the moral level of one's fellows is not high enough to permit them to be swayed by benevolent and forgiving actions, then

such people are instead to be corrected by firm and uncompromising measures.

So far, close attention to the discussions of humility in Aquinas and Bernard have not given consistently solid evidence in support of the popular notion that Christian humility consists in an uncritical attitude of servility and permissiveness towards everyone, particularly towards those who thereby do the most harm. In spite of the fact that there is a clear element of absolutism in the humility of Bernard and Aquinas, neither author (and especially not Aquinas) seems to say that being humble means giving free reign to others' mischief. But some of the terms in which writers such as these convey humility makes it rather easy to imagine how this inference as to the nature of Christian humility has appeared. The final section of the chapter deals with two more contemporary theologians on this topic, neither of whom is providing a commentary on a specific historical tract. Interestingly, while both writers seem sensitive to the common idea that humility may entail permissiveness towards evil, one writer accepts the view as realistic, while the other's attempt to dispel the notion is not entirely convincing.

4.4 Lingering Doubts in Contemporary Theology

Roberta Bondi (1987) partly wants to criticize what she sees as the popular notion that humility has to do with

"passivity," "being a doormat" or "daydreaming gentle thoughts while the world's violence goes on around [one]."²² According to Bondi this results from a longstanding ignorance of the very early Church fathers. The pioneering Christians understood by humility "that all human beings, every man, woman, and child, are beloved creatures of God," although this conception gave way early on to the view of selflessness or self-abnegation.²³ In the texts of the Fathers, she says, humility allows for the overcoming of relations of dominance and subservience. Bondi notes that humility since this earliest era has often been used for the opposite end, to justify hierarchical social relations (particularly that of women's deference to men) once again. The problem is not service per se but the loss of self that service can engender. By contrast, "a Christian may not give her or his life to another person as that person's absolute centre" because "such devotion belongs properly to God alone."²⁴

"Service" to a fellow mortal is, of course, a less suspect-sounding enterprise than acquiescence to the misguided will of another, so it is interesting to note that Bondi has reservations about subjection to other people even

²²Roberta Bondi, To Love as God Loves: Conversations with the Early Church (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 54.

²³Ibid., 42.

²⁴Ibid., 44.

where there is no prima facie indication of overall human harm resulting. At the same time, neither Aquinas nor Bernard have given a clear indication that subjection to another person implies giving over one's life and identity to that person's will. Bondi's distinction between self-sacrifice for God and self-sacrifice for another human being also suggests some further difficulties of interpretation, such as how one distinguishes between the former and the latter in a social context, but we will not take up this issue.

Bondi seems to envision humility as a basic sense of human equality premised on the immeasurable superiority of the Creator. I suggested earlier that this egalitarian element is also discernible in one of Aquinas' two senses of humility--that is, the notion that all of us owe our strengths to god and should conduct ourselves accordingly. Again, Bondi's version of Christian humility is emphasizing the idea of equality rather than any need to recognize better and worse states of moral character, even though her cautionary remarks about what humility should not entail are suggestive of this second concern.

However, Bondi also shows signs of sympathy with a view of humility more suggestive of potential passivity towards others' wrongs. Bondi claims that "No one can judge another, for no one but God knows why or how people came to

act as they do."⁹⁵ By "judge," Bondi seems here to mean the wholesale condemnation of a person, but it is precisely the problem that Bondi does not seem to make a clear distinction between condemning certain features of a person's character or behaviour, on one hand, and condemnation of such persons simpliciter, on the other. She writes that if one is oneself wrongly accused of some sin, one should avoid righteous indignation because one will have necessarily committed other wrongs for which one has escaped censure.⁹⁶ This reasoning gives no evidence of a view that some flaws are more culpable than others, or that some err more habitually or more intentionally than others. Christians believe that all persons have sinned, and "[t]o be humble is to identify with the sinner."⁹⁷ Can one identify with the sinner, at the same time regarding whatever the sinner's flaws as of the same order as one's own, and still find the moral authority to insist on refusing to allow the other to persist in wrong conduct, either directed against one's own self-interests or those of others? Bondi shows no sign of an awareness of this difficulty, much less a readiness to answer it. Since she is both conscious and critical of the notion that Christian humility means servility and moral permissiveness, Bondi surely ought to give more attention to

⁹⁵Ibid., 52-3.

⁹⁶Ibid., 51.

⁹⁷Ibid., 53.

explaining how her reluctance to endorse moral judgments of one person by another does not entail an inability to make correct moral judgments and an inability to act in accordance with the moral realities of the situation.

Unlike Bondi, François Varillon (1974) apparently chooses to concede that Christian humility does indeed entail the risk of self-destruction through the evil of others.⁹ "Humility is not a duty. It cannot even be recommended. On the ethical level it is ambiguous: it often destroys the individual," Varillon remarks in passing.⁹ Such a concession seems to point to a view of humility as a refusal to try to dominate the will of others at least under some circumstances where such refusal leads to one's own wrongful harm; that is, it points to humility as a kind of grace that finds its clear validation only in the supernatural realm.

This reading must be advanced tentatively, because Varillon's discussion of humility is tangential, and he does not offer a core formula. One can at least say that Varillon is closely linking humility to a subject's conscious and voluntary powerlessness or vulnerability in some regard. This becomes clear from the way Varillon explains his unconventional attribution of humility to God

⁹François Varillon, The Humility and Suffering of God, trans. Nelly Marans (New York: Alba House, 1983; originally published as L'humilité de Dieu by Editions du Centurion, Paris 1974).

⁹Ibid., 45.

as well as to devout mortals. Varillon reasons as follows. In spite of his divine identity, Jesus' humility is abundantly clear, and the truth of the Trinity entails this same characteristic in the attitude of God the Father towards human beings. Like St. Bernard, Varillon ties the logic of humility to that of love, reasoning that no human being has sufficient humility to continue loving a person without decline or end if that person permanently fails to reciprocate the love.

Paradoxically, God alone manifests the capacity for infinite and entirely voluntary vulnerability in relation to human subjects. The truest love has no admixture of pride--concern for one's power or efficacy--so God's love is perfect as well as of absolute humility.¹⁰⁰ God's omnipotence can be said to be self-limited by God's having given persons the attribute of freedom, which leaves them open to betray his love for them. Yet granting humans freedom in a sense allows for further dimensions to God's infinitude that would have otherwise been lacking: "God needs more power to forgive than to create," and God's capacity to suffer for the evils people unnecessarily bring upon themselves makes him more admirable than would be a supreme being who lacked such a so-called "anthropomorphism."¹⁰¹ Whatever the essence of God, the

¹⁰⁰Ibid., 45, 43-4.

¹⁰¹Ibid., 120, 100.

divine identity must find ample room for every excellence one can discern in a human character, and it must surpass the earthly exempla of these excellences. To the list of God's superhuman perfections, then, Varillon adds the power to negate without limit one's own power.

By claiming that God excels in the human virtue of humility on the basis of God's special relationship with human beings, Varillon gives some indication of how he takes humility to work in the case of human beings themselves. On his view it is humble to give someone else indefinitely the opportunity to reciprocate love, for which we may perhaps read in a parallel fashion the opportunity to treat one in a moral way, as the other person has been treated by one. The drawback is that this limitless patience in waiting for reciprocation of love or decency does not carry with it any assurance of eventual success; in the meantime, the other person has limitless opportunities to betray with impunity what Varillon takes to be charitable submission.

A final noteworthy feature of Varillon's account is his emphasis on the paradoxical aspects of humility. In Varillon's opinion, far from there being any inconsistency between the infinite strength of God and the infinite humility reflected in God's decision not to intervene against needless and spontaneous human evil, it is God's absolute power which gives such abstinence its greatest impact. Similarly, it is only because Jesus is utterly

without sin that his solidarity with sinners is one that is absent of all pride; there is no temptation to flattering comparison where there is simply no common frame of reference.¹⁰² Though Varillon has nothing to say of magnanimity, his view recalls Gauthier's praise of what he sees as the Thomist harmonization between humility and magnanimity. Varillon's God might be considered magnanimous beyond any mortal soul in Aquinas' sense of a capacity and willingness to greatness. It is because granting created beings a measure of freedom is greater than rigidly constraining the whole of creation that humility and greatness are compatible in God. Unlike Aquinas, however, Varillon seems unwilling to transfer this logic by analogy to the experience of human life. Varillon points out that love of persons involves weakness and dependency, but God's radically superior power seems too close at hand for Varillon to give any attention to the factor of a discretionary human power. One might, more explicitly than Varillon, draw an analogy by addressing a person's voluntary refusal to impose what is right upon others against their wishes in the hopes of winning their consent by one's non-paternalism. The moral defensibility of this strategy, which (Varillon seems to imply) often fails, cannot be the same as that for God's choice of the strategy, since humans and God are in fundamental contrast with respect to power

¹⁰²Ibid., 112.

and knowledge; i.e., a means of final restitution.

A second type of paradox is seen in Varillon's insistence that human humility is what Driver called a "virtue of ignorance": that one cannot know that one is genuinely humble. A person is not humble, "except in the fact that he admits being unable of humility."¹⁰³ Even the saints only became such after transcending the sense of their efforts as a striving for spiritual perfection. Mary's humility consisted in her ignorance of her own dignity being deeper than anyone else's.¹⁰⁴ This paradoxicality looks to be dependent on the assumption that humility is some sort of unlimited self-negation: if believing that one has only one moral virtue (humility) is in fact inconsistent with having even humility, then humility must entail an erroneous assumption that one has no positive qualities whatsoever. In other words, Varillon's humility seems in the end to represent a kind of absolutized self-limitation that makes Aquinas' or even Bernard's humility seem worldly-wise by comparison. Though he claims that men and women, unlike God, cannot attain the purest humility, Varillon makes clear the aspect of self-denigration in the disposition to the extent one can realize it. "The awareness of my unworthiness is such that....[a]lone with myself, I am disgusted by being what I

¹⁰³Ibid., 53.

¹⁰⁴Ibid., 55; 109.

am."¹⁰⁵ One is tempted to reply that this strain of self-loathing conduces to moral injury at the hand of others even if it does not necessarily entail it. By allying the quality of humility in people with that of humility in God, perhaps Varillon is thereby conflating the nature of subjection to fellowmen with that of subjection to God--the very mistake that Bondi seemed to warn against.

4.5 Conclusion

There is in the history of Christian literature undeniably a recurrent motif of the utter weakness, dependency and affliction of humankind which cannot but seem somewhat unattractive as well as one-sided to secular observers; however, the resourceful thought of Aquinas seems able to show that acceptance of this motif need not also imply an uncritical and voluntary passivity in the face of immoral behaviour. It remains quite plausible that the Christian presumption of human weakness (if my choice of authors has been fair) inherently favours this sort of moral paralysis in the absence of a rigorously developed doctrine that can wed this self-abasement before God to a readiness to uphold the moral good in social life. There are many influential Christian theologians both in earlier centuries and in modernity whom we have not dealt with here, and it may well be that many of them are more realistically

¹⁰⁵Ibid., 121.

interpreted as endorsing that tendency to moral passivity, as Varillon and Bondi both suggest, one intentionally and the other not.

Whether the version of Christian humility that is inconsistent with a social and worldly ethic is as widespread--or even more so--than the Thomist version, there is from a secular viewpoint no way to reconcile these radically opposed outlooks on life, and the choice between them from this viewpoint is a straightforward one. Any insights Christian humility has to offer those who explore the disposition from an extra-theological standpoint therefore seem more likely to derive from the more palatable version.

The more moral version of Christian humility, whose overall influence in the tradition remains uncertain, has been attributed to the earliest Christian fathers, finds intimations in Bernard, comes to perhaps a complete fruition in Aquinas, and is defended more or less cogently, sometimes on the basis of Scripture, by some modern day Christian scholars. This second perspective sees a virtue that is quite different and more elaborated in content. Broadly, it consists in regarding all people as essentially similar insofar as they possess some variable extent of shortfall and share in a capacity for moral improvement as well as for degeneration. These characteristics provide the rationale for what some see as the genuine "Christian attitude"

towards one's fellows: considerate respectfulness and a basically loving regard when one's concern for personal and collective human welfare requires forceful resistance and intervention, as well as when it does not. This mode of comportment is seen as most conducive to one's own moral health as well as that of others.

A very plausible supposition of one's active intervention in the moral problems people help to bring upon themselves is the variability of manifest specific personal moral merits; it is difficult to have resolve in trying to thwart human wrongs without having the conviction that one's perception that the wrongs are such is correct, and without having the conviction that one is able to change the situation for the better. In practice moral intervention against the will of another need not always imply a greater faith in one's own moral judgment; the offender may simply have consciously chosen to refrain from doing what is transparently better in moral terms, and the person intervening might well have made the same mistake on another occasion. But a basic and reflexive doubt about one's reliability as a judge of the behaviour of others and a doctrinaire assumption that others cannot be worse in practice than one is oneself are both likely to suppress a worthwhile response. One may say that it is specific judgments about others and according deeds that count, so the notion of implicit superiority is only operative in the

context of specific judgments and acts, and no generalizations about morally superior or inferior characters are necessary. But since interpretation of people's conduct depends upon judgments about their overall intentions and awareness, this reply seems insufficient.

What this chapter reveals is that, even within a theological context, Aquinas' companion virtues of humility and magnanimity--which together cover the same ground as humility as we formally defined it earlier--seem to be virtues appropriate to anyone, regardless of their actual attainments of merit. It seems that a coherent Christian doctrine of moral responsibility must accommodate (when appropriate) the decision to favour one's better judgments over those of others, no matter how remote such a decision seems from a spirit of subjection to one's fellows. Christian humility on these terms is not morally ambiguous and it is fully consistent with a rational and secular approach to the virtues.

While it may seem to be a redundant addition, we might conclude by noting that a more coherent version of Christian humility, as we have described in our interpretation of Aquinas, seems to be at least not at odds with my basic thesis (that relatively superior people can, through various moral frameworks, treat everyone else respectfully and without arrogance) even though my interpretation does not lend evident and strong support to that thesis. That is to

say, the Christian attitude towards one's fellows is on Aquinas' view as fitting to those who are themselves least sinful--most moral--as it is to those who are most sinful. It is because Aquinas does not put great emphasis on the awareness of one's relatively high moral refinement--and seems to prescribe essentially the same Christian attitude to all people, thus underlining their similarities rather than their differences--that Aquinas does not really lend positive support to my thesis.

CHAPTER FIVE

NOBILITY AND SELF-ESTEEM IN SPINOZA, KANT AND NIETZSCHE

Introduction

In this chapter I survey three well-known post-medieval philosophers, Spinoza, Kant, and Nietzsche, to ascertain their position on the question of appropriate relative estimates of one's own moral character. There are two sorts of conclusions of particular interest we might derive from comparisons of the three. These have to do with (1) the relationship between one's stance on this possible virtue of character and one's ideas of (in)equality and (2) the sort of overall character and comportment in a social context that is attributed to a person with a realistic self-evaluation as this may relate to (1).

We now briefly anticipate the findings. There is a trivial sense in which any philosopher would likely endorse the notion that one should accurately judge one's character merits (either in isolation or relative to others) insofar as self-knowledge is widely regarded as a good. In this sense it is not very significant to conclude that Spinoza,

Kant and Nietzsche all oppose self-overvaluation or self-undervaluation, because this approaches a tautology, provided one wishes to avoid self-deception. What is more important is that each of them does so in different ways and senses.

Kant appears very grudgingly to accept the value of this character trait, with serious qualifications. One is that one should not outwardly manifest one's disdain for the character suggested by another's base actions: one should apparently show the same basic respect for all people as people regardless of their deeds. A second is that Kant warns against dwelling on one's implied superiority of moral character relative to another even if this assessment is balanced. It is unclear what the most important justification for this is, but he offers at least two arguments. One is that such thinking will not promote others' moral improvement, and another is that no one is morally good enough to be complacent.

Kant does not make it very clear how he thinks the moral worth of persons as ends-in-themselves relates to the general moral assessment of flawed agents, so that one is unsure whether Kant even takes these two kinds of agent appraisal as properly independent of one another. If he does, it is unclear why he wants to downplay the significance of relatively better and worse moral characters. If he does not, it is unclear why this is so,

given that he recognizes all agents are fallible and some make much more serious mistakes than others. My contention is that Kant could have acknowledged two distinct orders of esteem, such that a presupposition of basic equality of all human beings is fully compatible with profound inequalities in realized worth which are justly acknowledged by morally competent agents, but it is unclear whether he has done so.

Spinoza strongly endorses a virtue of accurate self-appraisal; moreover, a virtue which is at least implicitly one of realistic relative character appraisal. Like Aristotle, he thinks that most people are relatively lacking in moral goodness, while he also thinks that an adequate self-understanding is a, or the, central feature of goodness. The ineluctable conclusion is that the good person knows himself or herself to have a fundamentally better character than do most people, whereas most are ignorant of his superiority to them. I shall argue that as in Aristotle, there is an implicit principle of human equality at work in Spinoza by virtue of his ethical rationalism. This principle is coupled with a view that anyone should have a warm and kindly attitude to all people, whether they are wise and benevolent or ignorant and malicious, but one is only liable to attain this ideal if one belongs to the former category. This is to say that most people fall far short of the very high potential of human beings for reasoned understanding of all reality and

for constructive activity, but even if one is exceptional in this regard and a very strong and well-developed person, the mark of this exceptionality is a saintly regard for everyone even in the process of resisting the harm that the many would often contrive to do.

I want to claim that Nietzsche also accepts the virtue of humility as we have defined it, and like Aristotle, additionally endorses the special emphasis given to this accurate self-estimate for people of exceptionally noble character. (Indeed, unlike Kant and Spinoza, on my reading Nietzsche goes so far as to call this paradigm instance of the virtue by the name "humility.") Nietzsche is the only philosopher we have addressed who appears to repudiate openly any principle of universal equality of human beings, although there is critical dispute about how literally one should interpret these claims. There are undoubtedly certain universalist claims about people in Nietzsche much as there are in Spinoza, but Nietzsche's intent seems to be much more to emphasize that social relations invariably entail polarization and opposition between individuals and even more so between classes or types of person, rather than involving some essential sameness that would yield in complete social harmony were it not for human ineptitude (as Spinoza claims). It is consistent with my observations about Kant to note that Nietzsche could also uphold the abstract ideal of equality (although I think he does not)

without logically undermining his point about real human discrepancies. In any case, I suggest that Nietzsche interestingly appears to uphold for the persons of great worth the same kind of social and behavioral dispositions as does Spinoza, thus providing one more instance (recalling too Aristotle's) of how a relatively very elevated self-conception need not manifest itself in apparent arrogance or wilful intimidation of others. But this point cannot be stressed quite as convincingly as it can in discussing Spinoza, because of the greater uncertainties of interpretation in Nietzsche.

5.1 Spinoza

Benedict de Spinoza is a relevant philosopher to examine because, like some of the contemporary authors in Chapter Two, and indeed all the philosophers we are addressing apart from Aquinas, he criticizes humility understood as implying any basic tendency to self-abasement. Once again, as I shall try to show, an accurate understanding of one's own strengths and weaknesses relative to others is very much a virtue in the Spinozistic system. At the same time, those virtuous social dispositions which Spinoza commends in those able to adopt them clearsightedly are not much suggestive of what most observers would take as un-Christian arrogance or cavalier contempt for the feelings of others. Instead, they have an aspect of saintly

benevolence, one which in some ways echoes the New Testament. As I remarked in the case of Aristotle, one can only attribute arrogance to what we are calling the virtue of humility in Spinoza's morally excellent person if one simply stipulates that whatever one's behaviour, when that behaviour is based on an implicit belief that one has superior understanding and competence (including moral understanding and competence) to most, it is necessarily arrogant behaviour. Of course, the implicit inner belief that one is morally superior to most can less controversially be characterized as arrogant, provided one presupposes that such inner beliefs are necessarily or likely mistaken.

It is difficult to present a clear exposition of this audacious idealist in such a way that his thought can be imaginatively grasped, but I try nevertheless in the following paragraphs. One might raise the objection that the Spinozistic system is evidently so bizarre that its relevance to a discussion purporting to defend a certain kind of moral virtue as workable in everyday life is dubious. As suggested earlier, I take the peculiarities of whichever philosophy is under examination to be advantageous to the defence of my thesis. The contrasts in the philosophical systems show how there are a number of very divergent ways in which one can rationalize certain patterns of thought and social behaviour in the most excellent

individuals. The crucial point is that the divergent systems (I think here of Aristotle and Nietzsche as well as Spinoza) do rationalize patterns having some interesting similarities.

With the rational optimism of the "geometrical method," Spinoza's Ethics sets out from minimal metaphysical premises to develop a psychology and an ethics in which human beings are integral constituents of a plenary, deterministic and divine cosmic unity. Mind and matter are two parallel attributes of a single substance, so that every physical and mental state of affairs (or "affection") has its correlate in the other attribute. Spinoza's monistic pantheism to some marks a radical departure from the metaphysics and theology of the Medieval period. In his monism, it is the limitedness and partiality of the human viewpoint upon the cosmic substance that accounts for all human suffering. Yet, very much unlike the Scholastics, Spinoza claims that human reason is sufficient largely to transcend this finitude of awareness in an earthly life of optimized overall pleasure,¹ strength, self-preserving and -enhancing activity, and blissful contemplation of God (i.e., nature or substance). It is surely significant to a discussion of humility for Spinoza that there is no clear upper limit to the human capacity to grasp the whole of reality, and a

¹This is not to be confused with what are popularly taken to be the great earthly pleasures, however, such as specialized forms of bodily indulgence; see below.

rational striving for perfection cannot possibly admit of excess. Admittedly, it is clear that, for Spinoza, this understanding must be far from total, as human beings cannot merge their personal identities with the divine totality, no matter how acute their reasoning. This is because full knowledge of the infinite sum of particular modes of substance and their events is not possible without the determination of these events being fully internal to the knower--i.e., determination strictly internal to the physical and mental being of the individual--whereas nature is vast and diverse, thus full of particular beings with which we as individuals typically have only the most fragmentary or remote causal connections.² Yet, these connections are common enough to impact profoundly upon personal well-being and survival. While they have a capacity to understand reality unrivalled by any known being save the divine substance as a whole, human beings remain infinitesimal in their influence upon nature, so that wisdom also often means acceptance of an impersonal and unalterable fate.

To understand the place of humility for Spinoza, we must have some sense of his analysis of the emotions. Spinoza's moral theory is fully integrated with his

²Ethics, II pr. 19-29. All quotations from the Ethics follow the Hackett edition (The Ethics and Selected Letters, trans. Samuel Shirley, ed. and introd. Seymour Feldman, Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1982).

metaphysics and psychology, with the result that his moral claims are advanced with the same precision and confidence as following from the geometrical method common to all fields he addresses in the Ethics. Virtue consists in thought and action which is fully and consciously consistent with the indubitable realities of nature as they bear upon the moral experience of existence. "By virtue and power I mean the same thing," Spinoza writes; "virtue...is man's very essence, or nature, insofar as he has power to bring about that which can be understood solely through the laws of his own nature."³ The goal of Spinoza's ethics is to bring about a reasoned maximization of one's level of overall activity, rather than allowing this level to rise and fall according to the vicissitudes of fate as it applies to all events wholly or partially external to oneself. In spite of the deterministic character of all reality, human beings have the potential to attain a high degree of autonomy. By "autonomy" here is meant orienting oneself within the totality of natural events in a relatively efficient manner, and attaining a comprehensive grasp of the basic natural laws and their relations as Spinoza's philosophy does. This autonomy is the fruit of the life of virtue.

Every thought and action which is according to virtue enhances the overall vitality and perfection of the human

³IV defs. 8.

being; such deliberated enhancement is necessarily pleasurable, while all suffering is symptomatic of an inadequate understanding of oneself and one's relationship to the cosmic whole.

Spinoza says that there are only three primary emotions, pleasure, pain, and desire.⁴ The basic desire of any being is for self-preservation and self-consolidation, and all particular desires--even those that are very misguided and self-defeating--are species or manifestations of this basic imperative or "conatus." On Spinoza's view, all the experiences of pleasure, which correspond to various attained increases in one's level of activity, are either in a part of the organism or in the being as a whole, while anguish and melancholy correspond to a decline in one's partial and overall activity level respectively.

Pleasure and activity are prima facie good and their privation (pain, passivity) bad. But ethics is not a matter of blind trust in one's hedonistic conatus. Basically emotions can only be advantageous to one's maximal development in proportion to the degree they are active. Although they necessarily signal an increase in activity, pleasures can be largely passive, as are pains wholly so. This is the case when one does not have an adequate, overall understanding of how one's activity is increasing. Pleasures restricted to some part of an individual (such as

⁴III Pr. 11.

sexual stimulation, titillatio) are more prevalent than activity-enhancements of the organism as a whole, and such restricted pleasures can be sources of disturbance and confusion.

Spinoza endorses the radical position that all harsh feelings towards oneself and others are always wrong: fear, hatred, anger, disparagement, envy, and so forth. They cannot be otherwise, in that all adverse sentiments directed towards oneself or others necessarily parallel a decline in one's activity and perfection. "[N]o emotions of pain can be related to the mind in so far as it is active, but only emotions of pleasure and desire," and "[h]atred is pain accompanied by the idea of an external cause."⁵ At the same time, Spinoza limits the number of proper feelings to a small number of distinctive constructive, stable sentiments that he attributes to the activity of the being as a whole. These include self-control, sobriety, resourcefulness, courtesy, mercy and honourableness; all such feelings can be broadly classed under "courage" (animositas) or "nobility" (generositas), which in turn are two aspects of the master-virtue, strength of mind (fortitudo).⁶ They do not include such things as hope, because of the connection of such a sentiment with ignorance that renders the feeling (positive as it is) a hostage to fortune.

⁵III Pr. 59; defs. emotions 7.

⁶See III Pr. 58 ff.

Thus, Spinoza advocates a sort of Stoic equanimity and eradication of all destructive feeling coupled with a saintly benevolence of disposition towards others. Indiscriminately pleasurable sensations are apt to pass into painful ones, since we lack the understanding and ability to sustain their preconditions. Thus, in practice, human bondage amounts "to man's lack of power to control and check the emotions," which are "as a general rule excessive."⁷ Cheerfulness, on the other hand, "cannot be excessive."⁸ While the moral value of positive feelings is indeterminate, negative ones are far easier to characterize. "Hatred [towards people or oneself] can never be good," Spinoza writes, while "[h]e who lives by the guidance of reason endeavours as far as he can to repay with love or nobility another's hatred, anger, contempt etc. toward himself."⁹ The rationale behind these assertions, in keeping with the geometrical method, is clear and coherent enough. Spinoza's thinking has nothing to do with affirming the alleged Biblical view that the meek (if we understand by this indiscriminately compliant and always cheerfully obliging) are blessed. Rather, it is that returning hatred, cruelty, injustice and the like with love and kindness is more likely to dispel futile social discords by transforming the

⁷IV pref.; Pr. 44, schol.

⁸Pr. 42.

⁹IV Pr. 45, 46.

offender's dispositions and deeds than is retaliation. At the same time, the strategy of emotional positivity preserves the mental strength of the more reasoned agent, provided that he continues to seek his own proper interests. One is to be cheerful, but neither compliant nor obliging, except where others act in conformity with the good of one and all that is revealed to reason. This benevolence of spirit does not, then, amount to routine capitulation to the others' wishes, nor to categorical obligations to practice certain deeds regardless of with whom one is dealing. "[N]o action, considered solely in itself, is good or evil," Spinoza writes.¹⁰ Indeed, Spinoza says that every individual's right is defined by his virtue or power, which is how he justifies the propriety of the human exploitation of other life forms.¹¹

Given that only a small minority of people live according to reason, and these people, on Spinoza's hypothesis, must have a far higher level of virtue or activity than the rest of mankind, it would appear that for Spinoza the freest, most rational people--those he also calls the "strong of spirit"--are justified in favouring their own purposes over those of the multitude, and that such self-presumption, rather than its opposite, goes hand in hand with the spirit of benevolence he also ascribes

¹⁰IV Pr. 59.

¹¹IV Pr. 37, schol. 2.

largely to those of fortitude rather than to common people. When Spinoza focuses his ontology upon the anthropological field at the outset of Part II, he strongly implies that some human beings are simply fundamentally superior to others, and their claims would thus be similarly so. Discussing the correspondence between an individual's mind and body, Spinoza writes that "ideas differ among themselves as do their objects, and...one is more excellent and contains more reality than another," adding that "[f]rom this we can realize the superiority of one mind over others."¹² One clear constraint he places on the philosophical justification of such self-preferential rights is that general adherence to the laws of one's society, where they are just, is prudent. A world populated only by the strong of spirit could do without social contracts, because the optimization of each person's activity is on Spinoza's view really fully compatible with that of all. There is "nothing...more advantageous to man than man."¹³ Spinoza continues that

Men, I repeat, can wish for nothing more excellent for preserving their own being than that they should all be in such harmony in all respects that their minds and bodies should compose, as it were, one mind and one body, and that all together...should aim at the common advantage of all....men who aim at their own advantage under the guidance of reason [seek] nothing for themselves that they would not desire for the rest of

¹²II Pr. 13, schol.

¹³IV Pr. 18, schol.

mankind; and so are just, faithful and honourable.¹⁴

This is in spite of Spinoza's assessment that people are

for the most part envious, and more inclined to revenge than to compassion [so that] it needs an unusually powerful spirit to bear with each according to his disposition and to restrain oneself from imitating their emotions.¹⁵

All the discord and despair in the world is the result of a failure of clarity in reasoning; crass ineptitude in most, and to a lesser extent the fallibility of the finite point of view in the few, highest, minds. Of people in general, "few there are who live under the direction of reason"; thus the free do better to uphold the law so that the many will least risk obstructing a limited, merely personal degree of self-actualization in the strong.¹⁶

Spinoza defines humility as "pain arising from a man's contemplation of his own impotence, or weakness" and declares that "Humility is not a virtue...it does not arise from reason."¹⁷ Evidently, the experience of humility as it has been defined here will be at odds with one's fundamental interest. Spinoza does not commend what he calls pride, which he understands as "thinking too highly of

¹⁴IV Pr. 18, schol.

¹⁵IV appendix, 13.

¹⁶IV Pr. 37 schol.2; IV appendix, 13; IV Pr. 73.

¹⁷III defs. emotions 26; IV Pr. 53.

oneself by reason of self-love."¹⁸ Both what he calls humility and pride are based on self-ignorance, and the two faults are portrayed as curiously resembling one another. Spinoza makes this clear when he allies extreme pride and self-abasement in a pair of propositions asserting that both "[indicate] extreme weakness of spirit" and "extreme ignorance of oneself."¹⁹ The anti-egalitarian thinking of the wise hinted at in the last paragraph might sound to many very much like extreme pride or arrogance, even if tempered by a prudential respectfulness for egalitarian laws, but Spinoza does not see an inward sense of personal superiority as wrong where the presumption is justified. Spinoza does not seem to present pride (that is, self-overestimation) as the remedy to humility, but rather sees both as flawed alternatives to rational self-acceptance or self-contentment (acquiescentia in se ipso) which is "the highest good we can hope for."²⁰

"Although self-abasement is the opposite of pride, the self-abased man is very close to the proud man," Spinoza writes.²¹ This paradoxical confluence of contraries is not peculiar to pride and humility. On the contrary, Spinoza believes that those whose feelings are largely passive,

¹⁸III defs. emotions 28.

¹⁹IV Pr. 56, 55.

²⁰IV Pr. 52, schol.

²¹IV Pr. 57, schol.

hence confused, often feel contrary sentiments towards the same object and vacillate between the two. The humble person finds consolation in the failings of others and he is most prone to envy where such failings are not readily discernible. The self-abased "end up by praising only self-abasement and exulting in it."²² Similarly, it is bad either to overestimate or to underestimate other people.²³ Self-contentment and the best understanding of other people depend upon a realistic awareness of anyone's degree of activity and passivity.

While Spinoza's antipathy to self-abasement is evident, then, he would appear to find no fault in the view that a true estimate of one's own virtues and those of others--entailing judgments of marked inequalities in a basic sense between the two--is itself a virtue. Furthermore, Spinoza sees no conflict between a firm determination to pursue one's own good against the incompatible preferences of others (where the others are wrong) on the one hand and a resolution to feel well-disposed towards such people, even in the process of resisting their misconceived purposes, on the other. In these respects, Spinoza may be most reminiscent of my interpretation of Aquinas. Aquinas' person of perfect virtue seems somewhat akin to Spinoza's in the tendency of both to show an absence of malice, even

²²Ibid.

²³IV Pr. 48.

where the other's purposes must be resisted. Aquinas does not take the doctrine of benevolence and cheerfulness to the Stoic extremes of Spinoza, however; the former accepts such emotions as anger and righteous indignation under appropriate conditions. Clearly there are fundamental discrepancies in the underlying theologies as well; Aquinas wants to put definite limits on the strivings of every human agent, even the most gifted, whereas in Spinoza the earthly quest for perfection finds no definite upper boundary.

Finally, it is suggestive that Spinoza appears to give a certain preference to what he calls humility as the lesser evil in relation to self-overestimation. This may make sense in light of the fact that on his view most people lead gravely misguided lives. If such people did not see themselves as having only very limited importance in the world, they might do untold harm to one another and even to strong spirits. Humility can serve as a restraint upon ill-conceived actions that the many might otherwise undertake. "So it is not surprising that the prophets, who had regard for the good of the whole community, and not of the few, have been so zealous in commending humility," he writes.²⁴ Self-underestimation or a dim view of one's capacities is not a vice to the same extent as its contrary after all.

Given that Spinoza is a determinist, such an analysis makes more sense if we can somehow distinguish between

²⁴IV Pr. 54, schol.

realized personal levels of activity and understanding and humanly possible ones. Does Spinoza mean by self-underestimation "a low self-estimate relative to the value one could attribute to oneself as a maximally effective human being" or "a low self-estimate in comparison with one's personally realized degree of activity"?

Presumably, if the many are basically inferior in their degrees of understanding and activity, then a low self-opinion in the former sense would be accurate. Yet humility for Spinoza means self-underestimation. For such people to be humble (as Spinoza maintains is desirable for them), would they not seemingly have to rate themselves lowly even relative to their already low attainments? The alternative interpretation here is perhaps more plausible: Spinoza means that, like all human beings, subject to the same inexorable laws of metaphysics and psychology, such people could be far more active, autonomous and reasoned in their ways of life than they are, and it is in a comparison of their actual lives with some vague sense of a better possible life that a humble self-assessment is both available and desirable. Spinoza also remarks that people characterized by humility in his sense "can be far more readily induced than others to live by the guidance of reason in the end,"²⁵ which may support the hypothesis that the humble (in his sense of the term) have some inkling that their modus vivendi is flawed

²⁵Ibid.

and unsatisfactory in its fruits in comparison with what they might have accomplished. It may also be that they are simply more receptive to new ways of living because they do not stridently insist upon their opinions the way other ignorant people remain more obstinate through overpowering though disordered sentiments.

Spinoza asserts that by contrast, the (excessively) proud, while "subject to all the emotions," "[tend] to love and pity least of all."²⁶ As love is an absolutely basic desirable social affect for Spinoza, the humble in his sense seem somewhat closer to the correct social dispositions than do the over-proud in this respect too. Pride thus seems to name a self-affirmation (albeit unstable and ill-founded) that does not find room for benevolence. As for pity, Spinoza allies it with compassionate deeds, which he commends, but sees pity in itself as a hazardous feeling in that it tends to be debilitating and hence undermining to one's activity.

Although he is a strict determinist, Spinoza characterizes the optimal use of human intelligence in maximizing personal activity, inner resilience and self-sufficiency as "freedom." Since human beings are denied absolute knowledge, for exponents of determinism there is no sure evidence to suppose that any individual either will or will not discover the life of reason; an encounter with

²⁶IV Pr. 57, schol.

Spinoza's treatise (supposing its claims to be true) might be the proximate cause of the reconstruction of one's formerly passive and dissipated existence, and hence it is proper for people to try to adopt Spinoza's principles even if overall success or failure is a foregone conclusion from the absolute point of view. Even in a deterministic universe, one's character could admit of progress or decay.²⁷ Thus, there is for determinists a meaningful distinction between actual personal merits and "possible" ones, even though "possible" must be interpreted as "possible from the perspective of one's finite self-knowledge" rather than metaphysically possible, i.e. really multiple and indeterminate future outcomes.

The foremost conclusion I want to draw about Spinoza's moral philosophy is that he definitely accepts the notion of marked disparities in the goodness, strength, activity, and perfection--that is, worth--of different kinds of person and

²⁷Spinoza seems somewhat uncertain about the psychological implications of determinism when he alludes to the question (at III defs. emotions 28 explic.). At first he appears to conclude that determinism makes self-underestimation impossible in that one's self-estimate is the determinant of what one actually accomplishes. Then, however, he retreats from this claim with examples of a contrast between one's self-assessment and the estimate others have of one's abilities, and a contrast between one's self-estimate and what one could assert of oneself with good justification. Spinoza's final position is more plausible, even if his reasoning here is less than ideally lucid. Determinism puts no limitation on the logically possible extent of psychological complexity and hence, the number of ways in which one have contrary confused ideas and feelings about oneself at once. If some people who are excessively proud are also excessively self-abased, then surely one might in a certain mood attempt things which one believed were beyond one's capacities in another mood.

at the same time believes that it is the most morally excellent people who show the noblest (most benevolent, loving, considerate etc.) attitudes towards people at large, who tend to have less noble sentiments, both among themselves and, likely to a lesser extent, towards the strong of spirit. As far as this goes, I think this case is exactly like that of Aristotle's great soul, even though the complex of traits attributed to each moral paradigm is somewhat different in tone.

Particularly given that Spinoza goes so far as to believe that there is a greater natural right in the claims of excellent characters than in those of the mediocre, there is a certain irony or paradox in this state of affairs. Those human beings with more reality and perfection seem to show more respect for those with a lesser degree of these attributes than the lesser people show for one another and even towards the excellent. The paradox, of course, is rather akin to the one I raised in the second chapter: believing that all people have the same worth in some sense and at the same time believing the apparent contradictory in some sense. Spinoza's higher human type treats every person in accordance with the highest potentialities of human worth, and that he grasps at the same time that many people are much further from the ideal than he himself is makes no difference to that principled attitude, although it does make a great deal of difference to whether he accepts lesser

people's opinions and actions.

Once again, like Aristotle, Spinoza is not an egalitarian, either by overt claim or in terms of some explicit features of his moral framework. The claim that higher people basically have a natural claim to things over lower people clearly runs afoul of some such principle of equality. Furthermore, one must concede that on this ground we would expect the strong of spirit to harbour a certain inner disdain or lack of gravity towards the aspirations of the many, even if the great person successfully conceals this disdain on the grounds of prudence and solicitude for the feelings of others. This inward conviction about one's naturally greater deserts (even where the State fails to acknowledge them) obviously puts some sort of constraint on a claim I might make to the effect that Spinoza's higher person lacks arrogance either as a behavioral disposition or a cognitive one.

Nonetheless, one could argue that many of Spinoza's basic tenets do suggest some notion of an ideal human equality. The beliefs to which I refer are that all human beings are subject to exactly the same principles, that these principles entail an actual, though hidden, harmony and unity of all peoples' genuine interests, and that all people are to be treated with courtesy and warmth--which requires a degree of wisdom in proportion to the stupidity and malice of the people one encounters--precisely because

these best conduce to the ideal state of society. It is because these universalist claims are true (by hypothesis) that Spinoza can recommend the same course of conduct to all agents, regardless of their actual state.

5.2 Kant

On the face of it, Kant achieves a fruitful and highly coherent synthesis of the principle of the fundamental equality of human beings with that of the basic fallibility of all individuals. This synthesis is accomplished by an understanding of both principles in accordance with the nature and exacting demands of Kant's moral law. The combination of these two elements enables Kant to offer a universal application for his robust concepts of "noble pride" and "humility." On his view, all human beings are properly subject to both dispositions. In the Lectures on Ethics and The Doctrine of Virtue (Part II of the Metaphysic of Morals), Kant offers a strong warrant for a profound kind of self-respect that is autonomous in origin ("noble pride") and an equally profound respect for every other person while also rationalizing an equally universal notion of an acute sense of one's necessarily real failings ("humility"). The only parallel we have seen to this forceful and pervasive Kantian humility in the sense of consciousness of self-weakness is the comparison Aquinas makes between all persons and God. Kant denies that there is any legitimate scope for

a sense of self-abasement, however, inasmuch as the moral law is a secular ideal of rational, i.e. human, thought, and we are not to abase ourselves for failure to realize a distinctively human standard of perfection.

One possible weakness with Kant's discussion of the relationship between noble pride and humility on the one hand and the notion of varying personal degrees of moral failure on the other is that it is unclear why comprehensive moral contrasts among agents are not clearly seen to constitute a legitimate object of attention. Kant's moral philosophy as a whole emphatically repudiates intrinsic value and dignity to anything except the good will, the conscious assent of any rational subject to the categorical imperatives discernible to all such subjects through reason. In this way, Kant is denying that all the personal merits and capacities that do vary from individual to individual through impersonal contingencies such as the lottery of birth or upbringing are ultimately significant; moral worth is uniformly distributed among all rational beings, and it is the universality of the rational capacity among moral agents that frees them from such contingencies. Yet Kant must of course acknowledge that, supposing we granted with him that all people have an equal capacity to choose what is morally right, then it would remain the case that some people make good with this capacity whereas others do not. Kant's doctrine of noumenal freedom presents the choices of

a moral agent as radically unconstrained in the sense of their independence from the determinations of nature. One might gather from this that there would be in Kant a legitimate basis for making strongly discriminatory judgments in comparing generally conscientious people with those who tend to be the opposite. As I shall illustrate shortly, this does not clearly and unambiguously seem the case.

For my discussion of Kantian pride and humility I address only the Metaphysic of Morals and the Lectures on Ethics. Although the Lectures are a secondhand account of Kantian views, both works date from the critical period in Kant's development and can be thought to provide his mature views on these subjects. We first turn to a compact and closely argued passage in Kant's Lectures.

"In the light of the law of morality, which is holy and perfect, our defects stand out with glaring distinctness," Kant writes. Thus "we have sufficient cause to feel humble."²⁸ Kant is maintaining here the predominant conventional association of humility with the sense of one's weakness or deficiency. "But if we compare ourselves with others, there is no reason to have a low opinion of ourselves; we have a right to consider ourselves as valuable as another." Kant goes on to say that this sense of one's

²⁸Kant, Lectures on Ethics, trans. Louis Infield (London: Methuen, 1930; New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1963), "Proper Self-Respect," 126.

basic equality with other subjects "constitutes noble pride."²⁹ Apparently the grounds for noble pride are as universal as the grounds for humility; neither sense bears any special relation to one's distinctive character as an individual relative to other individuals. Because both sentiments are properly in detachment from any variations in individual subjects, they are always equally proper. Kant contrasts humility on his definition with "monk's virtue," having a low opinion of oneself relative to others, which is "a sign of a little spirit and a servile character."³⁰ He repeatedly emphasizes that neither noble pride nor humility should arise from one's contrasts with other rational agents, while both these virtues have a proper reference to one's consequent attitudes towards others. "No one can demand of me that I should humiliate myself and value myself less than others; but we all have the right to demand of a man that he should not think himself superior."³¹ Kant also offers passing judgments on the error of both Christian and "ancient" perspectives on pride and humility. Of the former, he writes that

The Gospel first presented morality in its purity....But [monk's humility] does not bring courage....Conscious of his shortcomings, a man may feel that his actions can never attain to the level of the moral law, and he may give up trying, and simply do nothing....In order to

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Ibid., 127; 126.

³¹Ibid., 127.

convince man of his weakness, make him humble and induce him to pray to God for help, some writers have tried to deny to man any good disposition. This can do no good....If we depreciate the value of human virtues we do harm, because if we deny good intentions to the man who lives aright, where is the difference between him and the evil-doer?"³²

In the ancients, Kant perceives the opposite error.

"If an individual takes a lenient view of the moral law, he may well have a high opinion of himself and be conceited because he judges himself by a false standard." The ancient conceptions of the virtues were "impure" because their standards fell short of the rigour of Kantian moral law.

Like Spinoza, Kant perceives a secret motive of conceit in at least some of those who appear to consider themselves inferior to their fellows. "To flatter oneself that [servility towards others] is virtue...is in fact a form of pride," Kant contends.³³ Kant repeats this view in The Doctrine of Virtue in his brief remarks "On Servility."³⁴ "The man who tries to equal or surpass others in humility, believing that in this way he will also acquire a greater inner worth, is guilty of pride (ambitio)..."³⁵ In this text, Kant explains that human dignity or "absolute inner worth" is grounded in a subject as a person or end-in-

³²Ibid., 128.

³³Ibid., 126-7.

³⁴Kant, The Doctrine of Virtue: Part II of the Metaphysics of Morals, ed. Mary J. Gregor (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), Book I, Chapter II, Article iii (sect. 11), 99-101.

³⁵Ibid., 100-101.

himself ("homo noumenon") which is contrasted with an individual's extrinsic value or usefulness in the system of nature. Personal dignity is the basis on which one demands respect "from all other rational beings in the world."³⁶ Kant now spells out two erroneous forms of self-appraisal, which he here calls "false humility" and "moral arrogance." Moral arrogance is the false sense of the greatness (perhaps even the perfection) of one's personal moral worth through lack of comparison with the (genuine) moral law: by all appearances, the flaw of the ancient moral theorists to which Kant alluded above. False humility is the disavowal of any claim to moral worth in oneself: presumably the same as what Kant called "monk's virtue" in the Lectures.

The Doctrine of Virtue helps to provide the theoretical context for Kant's call for equal respect for all moral agents. The Metaphysic of Morals broadly divides moral duties into two kinds, duties of justice and duties of virtue, or "ethical duties." The former, juridical duties concern the performance of deeds that follow directly from some formulation(s) of the Categorical Imperative, while duties of virtue directly prescribe the ends that the will is inwardly to embrace in accordance with the same moral principle, while tending to leave the choice of actions in support of such ends to the discretion of the agent, provided that such actions harmonize with juridical duties.

³⁶Ibid., 99.

Both juridical duties and ethical duties are subdivisible into duties to oneself and duties to others. Ethical duties to others can be further subdivided into duties of love (benevolence, gratitude and sympathy) and duties of respect (which consist in avoiding the vices of excessive pride, calumny and mockery). The assumption underlying every act that avoids such vices is that every human being has the right to one's basic respect. Duties of respect are distinctive among ethical duties in that they are unusually stringent in their requirements, or more accurately in their prohibitions (since Kant says these duties "are expressed only negatively").³⁷ They are the only ethical duties which entail reciprocal rights-claims for others, so that specific forms of neglect of these duties and rights is more serious than an instance of neglect of the duty of sympathy, for example. "To neglect mere duties of love is lack of virtue....[b]ut to neglect duty that proceeds from the respect due to every man as such is vice," Kant writes.³⁸ He continues that "if we fail in a duty of respect, then a man is deprived of his lawful claim."³⁹

³⁷Ibid., 135.

³⁸Ibid., 134-5.

³⁹Ibid. Pride as defined here "is a kind of ambition...in which we demand that others think little of themselves in comparison with us," calumny, "the immediate inclination, with no particular end in view, to bring into the open something prejudicial to respect for others"; mockery, "the propensity to expose others to laughter so as to make their faults the immediate object of our amusement" (135-7).

In the Lectures on Ethics, Kant observes that "Men are greatly inclined to take others as the measure of their own moral worth, and if they find that there are some whom they surpass it gives them a feeling of moral pride."⁴⁰ Kant's response is to remark that "it is much more than pride if a man believes himself perfect as measured by the standard of the moral law" and that "I can consider myself better than some others; but it is not very much only to be better than the worst, and there is really not much moral pride in that."⁴¹ Significantly, Kant here does not actually reject a comparative personal moral evaluation as mistaken and incoherent on the grounds that if all people have equivalent and infinite worth as ends in themselves then some cannot in some sense have more worth than others. (Nor from my own position, of course, should he do so.) Kant is conceding that some people are more moral than others in practice and could recognize themselves as such. The question concerns why Kant thinks it is not a well-advised thing to dwell upon this contrast, flattering as it may be, in the realized moral goodness of different people. Kant appears to be casting doubt on the importance and the advisability of making such contrasts by arguing that the two key standards of personal evaluation (everyone's infinite value as a moral being and everyone's marked weakness in trying to conform

⁴⁰Lectures, 127.

⁴¹Ibid. (emphasis mine).

with the moral law) make such intersubjective contrasts pale by comparison.

Again, recall Kant's rhetorical question in response to what he saw as the well-intentioned but mistaken theological conflation of human weakness with human worthlessness. "If we depreciate the value of human virtues...where is the difference between [the man who lives aright] and the evil-doer?" Kant thinks the difference between these two people is important, but apparently it is not nearly as important as dwelling upon what all human beings have in common.

There is a striking passage in the Doctrine of Virtue that seems to confirm Kant's concession to the actual existence of wide disparities in moral character and may furthermore grant some measure of legitimacy to inward recognition of such discrepancies. "One cannot, it is true, help disdaining some [people] inwardly in comparison with others (despicatui habere); but the outward manifestation of disdain is, nevertheless, an affront."⁴² Presumably he means one's betraying before others a sort of ambition that they think little of themselves in comparison to oneself (how Kant characterized the vice of pride, one of the violations of the ethical duty of respect in note 39 above). Kant provocatively seems to suggest here that everyone's right to expect equal respect from others may coexist with a recognition that people can legitimately possess inward

⁴²Doctrine of Virtue, 132.

inclinations to feel very unequal respect for different agents. Notice, however, that the general thrust of this passage may seem somewhat at odds with Kant's brief argument in the Lectures against setting much store by one's manifest moral superiority to some people.

How are we to square inner disdain for immoral people with the view that we all have a right to consider ourselves as valuable as another? Ideally we could answer this by locating passages in which Kant aims to relate moral disapproval towards another on the basis of her misdeeds to the underlying premise of fundamental equality. Kant does remark that "I cannot deny all respect even to the immoral man as a man...even though by his deed he makes himself unworthy of his humanity."⁴³ In the Note following this section he adds that "the censure of vice...must never break out into complete contempt and denial of all moral worth to the immoral man."⁴⁴ Earlier in the same work, Kant offers that a person must "do nothing by which he would forfeit this respect [from all other rational beings, justified on the basis of the dignity of all persons as ends in themselves]."⁴⁵ Yet the dignity itself, rather than the respect (it would seem), is "inalienable."⁴⁶

⁴³Ibid., 133.

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Ibid., 100 (emphasis mine).

⁴⁶Ibid., 101.

It is hard to know what to make of these passages. Kant does not very clearly indicate that he takes the respect due to anyone as a person--regardless of his or her actual conduct--as fully independent and unaffected by the greater or lesser extent of the respect one earns through one's moral conduct. Since Kant contends that everyone has the right to respect, it may appear logically necessary that the respect for persons as such must be wholly independent of the respect bestowed according to one's individual character and habits. One alternative is that the claim that all have the right to equal respect is to be interpreted as identifying a prima facie right only. One has the sense from his use of the qualifiers ("all respect" and "complete denial of all moral worth") that Kant takes the basic respect due to persons as something which is seriously compromised by immorality, but which is never legitimately negated altogether (although this does seem suggested by the phrase "forfeit...respect"). The weakness of this interpretation is that it makes it more difficult to accept Kant's claim that there is little virtue in seeing oneself as morally superior to some other individuals, particularly if Kant is so clear that it can be easy properly to assess another's actions as contemptible. If there are wide discrepancies in merited respect, whose extent has a significant bearing on what extent of minimal respect one can have for a person as such, then it is

implausible to claim these differences pale into insignificance beside the failings of the most moral people.

One might speculate, then, that Kant is guilty of some logical inconsistency in failing to distinguish clearly between two wholly independent kinds of respect, one contingent and the other necessary and constant, which would allow him to regard moral failure as something which poses no threat to noble pride as a condition proper to every human being regardless of his or her particular history. If Kant maintained that there are two distinct orders of esteem rather than suggesting that disdain for misdeeds can impact directly on one's respect for a human being as such, then it would be easier for Kant to defend the coherence of noble pride and the reciprocal obligations of universal respect. Alternatively, perhaps Kant simply does not believe we really are all entitled to equal respect in any sense in practice, and the claim to the contrary is only true inasmuch as there is no evidence to suppose that the people in question lack a good will.

We can point to a second, related uncertainty in this area of Kantian doctrine. This is the problem of identifying Kant's rationale for downplaying the significance of correctly identifiable contrasts in the worthiness of different people's habits. One might try to reason that Kant thinks the respect to which all have a right is far more important and striking than the disdain

which is directed towards the especially misguided, so that the sense of one's moral superiority to some is to be treated as inconsequential. But since Kant wants to acknowledge that the difference between virtue and vice is strong, perhaps one must find another account. Discussing what he calls Kant's "anti-moralistic strain," Thomas Hill (1978) suggests that, because it is impossible to know any agent's motives--even one's own--for making a certain choice, Kant might think it hazardous to make general assessments of moral character on the basis of actions, and wiser simply to confine oneself to judging those actions in isolation."

This sort of rationale is only as persuasive as its assumption that the notion of moral dispositions or habits of character is ethically peripheral in comparison with deeds themselves and that identification and assessment of actions is possible in detachment from habits and dispositions. These views, of course, tend to be at odds with virtue ethics, and I have tried to sketch objections to them elsewhere in the essay. Kant does explicitly offer a different sort of rationale at one point: he says we should never become completely contemptuous of "an immoral man" because "on this supposition he could...never be improved,

"Thomas E. Hill Jr., "Kant's Anti-Moralistic Strain," Theoria 44 (1978): 131-51, reprinted in Dignity and Practical Reason in Kant's Moral Theory (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 176-95.

and this is not consistent with the Idea of man, who as such...can never lose all his disposition to the good."⁴
 In other words, it is the presumed universality of the potential to acquire a good will that is the basis of some measure of respect for everyone; the problem is in ascertaining just what this measure is. Even if Kant would assent to the notion of two distinct orders of esteem, it would remain possible that he also believed most people would be prone to conflating the two orders; hence, it would become necessary in light of human psychology to minimize the implications of immoral character for one's right to be esteemed equally.

In conclusion, Kant acknowledges, if at times grudgingly, that there are sharp disparities in the realized value of different ways of life, in spite of his explicitly egalitarian claim that all human beings have the same rights and the same inalienable dignity as ends-in-themselves. What is unclear is how one's respect for a person is related to relatively pronounced immoral conduct in that person. It is tempting to claim that Kant's reluctance to emphasize the contrasts in realized moral worth of different characters has to do with his greater concern for the ideal of equality, along with an implicit belief that these two notions are basically at odds with one another. But the evidence that Kant thinks these things are incompatible is

⁴Ibid., 134.

not compelling. It may be that he would accept my view that one's dignity as a rational being is wholly independent of the social respect that one is due and that the latter depends on one's conduct while the former is wholly unaffected by it. Alternatively, it may be that there is for Kant only one order of human esteem, so that people do compromise their dignity and the respect they can rightfully claim, in proportion to the extent to which in practice they deviate from what is morally right--although it seems one's dignity can never be forfeited completely. The most abominable transgressions of the moral law would diminish one's worth as an end to the greatest extent, but again, it is difficult to say to just what extent this would be.

My own position is that the more desirable conception is of two entirely independent orders, because in this way one's contingent moral development does not appear to compromise one's prospects for fully competent moral agency in any way. If in practice people do not really retain the same dignity and worth in some sense, then moral pride and the dignity of the autonomous, rational agent seem to be less significant and influential principles. The best way to uphold an ideal of equality is to be quite clear about the existence of real inequalities and to have a theoretical framework sufficiently robust to accommodate such inequalities without weakening the egalitarian principle at all.

My basic thesis, that morally principled treatment of people one takes to be fundamentally inferior is possible in a number of different ways, also casts doubt on Kant's apparent assumption that dwelling on one's (possible) moral superiority over another is counter to the interests of moral progress in oneself and in others. If, on the contrary, reflection on these contrasts is to some extent supportive of moral goodness in society, then there is a good reason not to dismiss the notion of acknowledging real discrepancies in the fundamental worth of different individuals. While Kant offers a fragment of a pragmatic argument in support of his view that a lack of respect for another that is in a certain way warranted is still undesirable, he does not appear to address any objections to the contrary--such as mine, that a principled refusal to make comprehensive comparisons of character can needlessly impair one's ability to make balanced judgments about other agents' actions or intentions, particularly when such judgments are vitally necessary.

5.3 Nietzsche

Friedrich Nietzsche is notorious both for the iconoclastic nature of his philosophy and the interpretative controversies surrounding it. Nevertheless, I think he is a fitting choice to conclude my survey of historical sources. Nietzsche is perhaps best known for his scathing attack upon

Christianity, and one would be correct in supposing that Christian humility as popularly understood is a prime target of his critique. What is much less well-known is that Nietzsche seems to restore to humility the status of a genuine virtue by offering an alternative conception of it. This section will attempt to clarify that conception and relate the result to my own thesis on humility. I shall try to show that as a Nietzschean virtue, humility has to do with self-control or self-discipline that is determined by a strong sense of honour or reverence for some esteemed object, be it an idea for which one is responsible, a class of people to which one belongs, or simply oneself. Nietzschean humility, at least in some cases, resembles the instance of the trait that has been our special focus: a character virtue reflecting a commitment to one's own excellence. A second point of resemblance concerns the social behaviour Nietzsche sometimes attributes to higher human beings (the only subjects whose virtues he takes to be genuine): kindness and gentleness towards lesser people.

What makes this thinker unlike any of the others we have discussed at length is his eschewal of a highly systematic mode of discourse and correspondingly radically unconventional or even deconstructionist views of such pivotal concepts as truth, being, and goodness. Nietzsche emphasizes the essential relativity of such principles to human interests, where he does not appear to deny their

legitimacy outright. "Nietzsche is attacking anything at all that transcends man," one commentator puts it, while another remarks that for Nietzsche, "there is no need to invent a more perfect form of life...since life already has sufficient meaning and value."⁴ One implication is that whatever excellence it is towards which Nietzschean humility is oriented, this excellence is anthropocentric and hence there are at least some people who are not debased by their reflection upon it. This contrasts with the element of self-abasement in religious humility, in a comparison between human beings and the divine.

Nietzsche's discourse often develops dialectically, in that an assertion made at one place will have to be reevaluated in light of a somewhat inconsistent claim that follows. The result is that it is hazardous to isolate any specific claim as decisively Nietzschean. He is nothing if not a difficult thinker to assess, and we cannot hope to do a persuasively argued work of exposition in this short scope. Therefore, there is no attempt made in what follows to give an adequately complete account of his outlook. Many consider Thus Spake Zarathustra to be Nietzsche's most important work, but the mode of expression here is least systematic and most indirect, and consequently I have not

⁴Joan Stambaugh, The Other Nietzsche (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1994), 4; Ofelia Schutte, Beyond Nihilism: Nietzsche Without Masks (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 189.

employed it as a source. Rather, we point to a few important aspects of his thought bearing upon humility with emphasis upon Beyond Good and Evil and The Genealogy of Morals.

To begin, there are certain basic points on which commentators are in agreement, although there may be sharp contrasts of opinion about how much emphasis is to be placed on such points. One of these is Nietzsche's argument with Christianity. He sees Christianity as one more expression of the Platonic ideal of transcendence of the here-and-now, of an insistence on an other-worldly reality which is privileged over the sensible, material world (of "appearances"). This metaphysical reinterpretation of nature brings with it a fatal separation of the human mind and body in which the latter is denigrated in the name of the former. From what we have already said it is clear that Nietzsche sees such presuppositions as basically misguided. Other-worldly doctrines are basically at odds with the nature of spiritual-physical health, which involves affirmation of the natural, biological elements as well as of the intellectual potency of the human species. Reason should be at the service of natural life and vitality, not overcoming them. According to the theology discussed in Chapter Four, the whole worth and welfare of human beings is dependent upon their assent to the ultimate reality of God as the provider and arbiter of these things. Faith, hope

and charity (and similarly the ascetic or saintly virtues of poverty, chastity and humility) are forms of self-discipline in accordance with the total deference and submission of human beings to an omnipotent entity, one which theoretically rewards those who recognize that authority and punishes those who do not, who fall into ultimate despair. The Christian's submissiveness to God is the sign of his pettiness, the absence of anything great and noble:

I do not like the "New Testament"....How can one make such a fuss about one's little lapses as these pious little men do? Who gives a damn? Certainly not God....they never grow tired of involving God in even the pettiest troubles they have got themselves into. And the appalling taste....of pawing and nuzzling God!⁵⁰

Another prominent target of scorn is egalitarianism and democracy as presumed moral and political ideals or absolutes. Such popular assumptions seem to be basically at odds with one of the few consistently advanced theoretical doctrines in Nietzsche's thought, the will to power. This is "the essence of life...the essential priority of the spontaneous, aggressive, expansive, form-giving forces that give new interpretations and directions."⁵¹ One can readily see two ways in which these assumptions clash: it is difficult to strive freely for fuller self-expression in the world if one makes a conscious principle of one's conduct

⁵⁰Genealogy of Morals III sect. 22. All translations are by Walter Kaufmann, unless otherwise indicated.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, II sect. 12.

that every person has an equally legitimate claim to self-expression, and it is hard to see how creative development in power relations can proceed when the norm of a balance among all individuals' interests is fixed. Modern ethics and politics--in their alleged foundations--are thus at war with the essence of life, and are succeeding in rendering us lifeless. While they may become a self-fulfilling prophecy in promoting mediocre people who gradually lose their instincts for anything more than mediocrity, the point for Nietzsche is that this state of affairs is bad and needs to be overcome as far as it can be. It does not matter that there are vulgar and worthless people, on his view; indeed, in the proper state of affairs it is inevitable that some, or rather most, people will be relatively base. What is vital is that there are noble human beings, natural aristocrats. The possibility that excellence can inhere in oneself or in another and the recognition of this possibility are both undermined by the egalitarian-democratic climate.

The will to power does not in itself give any clear indication of what the proper or conclusive state of sociopolitical organization is; one might surmise that there is no such "proper" or terminal structure. Nonetheless, Nietzsche's frequent accounts of how various forms of domination by one social class over another (sometimes characterized as "masters" and "slaves" respectively) have

marked history up to now certainly do leave the impression that one of the most important human realities is of natural inequality and imbalance among human beings, at least in terms of realized expression of the will to power. A pressing question is whether it matters to Nietzsche to what extent such imbalances translate into extreme forms of domination, i.e., societies in which widespread suffering is deliberately inflicted upon the ruled by the powerful (at their discretion) for the sake of furthering control and supremacy. Nietzsche contends that the ideal of conventional morality is "if possible--and there is no more insane 'if possible'--to abolish suffering."⁵² In claiming that it is futile to try to engineer the eradication of suffering, however, he hardly need be implying that he has no concern for suffering as such or that the promotion of human excellence calls for the infliction of more suffering upon people against their will by others than does the promotion of mediocrity.

Here one finds deep divisions among commentators. For example, Schutte (1984) faults Walter Kaufmann's influential portrayal of Nietzsche as a humanistic philosopher, even one who is receptive to some qualified interpretation of Christianity.⁵³ "[Nietzsche's] ideals of self-integration

⁵²Beyond Good and Evil, VII sect. 225.

⁵³Schutte, 106.

and life-affirmation are turned into justifications of authoritarianism and extremism," Schutte charges.⁵⁴ Yet one may have the impression that Nietzsche abhors brutality against the weak just as much as he claims to be against the vulgar. "The most spiritual men, as the strongest, find their happiness...in hardness against themselves and others," Nietzsche observes; yet "that does not preclude their being the most cheerful and the kindest," and "[w]hen the exceptional human being treats the mediocre more tenderly than himself and his peers, this is not mere courtesy of the heart--it is simply his duty."⁵⁵ The notion in this passage that superior people readily and even characteristically find themselves at ease and pleasantly disposed towards the many may well remind one of the similar tendency attributed to Aristotle's great soul, who only behaves assertively and competitively towards those who presume themselves to be great, while he is far more restrained towards the modest. (I shall return to this parallel later.) Perhaps Nietzsche envisages the unfettered reign of the human elite with a minimum of distress and resistance from the masses--even with their wholehearted consent, whether clearsighted or self-deceiving.

It seems that the way in which one's will to power is applied is at least as important in making qualitative

⁵⁴Ibid., 113.

⁵⁵The Antichrist, sect. 57.

assessments of one's health and excellence as is the strength of its expression relative to that in others; perhaps even much more so. The Genealogy presents a provocative psychological analysis of the evolution of a Judeo-Christian "slave morality," i.e., the construction of an ideology (political, religious, etc.) to sanctify the self-perversion of the weak and dominated. This creation is the weak people's way of coping with their failure and contemptibility. "The Jews....have brought off that miraculous feat of an inversion of values," Nietzsche writes. "[T]heir prophets have fused 'rich,' 'godless,' 'evil,' 'violent,' and 'sensual' into one and were the first to use the word 'world' as an opprobrium."⁵⁶ The irony is that the weak have come to impress what Nietzsche sees as their antivalues ("the meek shall inherit the earth") even upon the ruling strata of modern society. Obviously even the paradoxically self-destructive forms of the will to power can be extremely influential upon the course of social development. Kaufmann (1950) argues that striving for excellence is for Nietzsche primarily a matter of self-discipline; it takes more discipline to master oneself than it does to master others.⁵⁷ This is one way in which a commentator can downplay the possibility that the will to

⁵⁶Beyond Good and Evil V sect. 195.

⁵⁷Walter Arnold Kaufmann, Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist, 3rd ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), 252.

power condones the most overt and brutal forms of domination.

Clearly Nietzsche does not advocate the same kind of self-discipline as the masochistic self-negation of Christians or of sterile egalitarians. Rather than emasculating one's natural drives, one seeks to order them and attain their highest possible fulfilments. As for religious piety, however, Nietzsche writes that "[f]rom the start, the Christian faith is a sacrifice: a sacrifice of all freedom, all pride, all self-confidence of the spirit," and "at the same time, enslavement and self-mockery, self-mutilation."⁵⁸

Nietzsche sums up the Christian's concern for the suffering of others as "pity" (mitleid). "[I]f you listen closely, [pity] is the only religion preached now," Nietzsche says, "...through all the vanity, through all the noise that characterizes these preachers...[psychologists] will hear a...genuine sound of self-contempt."⁵⁹ Thus pity is tied to the self-hating and self-destructive impulse. Nietzsche also associates pity with a subtle and hidden vengefulness. To feel sorry for the apparently greater misfortunes of another is in fact to think oneself superior at the expense of the other's suffering. In short, the Christian's ideal of solidarity with the suffering and

⁵⁸Beyond Good and Evil, III, sect. 46.

⁵⁹Ibid., VII, sect. 222.

weakness of others, which presents itself as gentle, kind and loving, is hypocritical and at bottom sadistic, spiteful and petty. One way Nietzsche lends plausibility to this perspective is to emphasize the explicit evidence of vengefulness in certain Christian texts. Nietzsche cites a passage from Aquinas to the effect that the saints are rewarded in heaven for their virtue by being shown the eternal punishment of the damned, while an early Church Father, Tertullian, exults in imagined visions of the destruction of kings, philosophers, athletes and others on the Day of Judgment, and uses this vision as an incentive for Christians to refrain from witnessing the sadistic and gory spectacles of the Roman games.⁶⁰ As Joan Stambaugh (1994) notes, Nietzsche does not appear ever to interpret concern for others' suffering as the less devious feeling-with or feeling-for of compassion or empathy; the German term encompasses both pity and compassion, but it seems that the latter has only been collapsed into the former.⁶¹

Nietzsche's implication here is not only that Christian morality unconsciously turns on the same less admirable human instincts as any other morality-for-the-masses. Rather, he is contending that it is a particularly vulgar and base morality precisely because it is for the doubly

⁶⁰Aquinas, Summa Theologiae III Supplementum, Q. 94 art. 1; Tertullian, De Spectaculis, both cited in The Genealogy of Morals I sect. 15.

⁶¹See Stambaugh, ch. 4, "Thoughts on Pity and Revenge," 45.

weak: those who are too weak to rise above such hateful feelings as vengeance, and also too weak to acknowledge their hateful impulses for what they are in the first place. In tying pity to vengeance, Nietzsche seems to reject both. Kaufmann notes that a recurrent theme in Nietzsche is contempt for the notion of punishment as a way to deal with those who challenge a person's or society's interests.⁶² One who feels a necessity to punish is feeble and vulnerable; a society enjoying an abundance of strength and vitality would afford benign indifference towards its "parasites."

With this partial sketch of Nietzsche's thought, we can introduce some observations about his view of humility. On the one hand, we have seen a deep aversion to the idea of self-denigration in all its forms, as in his interpretation of Christian practices. Yet, as Nietzsche notes in the Genealogy, the ascetic virtues of poverty, chastity and humility apply to the self-discipline of the serious intellectual or artist as well as to the pious believer.

The three great slogans of the ascetic ideal....Now take a look at the lives of all the great, fruitful, inventive spirits: you will always encounter all three to a certain degree....

...A philosopher may be recognized by the fact that he avoids three glittering and loud things: fame, princes, and women--which is not to say they do not come to him. He shuns light that is too bright....As for his "humility,"....His "maternal" instinct, the secret love of that which is growing in him, directs him towards situations in which he is relieved of the necessity of

⁶²Kaufmann, 372-4.

thinking of himself; in the same sense in which the instinct of the mother in woman has hitherto generally kept woman in a dependent situation....he is concerned with one thing alone, and assembles and saves up everything--time, energy, love, and interest--only for that one thing."

We should underline immediately that Nietzsche has attributed humility on some interpretation to the great spirits, a promising sign that he thinks there is room for a quality so named in a table of genuine virtues.

Although the value of these spiritual creations is evidently much in doubt when Nietzsche discusses the wisdom of the religious ascetic, there is no doubt here that Nietzsche betrays respect for ascetic discipline as the condition of great creations of the soul. Indeed, Nietzsche implies earlier in this same passage that he has firsthand knowledge of this discipline ("I just recall my most beautiful study--the Piazza di San Marco, in spring of course...") and Nietzsche is well-known for his forthright lack of modesty about the importance and benefit of his own philosophizing.

The singleminded concern of the intellectual or artist is for the idea or art work (the "one thing") to which he will give birth. In this sense these figures are like the religious contemplative in their capacity to dedicate their whole existence to the pursuit of their spiritual fruit. The passage seems to say that the humility of these people

⁶³Genealogy, III sect. 8.

is a self-forgetting, a sort of purity of consciousness, in consequence of their absorption in the spiritual progeny. Notice that the humility of this self-forgetting and disciplined focus has nothing to do with a belief that the thinker or creator is himself unimportant or unworthy of attention, although neither would it be true to claim precisely the opposite. If questioned, the person who of necessity possesses these ascetic virtues might well judge his aims to be of great importance, however. There is also a strong element of self-discipline in this purity of thought and concern, whereby the person organizes everything in life to the single goal. As suggested already, Nietzsche prizes self-discipline properly directed as essential to human greatness.

One might at this point ask what humility thus understood has in common with the conventional associations of the phrase that prompts Nietzsche to press the term to his service. One point of resemblance is that those who denigrate themselves, perhaps, are also likely to remain in social obscurity, as the great spirits can alike before the reputation of their deeds begins to spread. People can "think little of themselves" out of self-contempt or out of a stubborn preoccupation with something external. The religious ascetic happens to direct his energy and attention to an infinite, perfect and inhuman being in comparison with which he must disparage himself, but perhaps this difference

is a contingent one, whereas the ascetic virtues are necessarily common to both cases.

A second clue Nietzsche offers about a virtuous humility is found in Beyond Good and Evil, in the course of discussing the nature of noble-minded people and their relations with one another. Two cardinal traits of the noble, he writes, are self-discipline and a capacity to honour, particularly, but not only, self-honour.

The noble human being honours himself as one who is powerful, also as one who has power over himself, who knows how to speak and be silent, who delights in being severe and hard with himself and respects all severity and hardness....

It is the powerful who understand how to honor; this is their art, their realm of invention....

...enthusiastic reverence and devotion are the regular symptom of an aristocratic way of thinking and evaluating."⁴

Rigorous self-discipline is common both to the ascetic creative type, who was previously said to possess humility, and to noble human beings. In fact the earlier passage has already established that humility (as it relates to self-discipline) is found in great people. This latter passage characterizes noble people as those whose province is honour. Thus, it looks as though humility has to do with honour as much as with self-discipline. This is confirmed by the following sections:

[The noble human being] will say, for example: "I may be mistaken about my value and nevertheless demand that my value, exactly as I define it, should be acknowledged by others as well--but this is no vanity (but conceit or, more

⁴Beyond Good and Evil, IX, sect. 260.

frequently, what is called 'humility' or 'modesty')"....
 ...I propose: egoism belongs to the nature of a noble soul--I mean that unshakable faith that to a being such as "we are" other beings must be subordinate by nature and have to sacrifice themselves....Perhaps [the noble soul] admits...that there are some [other noble souls] who have rights equal to its own; as soon as this matter of rank is settled it moves among these equals with their equal privileges, showing the same sureness of modesty and delicate reverence that characterize its relations with itself...."

Nietzsche is contrasting humility and modesty here with "vanity," which may be among the things "hardest to understand for a noble human being." Nietzsche describes the vain here as "people who seek to create a good opinion of themselves which they do not have of themselves--and thus also do not "deserve,"--and who nevertheless end up believing this good opinion."⁶⁵ Clearly humility or modesty is not having a low self-estimate; nor is it trying to think highly of oneself. Instead it is a well-considered self-estimate ("I may be mistaken...") that tends to be high. In this way the philosopher seems to have turned the conventional sense of the trait on its head, much as he has turned Christian charity into vengefulness.

One may point out that here Nietzsche has tied this second sense of humility to egotism, which seems to be at odds with the other notion of humility (the self-forgetting ascetic discipline of solitary creators) raised previously. Clearly, Nietzsche cannot explore the notion of self-honour

⁶⁵Ibid., sect. 261; 265.

⁶⁶Ibid., sect. 261.

without acknowledging egotism. The way to deal with the tension, I think, is to regard the essential point as being that humility is a far-reaching attitude of self-discipline based upon one's capacity for honour or reverence towards something. This object of esteem may be one's creative goal or even the idea of one's own excellence of character. If the notion of prizing something is at the core of the virtue for Nietzsche, then humility can manifest itself in ways as diverse as self-forgetting or self-preoccupation.

The last passage also says that humility in the noble is having confidence about just how much one should ask of others. Lesser people are to be subordinated (whether they will consent is unclear here!), while other noble souls are to be treated as equals whose honour is not to be slighted. This description reinforces the resemblance of Nietzsche's humility to the notion of an accurately balanced self-assessment, as I have characterized the virtue throughout the thesis.

The linkage of humility to honour and reverence--to whomever or whatever they are due--means that most modern and progressive individuals are incapable of genuine humility or modesty for Nietzsche, even though vanity seems to be common enough:

Conversely, perhaps there is nothing about so-called educated people and believers in "modern ideas" that is as nauseous as their lack of modesty and the comfortable insolence of their eyes and hands with which they touch,

lick and finger everything....⁶⁷

That a devout Christian, among others, might well have levelled exactly this charge at Nietzsche is not really to the point here. Rather, the passage reinforces the sense that the virtue is not possible without a capacity for self-discipline, a receptiveness to what is profound and worthy of reverence.

As mentioned above, Nietzsche's discussion is quite suggestive of Aristotle's portrait of the megalopsuchos. This resemblance may not be accidental; Kaufmann thinks that Aristotle's portrait was a powerful source of inspiration for Nietzsche, so much so that he appreciatively echoes some of the lines from that part of the Nicomachean Ethics in his own polemics.⁶⁸ That Nietzsche is not an Aristotelian is obvious; he gives only the slightest attention to characteristically Aristotelian moral notions, and disparagingly at that.⁶⁹ Nonetheless, Nietzsche's sympathy for the Classical conception of human virtue as strength, self-honour and self-sufficiency is quite in keeping with

⁶⁷Ibid., sect. 263.

⁶⁸Kaufmann, 382-4.

⁶⁹As Bernd Magnus points out in his article, "Aristotle and Nietzsche: 'Megalopsychia' and 'Ueberschmensch,'" the sole direct reference to Aristotle's ethics speaks of "that tuning down of the affects to a harmless mean according to which they can be satisfied, the Aristotelianism of morals" (Beyond Good and Evil, V sect. 198). Magnus argues that it is misleading to see the great soul as an inspiration to Nietzsche, whose prime concern is to argue against Platonic doctrines. See The Greeks and the Good Life, ed. D. Depew (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1980), 260-95.

admiration for the great soul.

In his dissertation on Aristotle's megalopsuchia, Osborne advances the interesting thesis that for Aquinas, "the distinction between self-respect (megalopsychia) and self-abasement is blurred" while for Nietzsche, "the distinction between self-respect and self-inflation is blurred."⁷⁰ Osborne's ambitious analysis temptingly sees the Aristotelian model of great-souledness as the golden mean in that this is the only philosopher of the three who judges one's self-regard by the standard of one's genuine worth: Christians tend to deny the genuine worth of human beings while Nietzsche elevates the human being to the level of a radically unconditioned, value-creating deity. The implicit assumptions in Osborne's thesis are that Aquinas is mistaken in supposing that human beings are essentially nothing save for whatever God's grace has bestowed, while Nietzsche is mistaken in thinking that anyone could justifiably exalt himself over the mass of people.

The weakness with such a thesis is a critical ambiguity in that "anyone." Nietzsche seems to think that very few people would be justified in, and perhaps by the same token capable of, conceiving of their exalted rank and defending it. (The vain do not have genuine self-reverence--one is tempted to say that, for Nietzsche as for Kant and Spinoza, they are often just a species of the servile.) Therefore

⁷⁰Osborne, 109.

sincere self-regard for most would not amount to self-inflation, because most people cannot honestly think themselves superior. The only ones who would likely regard themselves as superior beings would be those who had the force of character and the supreme detachment from conventional thinking that lends credence to their belief. In sum, Nietzsche and Aristotle do seem in some sense to coincide in their views of self-respect: we deserve to see ourselves as we are, and for both philosophers, the most interesting instance of this principle is found in the preeminently valuable and noble individual. Both might well also concur that what is from their point of view a Christian's self-contempt is fundamentally a justified self-contempt, given a serious depth to one's metaphysical commitment to the God of Creation.

Another provocative feature of Nietzsche's view concerns his stance on the question of equality. As noted earlier, there is a fairly consistent theme of contempt for the modern ideal of equality as a philosophical and moral fiction that has done untold harm to the human capacity for greatness. Those who wish to cast this thinker in a sympathetic light may claim that he is underlining the limitations or contemporary distortions and trivializations of equality rather than arguing for its complete

negation."⁷¹ Yet of all those philosophers we have addressed, Nietzsche is the most difficult in which to find even indirect evidence of recognition of the meaningfulness or value of any sense of universal human equality as a guiding principle. On the contrary, Nietzsche repeatedly stresses that there is no common principle of good among all human beings. The universality of the will to power imparts to each a personal view of the good, but the yawning gap between the nature of noble individuals and base ones on his view precludes any shared good. "And how should there be a common good?" Nietzsche writes. "The term contradicts itself: whatever can be common always has little value."⁷² As we saw, equality for him is significant when one speaks of a limited group of people who do have like natures and hence, perhaps, shared interests, but this is as far as it goes.

This point can be illustrated by a comparison between Nietzsche and Spinoza. Nietzsche is sympathetic to a number of Spinozist doctrines: universal determinism, the derivative nature of conventional moral principles (as

⁷¹For example, Kaufmann writes that "In an age in which there was a [class] "nobility" that deemed itself superior without living up to its exalted conception of itself, greatness could manifest itself in the bold insistence [as by Socrates] on a fundamental equality. In our time, however, equality is confused with conformity...and the demand for a general levelling. Men are losing the ambition to be equally excellent...and they are becoming resigned to being equally mediocre" (404-5).

⁷²Beyond Good and Evil, II sect. 43.

opposed to the actual omnipresence of self-interest), and the rejection of a divine teleology." Stambaugh suggests that the most crucial convergence in the two lies in the notion of the love or affirmation of fate, i.e., unconditional acceptance of life in its immediacy."⁴ Stambaugh does not emphasize that this common motif entails for both a similarly shared ideal of emotional resilience and positivity. Both writers (in Nietzsche's case at least sometimes) overtly reject attitudes such as hatred, vengefulness and envy, as well as hope and despair, all of which are indicators of the dependency of one's spirit upon the vagaries of fortune as opposed to a perfect alignment of the spirit with all fortune. The sign of this reconciliation is cheerfulness, which both affirm as the true mark of strength, although Nietzsche's accompanying emphasis on playfulness of the spirit finds no definite parallel.

But while Nietzsche acknowledges a certain spiritual ancestry in Spinoza, he is no Spinozist. He writes of "the hocus-pocus of mathematical form with which Spinoza clad his philosophy--really the love of his wisdom" and, more tellingly, calls him one of "the sophisticated vengeance-

⁴Nietzsche enumerates what he takes to be the points of agreement in a postcard to his friend Overbeck which is quoted by Kaufmann, 140.

⁵See Stambaugh's chapter, "Amor Dei and Amor Fati: Spinoza and Nietzsche," Ibid., 75-93.

seekers and poison brewers."⁷⁵ Arguably the crux of the difference is Spinoza's typical faith in the supremacy of reason as the vehicle of a perfected mode of being. In the end, Spinozistic reason thinks that in principle it can accomplish everything--a perfect harmony of humanity, even (in the last part of the Ethics) a justification for the idea of a personal afterlife. Nietzsche might opine, then, that Spinoza finally falls into the old Platonic trap of transcendence. While Nietzsche would agree that living properly requires insightfulness and self-discipline, he would not accept that all the social conflict one finds in the world is a tragic error of logic that such qualities would negate if only everyone possessed them. Nietzsche's scorn for the idolization of reason at the expense of sensible and embodied existence is one that he would apply to all the other philosophers we have discussed. None of Kant, Spinoza, Aquinas, and Aristotle would escape the charge that such a life risks being denigrated where reason alone is alleged to fulfil the truest and best human aspirations.

Unfortunately for us, what Nietzsche does not provide is a more revealing account of why the noble soul is to behave in such a civilized fashion towards the masses, in spite of his conviction as to his own superiority, the primacy of his desires and concerns, and also in spite of

⁷⁵Beyond Good and Evil, I sects. 5, 25.

the quite conceivable tendency of those masses to fail to accept any of these beliefs even if they are true. The more rationalistic and systematic theories of the other thinkers just cited offer such accounts, but Nietzsche leaves the reader to his own resources. This is a difficult task, given the presuppositions of natural inequality and natural conflict of interest among the unequal classes.

5.4 Conclusion

What conclusions can be drawn on the basis of these three philosophers about the relationship between beliefs about equality and one's attitude towards moral humility as we are understanding that term? And about the relationship between one's conscious moral superiority and one's attitude towards others?

Only Kant explicitly affirms the egalitarian ideal, and Kant is also the only figure who is at least reluctant to concede that comprehensive comparisons of personal moral character are requisite. This is the sort of parallel one might expect on a rather simplistic view: if we are thought equal, one cannot be better or worse than another, but if we are not, then one can.

Yet, as I have argued, Kant's tendency to downplay these sorts of comparisons is not very unequivocal or persuasive. Furthermore, Spinoza and Nietzsche, while clearly not privileging an a priori ideal of equality,

nonetheless seem to share in a belief that higher natures do and should show just as much kindness and thoughtfulness towards lower ones--perhaps even more so in Nietzsche's case⁷⁶--as they do towards those of comparable merits. Not being an egalitarian does not necessarily imply endorsing the contemptuous treatment of lesser people.

I have also argued that if we examine the universal laws of Spinoza's system from which this doctrine of universal benevolence (including benevolence towards base individuals) follows, a kind of ideal of equality can be described therefrom. By pointing to certain egalitarian tendencies in Spinoza, however, it is not my aim to suggest there is some necessary implication from universal benevolence to an egalitarian principle. Nietzsche's example casts too much doubt on this hypothesis. One could try to make a case for the claim that Nietzsche too is an "implicit egalitarian" by pointing out that Nietzsche seems to think noble and base natures are distinguishable in the same way everywhere, and perhaps it is always equally fitting that the strong show kindness to the weak as if they really were equals in some sense. But it is far less

⁷⁶What I mean here is that unlike Spinoza, Nietzsche does not seem to think that all people are effectively dealt with according to the same principles, precisely because there are at least two fundamental human types (the noble and the base). If the noble taste is to show special kindness to the base (condescending as this sounds), then in a sense perhaps the base are treated more considerately by the noble than are other noble individuals treated by the noble.

intellectually straining to see him as an anti-egalitarian, although one could add as an afterthought that this may be just the sort of deception Nietzsche would relish in wishing to communicate only with the most discerning audience. In sum, Nietzsche's case makes the suggestion that egalitarian tendencies are necessary supports to a doctrine of noblesse oblige a less persuasive one. I do want to suggest that implicitly egalitarian tendencies such as Spinoza's are in themselves conducive to kindly treatment of lesser people, but Nietzsche's case makes it look as though there are alternative possible bases for such behaviour.

Finally, since the unequalled difficulty we have in characterizing Nietzsche as an egalitarian seems to pose no obstacle to Nietzsche's apparent view that noble natures characteristically refrain from doing violence to the self-respect and to the laughable aspirations of the multitude, it is worth noting that Nietzsche's case (like Spinoza's) supports my claim that arrogant and repressive treatment of one's inferiors need not follow from the recognition that they are one's inferiors. For Nietzsche, as for Spinoza and Aristotle earlier, an inward belief in one's superiority of personal character can be quite compatible with respectful treatment of less admirable characters. There is more than one ethical-theoretical apparatus that can serve as the rationale for such a juxtaposition of features.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

This brief chapter will review the main claims of the essay as a whole with reference to both historical and contemporary writers and will reiterate the justifications for these claims. In closing, it also explicitates some related and secondary themes which the previous discussion has only suggested, which raise a few novel questions for the reader's reflection.

6.1 The Argument Reviewed

6.1.1 The Existence and Nature of Moral Humility

Throughout this essay, I have assumed that it is the moral realm of human life ("moral realm" understood in the rather broad sense of the phrase as interpreted by virtue ethics) which involves the most important kind of comparative personal evaluations. Most of the discussion has focused on the special case of moral self-evaluations

which are relatively high. Based on this crucial assumption, Chapter Two attempted to show that defining humility as accurate knowledge of self-worth (following the attractive proposal of a number of contemporary authors) would lead to instances of humility in which some persons correctly regarded themselves to have exceptionally high worth relative to the social norm in some fundamental evaluative sense. Most of the authors to which that chapter responded overlook this implication by emphasizing the principle of the equal worth of all human beings as one which makes differences in realized personal merits ultimately insignificant. I have tried to cast doubt on the persuasiveness of this claim by pointing out that the assumption of equal worth is only one of the fundamental dimensions of moral assessment of and esteem for individuals; there is a comparably fundamental sense in which people have different (realized) moral worth.

In subsequent chapters, we have seen from a survey of some attempts in the European philosophical tradition to provide a rational analysis of ethics that, unsurprisingly, moral philosophies to some extent link the degree of personal attainment of goodness to the degree of personal understanding of the nature of goodness. It would be too facile to argue that anyone who claims to have unusually deep insight into what goodness involves is by virtue of that fact making at least an implicit claim to be an

unusually good person. Nonetheless, this inference is certainly applicable (on my interpretation) to the views of the good person held by Aristotle and Spinoza, as well as to Nietzsche, if we take the term "good" somewhat more loosely. This means that some quite divergent historical ethical theories are in accord with my claim about the key significance and value of that special case of humility we have been discussing. That is, a number of historical moral frameworks agree in holding that one can expect that a very moral person will have an unsurpassable kind of self-assurance about the uncommonly pronounced fundamental merit of his or her own character. "Moral humility" is the phrase we have chosen to name the conjunction of personal excellence and knowledge of such. In Aristotle, Spinoza, and Nietzsche, we see that the sorts of character dispositions particular philosophers wish to emphasize as vital to, or paradigmatic of, excellence of character--benevolence, nobility or magnanimity, self-discipline, a capacity to honour, and so forth--seem to go hand in hand with the capacity to judge oneself as uncommonly capable of fulfilling the highest potentialities of human beings, and hence as fundamentally superior to most people.

Kant lends the least support to this view. He seems to think either that personal discrepancies in realized moral goodness are insignificant in comparison with the moral imperfection of all agents--as Aquinas and other Christian

writers might agree--or, if these discrepancies are very significant, it is more harmful than helpful to pay much attention to them. Thus, Kant appears to provide the clearest source of opposition we have encountered to my view of the importance and legitimacy of the virtue of moral humility as I describe it. But Kant's apparent reasoning--that exceptional virtue cannot be self-conscious without undermining the ideal of the dignity of all persons--does not seem persuasive, although it may have psychological, if not logical, plausibility for some.

The main claims of the thesis can be expressed as two related paradoxes. One is that the morally good person can justly believe herself morally superior to most people in a fundamental sense while believing consistently that all people have equal moral worth. This is the point that was emphasized in my article as reproduced in Chapter Two, which in turn provides one rationale for the subsequent study of some historical philosophers. The other, related paradox, which becomes the main focus of attention in the present essay as a whole, concerns the supposed incongruity in the choice of the term "humility" to name the moral virtue we have discussed, an incongruity in relation to the conventional associations of humility with a self-regard that is restrained if not dismissive. My foremost claim, which I hope finds support throughout, is that persons of humility in the sense adopted by this essay could well

exhibit what appears a sort of restraint with regard to the way they deal with those who are their inferiors, a restraint which is wholly in keeping with their superiority. At the same time, there is nothing restrained about such people's self-estimates relative to their estimate of most other individuals. More precisely, through consideration of moral goodness in a number of philosophers, I have tried to suggest that many dispositions associated with humility on its more conventional interpretation--equanimity towards the vagaries of fortune, a lack of spitefulness and malice, uniform benevolence and considerateness toward others--can also be coherently attributed to the characters of people who regard themselves as morally relatively authoritative individuals in accordance with their better-elaborated ethical frameworks. One particularly thinks here of Aristotle, of Spinoza, and perhaps also of Nietzsche. In these philosophers, moral self-restraint in social behaviour and preferential self-esteem do not seem so incongruous after all. As a sort of converse to this claim, Aquinas, in whose humility the conflicting motif of self-abasement finds some expression, is able to rationalize many social dispositions (such as moral vengefulness) that might not be casually supposed consistent with the motif of self-abasement. (This is obviously a different kind of incongruity, but it is perhaps a similarly revealing one.)

6.1.2 Moral Humility and Human Equality

My claim that the ideal of equality need not be at odds with what I call moral humility in morally exceptional people may not be very satisfactory in one way: it is clear that I have not succeeded in clarifying exactly how equality is to be understood in practice. Trying to deal with this concern is an ongoing problem in liberal political theory, but it has not been an aim of this essay to explore exactly how strong a reading of the principle should be given. I take the belief in the equality of human beings to be a moral stance which conduces to a tendency to treat people respectfully and humanely as well as providing a theoretical rationale for the repudiation of broadly undemocratic political arrangements. Thus understood, it seems safe to say that Nietzsche, for example, rejects the principle just as he overtly professes to do, not because he is clearly anti-humanist, but, on the contrary, because he apparently justifies humane treatment of vulnerable people by recourse to some notion of what good (strong) characters are naturally like in their dealings with weak (bad) ones, and not by recourse to an a priori claim of equality.

Spinoza's case is more difficult to assess with regard to a notion of equality. He seems to think that realized strength of personal character is the most plausible warrant for claims of desert, a view that seems straightforwardly anti-egalitarian. Yet he believes that all human beings

have essential access to a clear and distinct understanding of how to strengthen one's character without limit. This degree of rationalist optimism about universal human potentialities seems to go beyond what many egalitarians would nowadays endorse in their hopes for what equality of opportunity can really accomplish in terms of universal personal fulfilment. Thus, in some sense, Spinoza can be seen as more of an egalitarian than are twentieth century exponents of democracy, in spite of his view that the strong have a better prima facie claim to goods than do the weak.

Again, Aristotle seems overtly to disavow equality, yet he surely does not attribute all degrees of personal deviation from moral perfection in terms of the natural disparities in realizable goodness, even though he does believe there are such natural general disparities between men and women, Greeks and barbarians, slaves and non-slaves. That is to say, he does not seem to think that every agent is in practice as good or as bad as she must be by virtue of her nature. The point of Aristotle's ethics (like that of Christianity, as was observed in Chapter Four) is to describe a fallible and untutored human nature, a perfected one, and an account of how to progress from the former to the latter. The very notion that the knowledge of ethics can be one of the instruments of human betterment brings with it some sort of latent idea of the potential and desirable uniformity of all, or at least most, human agents

in accordance with an ideal of the good. In addition, as suggested earlier, it looks as though one could eliminate those claims to natural disparities of gender and class (the most evident impediments to an egalitarian interpretation of Aristotle's ethics) without radically transforming his basic ethical principle--the dualistic conception of human nature. I cannot resist adding that while Kant alone claims to uphold the principle of equality, one might imaginably accuse him of betraying its spirit, for example, in endorsing capital punishment where the much less egalitarian Nietzsche likely would not.¹ It seems dubious to advocate taking a human life which has inalienable dignity as an end-in-itself whether or not the wrongdoer has forfeited as much respect as it is possible to do.

In sum, the relationship between a priori claims of equality and prescribed moral practice is a murky one, and there are a variety of accounts of moral practice that neither clearly conform with nor clearly oppose the principle. Of course, any account of moral practice that offers only clearly arbitrary reasons for treating different people differently does in that respect stand firmly at odds with the implications of a principle of equality, but all of the uncertainty stems from judgment as to what is clearly arbitrary.

¹See Kant's defence of capital punishment in The Doctrine of Right (Part I of the Metaphysics of Virtue), trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 141-4.

It has been contended that the distinction between the ideal principle of equality and the manifestly unequal realized moral worth of different individuals must be rigorously kept. In this way, both realities can have a strong influence on human conduct rather than each undermining the coherence and practical significance of the other. The latter, empirical reality is the basis of the claim that sharply differential appraisals of particular personal beliefs, desires, and choices of conduct allow for legitimate differential judgments of the degree of one's justice or injustice, courage or cowardice, etc., and ultimately of one's morality or immorality. At the same time, the principle of equality likely does influence the way people treat one another, and in a morally desirable way, particularly in the absence of some well-articulated moral framework that coherently demands universal benevolence, as does Spinoza's, for example. It can do so by helping people show charity and equity in their treatment of others' foibles. Such treatment likely supports more moral conduct on all sides. At the same time, there are far-reaching political implications to the view that the virtue of an egalitarian-minded person does not entail equal receptiveness to all people's opinions of what is good (indeed, the view is that such virtue entails the contrary). The essay has not taken up these political implications either.

6.2 Other Instances of Moral Humility and Its Lack

Some other possible paradoxes have been addressed in the course of the essay. In Chapter Four we noted the incoherence of the conception of humility as radical, conscious self-denigration, the virtue of which can be known and consciously possessed by the agent. If one's virtue of humility amounts to refusing to recognize that one has any merits, then one cannot consciously attain humility, since to do so is to violate its basic requirement. Humility thus understood escapes incoherence provided that there can be one or more virtues of character that are necessarily unknown to their possessor. This perspective on humility was rejected in Chapter Two on the grounds that it is preferable not to posit virtues that depend on self-deception and self-ignorance if alternative conceptions seem workable, and the rejected perspective thus lent support to the formula for the virtue we have since employed.

Another kind of paradox which we have not much explored has been suggested that is consistent with my preferred formal definition of the trait. According to Aristotle, Spinoza, Kant, and Nietzsche, there is an affinity or complementarity between arrogance, conceit and vanity on one hand and servility and self-denigration on the other. These allegedly mutually implicated character vices would

collectively comprise the counterpart of the virtue of humility in persons who do not have an accurate sense of their own merits. If self-overestimation and self-underestimation really do tend to coincide, then there is really only one form of the vice rather than two as one might have supposed. Intuitively, it seems possible to overrate or underrate oneself consistently rather than fluctuating between the two, and one can imagine each flaw inhering in a different sort of personal character. Since we have discussed only the most virtuous agents, there has been little occasion to dwell on the nature of the vice or vices. Furthermore, we have scarcely addressed the nature of accurate self-appraisal in more mediocre or markedly corrupt characters.

Morality is of course a universal social concern, and it is somewhat unsatisfactory to reflect upon the virtue of moral humility only with reference to a small and highly exceptional, even idealized, class of moral agents. I have assumed that goodness of character likely admits of wide degree, and of a variety of personal kinds of expressions.² One could speculate that it seems most in keeping with the position of ethical rationalism that moral self-understanding would be broadly proportionate with the degree of one's moral sufficiency. If so, the virtue of humility (understood as referring to all of its instances, i.e., as

²See the appendix, section 3.8.

accurate relative self-assessment rather than as an accurate estimate of one's own relative moral excellence) could belong to many less moral agents, but only to a lesser extent than it would to the most moral agent. This is only one possible pattern. Aristotle, for example, suggests that very bad characters know themselves to be wretched.³ In this case, people with the morally worst characters could possess humility as a basic self-appraisal which is as realistic as that of their virtuous counterpart, the paradigm case of the very good person who has a very clear conception of what constitutes his or her goodness.

Because we have not investigated the scope of what we call humility and its counterpart vice or vices in relation to the morally mediocre or deficient, we can only comment in a tentative fashion on the claimed affinity between a tendency to seek or expect high esteem from others and a tendency to have low estimates of one's own worth. Norvin Richards suggests that even the humble person in my formal sense might to others appear to have both of the contrary kinds of flaws--such as with respect to one observer's faulty judgment as compared to another's contrarily faulty view.⁴ That is, even though an agent assessed her own merits realistically, she could be wrongly judged by others as vain in one context, as self-denigrating in another, or

³Nicomachean Ethics 1166b2-29.

⁴Richards, "Is Humility a Virtue?" 236-7.

even as both at the same time from the viewpoints of different observers, all based on her failure to conform to the most reasonable expectations others might be able to have of her self-estimate in such contexts. In the converse type of situation, where a person is making inaccurate self-estimates even though other observers reasonably suppose them to be accurate, we can see by analogy that both kinds of misjudgment about oneself (i.e., instances both of vanity and self-denigration) might come from the same person at different times or in different respects. Instability in self-assessments seems more in keeping with self-ignorance than with self-knowledge. In relation to both kinds of cases, it is interesting to note an observation by Gabriele Taylor that one's underlying assumptions about one's own worth or deserts can lead to behaviour that appears superficially at odds with the assumptions: the self-denigrating person could show extreme pride at having surprised herself by accomplishing something moderately honourable, while the very self-assured person might appear to verge on indifference in response to similar circumstances, much as we can picture Aristotle's great soul responding to the same accomplishment.⁵ These aspects of humility are all of interest in their own right, but a serious exploration of the character of humility in the morally more typical person must wait for another occasion.

⁵Taylor, 38-43.

6.3 Behavioral Parallels in the Two Humilities:

A Suggestion

Humility has a pleasing sound in many ears. Perhaps the most theoretically neutral behavioral associations of the term are of some kind of self-restraint and balanced quietude. These characteristics do not in themselves seem to have great value, except to the extent that they can be agreeably non-intrusive features from the self-preoccupied viewpoint of other people, or agreeably unthreatening ones for the insecure. I conclude by suggesting that if there is some essential link between such behavioral characteristics of humility and a profound underlying personal strength and merit (that is to say, moral goodness) that the value of behavioral humility becomes clearer; if the restraint and quietude is a sign of such merits. Such an interpretation of the significance of humility must also concede that the same outward dispositions might issue from extreme self-effacement simpliciter: a lack of loud assertiveness of one's possible claims to social recognition and a lack of reactivity to external impediments to that recognition could be signs either of a lack of belief in the importance of one's claims or of exceptional confidence in the objective validity of those claims. Perhaps the behavioral features are the common and unifying link between humility on its traditional reading and the species of moral humility developed here.

APPENDIX

A DEFENCE OF VIRTUE ETHICS

The past thirty or forty years of accumulated discussion in Anglo-American circles about the possible role of the virtues in theoretical ethics helps lend relevance and immediacy to consideration of the trait of humility and closely related qualities. In this appendix, we consider the general notion of a philosophy of virtue as it has been understood since the revival of interest in the topic signalled by writings of G.E.M. Anscombe, Philippa Foot, Alasdair MacIntyre, and others. A further attempt is also made to justify some of the positions I choose to take within the aretaic field in the dissertation as a whole, especially in Chapter Two.

1. The Nature of Virtue Ethics

The ethics of virtue can be regarded either as an alternative or as a supplement to the other prominent moral

theories of our age: deontology, utilitarianism, and contract theory. It uniquely holds that the good life tends to be attained by the personal acquisition and maintenance of certain identifiable dispositions of character called moral virtues. Virtues promote one's own flourishing (also termed "eudaimonia") and that of one's community alike. Collectively the virtues (or vices) comprise one's moral character.

Flourishing is essentially a conception of both personal well being and the complementary well being of one's social community. In the most general terms, flourishing is about the vitality, resilience and richness of the community and the integrity, activeness and sense of social responsibility of its inhabitants. To some extent it requires material prosperity and good fortune on both levels, but it has more to do with the way circumstances are used than with how fate deals them. The virtues promote flourishing by permitting people both to benefit from the goods of community life and to contribute to them. That is, the virtues promote the optimal level of personal agency in the context of optimal social harmony.

Various more precise and attenuated descriptions of flourishing have been advanced (as discussed below). These can be faulted for onesidedness.

Virtues are dispositions that broadly characterize the way one voluntarily behaves and correspondingly thinks and

feels in various kinds of contexts. We could describe these contexts as relating to the basic universals of human experience, such as how necessary but scarce resources are managed, how one deals with one's biological instincts, and so forth. The moral virtues include justice, prudence, courage, honesty, temperance in the bodily appetites, and an indefinite number of other less fundamental traits, such as even-temperedness, liberality with one's wealth, and social amiability.

Virtue ethics addresses questions about how one should act in circumstances calling for moral judgment by reference to the implications for one's character in acting in one way as opposed to another. Such a perspective distinctively emphasizes several features of moral conduct. One is the overall personal context underlying one's view of the choice at hand. Proper judgment must take into account one's own general beliefs and desires as well as those of any other subjects directly involved, and cannot be legitimately reduced to impersonal circumstantial features, although these certainly can be relevant, particularly in the case of justice.

A second facet of the aretaic approach is that, since one tends to act in accordance with one's dispositions, there is in the virtuous an unparalleled sense of harmony between learned habitual inclinations and what one takes to be right conduct. As a result, an explicit role for the

notions of "duty" or of "moral obligation" is properly much less prominent than it is in most other ethical frameworks, since the right choice is, in good people, in general accord with one's spontaneous inclinations. Similarly, virtue ethics is especially receptive to denial of the overridingness thesis, that moral directives are uniquely, properly decisive for the agent as a result of some inherent property they have. It is within everyone's genuine self-interest to be virtuous. The notion that what moral goodness requires is somehow in sovereign detachment from whatever one's actual preferences are is a notion which needlessly obscures the fundamental symmetry between proper subjective interests and moral needs. Instances of conflict between subjective and objective, moral goods are still possible, as discussed below in the case of courage. But there is a rational resolution of such conflicts which reinterprets one's actual preference as in accord with more fundamental moral interests. What even the most enlightened and morally exemplary agent lacks is a sense of moral judgments as prescriptions that have (in Gregory Trianosky's phrase) "'a certain automatic reason-giving [justificatory] force' independently of their relation to the desires and/or interests of the agent."¹

¹Gregory Trianosky, "What Is Virtue Ethics All About?" American Philosophical Quarterly 27 (1990): 336.

2. Kinds of Virtue Ethics

Probably the most basic variable in aretaic ethics concerns the relationship between virtue and flourishing. Some theorists, dubbed "perfectionists," believe that eudaimonia amounts to no more than virtuous activity itself; Aristotle is sometimes claimed to be the best-known progenitor of this version of the framework, while a recent exponent is Slote (1992).² Yet it is unlikely that even Aristotle would wholly endorse the view, since he recognizes that the so-called "external goods"--wealth, happy accidents, and so forth--have an important bearing on the quality of life and are not fully within the control of one's dispositions. These issues are thoroughly discussed by White (1992) and, to a lesser extent, Nussbaum (1984).³ Virtue ethics may seem more substantial and less artificially reductionist if viewed as teleological in that there is a goal (flourishing) which is distinct from the virtues centrally instrumental in its attainment. (A second sense of "teleology" attributed to virtue ethics refers to the apparent necessity of a metaphysical or at least an anthropological telos or natural aim or end of things or, at any rate, of human beings. In this regard, perhaps all variants of virtue theory are teleological, although some in

²Michael Slote, From Morality to Virtue (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

³Nussbaum (Ibid.), Part III; White, Ibid.

a more muted way. Questions about the plausibility of assumptions of a cosmic or human telos and its content are thus an important basis of criticism of the field.)

Other variables in virtue ethics include: the number and identity as well as the collective unity and compatibility of moral virtues; the relationship between virtues and vices; the presence or absence of a role for a human desire to be virtuous per se; the importance of morally acclaimed agents whose characters are to be emulated; and so on.

3. Criticisms of Virtue Ethics

With this general understanding of virtue ethics, then, we turn to a survey of some of the recurring criticisms of the field. Most of the general thematic points introduced above are raised again as we outline and very tentatively respond to these criticisms.

3.1 Circularity

Rosalind Hursthouse (1991) takes the standard circularity charge to be that "right action" and "the virtuous agent" are each justified in terms of the other.⁴ Her suggestion is that instead eudaimonia should be the ultimate foundational principle grounding virtue and, in

⁴Rosalind Hursthouse, "Virtue Theory and Abortion." Philosophy and Public Affairs 20 (1991): 226.

turn, right action. For instance, it is right for the soldier not to flee the battlefield not merely because fleeing shows cowardice, but because the security of one's community is best supported by making the greatest possible effort to repel external attacks. Richard Montague (1992) faults Hursthouse for a circularity of explanation with regard to flourishing itself and virtue.⁵ According to Montague, Hursthouse says that the basic question of ethics is "how should/ought/must I live in order to flourish," the immediate answer being that "I must practice the virtues." The virtues in turn are identified as "inclinations to pursue intrinsically worthwhile ends for the right reason." But the only basis for ascertaining that one's inclinations are such is, again, the criterion of flourishing. Thus both flourishing and virtues are explained in terms of one another.

As Montague acknowledges, flourishing (for Hursthouse as for others) is not reducible to the practice of virtue alone, so one cannot explain flourishing merely in terms of virtue. Where there is eudaimonia, however, there is always virtue, so that flourishing does seem to be the logically prior foundational concept. If one endorses the logical priority of flourishing, what seems most necessary is an articulation of eudaimonia's content followed by some

⁵Richard Montague, "Virtue Ethics: A Qualified Success Story," American Philosophical Quarterly 29 (1992): 55.

account of how the virtues conduce to it.

3.2 Vagueness of Eudaimonia

If flourishing is taken as the deepest concept, clearly much depends on how well it can be known. Sarah Conly (1988) argues that since we cannot accept a content for the telos as narrow as Aristotle's choice of theōria (detached contemplation), the pluralistic character of the good life is too imprecise and lacking in coherence to show what character traits are choiceworthy.⁶ For example, Kraut (1989) may lend credence to this critique in his scholarly defence of theōria as Aristotle's conception of full flourishing.⁷ Kraut correlates the precision in content of the particular virtues with that of eudaimonia. Different economic needs and practices apply to someone who intends to contemplate philosophy than to someone who will be a military general.

There is plenty of dispute about how best to articulate flourishing. James Wallace (1978) tersely characterizes the distinctively human activity as life "in communities mediated by conventions," suggesting that the virtues are whatever qualities are instrumental to this very loosely

⁶Sarah Conly, "Flourishing and the Failure of the Ethics of Virtue." In French et al., 83-96.

⁷Kraut, *Ibid.*

described pattern.⁹ MacIntyre (1981) sees the virtues as conducing to goods internal to complex cooperative activities called "practices" which are borne in turn by "institutions."¹⁰ Pincoffs (1986) would prefer to put aside the idea of any specific content to flourishing; any determinate content to the human telos is difficult to defend. Pincoffs draws an analogy between the moral health of a community and keeping a ship in running order: its crew can choose any destination provided that it is well maintained.¹¹ He sees virtues as "qualities that serve as reasons for preference in the ordinary and not so ordinary exigencies of life."¹¹ Given the extent of disagreement about the content of eudaimonia--even about whether one needs a determinate conception of eudaimonia at all--clear practical interpretation of the virtues may well look doubtful. Pincoffs' extreme view does not seem helpful in providing justification for interpreting justice or courage in one way rather than another. Is the ship of state allowed to sponsor ritual human sacrifice, slavery or imperialistic foreign policy, for example? Yet it is easy to see that the conceptions of eudaimonia in Wallace and

⁹James Wallace, Virtues and Vices (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978), 34.

¹⁰MacIntyre, After Virtue, 187 ff.

¹¹Edmund Pincoffs, Quandaries and Virtues: Against Reductivism in Ethics (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 1986), 6-7.

¹¹Ibid., 97.

MacIntyre are in essence equally indifferent to such issues.

Perhaps this problem can be overdrawn. Pincoffs' notion of a well maintained ship of state itself implicitly does offer some picture of eudaimonia, broadly understood. The community is reasonably and sustainably organized, rather than chaotic, so that persons and groups are able to pursue determinate projects of a rather voluntary nature instead of constantly exhausting their energies on subsistence needs and other problems of simple survival. There does seem in virtue ethics a need further to elaborate a view of the broad institutional features of the good society in order to clarify some working limits upon both eudaimonia and the manifestations of specific virtues. But this problem about what arrangements make for a good society is not exclusive to virtue ethics. All the proposed terminologies of cultural goods--conventions, practices and institutions, and so forth--point to cooperative social ventures. Perhaps it is minimally sufficient to regard virtues as the conditions of all such ventures. Yet whether a "just" person takes such practices as slavery or barbarous rituals for granted must depend on the features of institutional justice.

On the hypothesis that eudaimonia is a more fundamental concept than is virtue, these unclarities about the content of eudaimonia cannot be resolved by the investigation of specific virtues in preference to the study of societal

institutions and practices. Nonetheless, regardless of the forms these social arrangements take, the rather general description of eudaimonia I presented in Section 1 above at least suggests that the human relationship towards a whole variety of personal and social goods can be comprehended under the rubric of flourishing, from the provision and management of resources necessary to survival to philosophical, scientific and artistic endeavour.

3.3 Metaphysical Teleology

Comments about the unacceptableness of Aristotle's "metaphysical biology" and how much bearing this may have on the defensibility of his view of the nature of eudaimonia are not uncommon even among those sympathetic to virtue ethics.¹² For Aristotle, the notion of a proper human function through which humankind attains its natural end or telos is but one instance of the same teleological principle of final cause applicable to all natural processes, albeit a special instance: the uniquely human reason has discretionary power over the use of one's capacities, so human beings are quite able not to realize their telos. Because humans differ from all other animals in their rational faculty, the fullest exercise of reason in contemplation (and perhaps also moral wisdom) is the proper

¹²See Williams, Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy, 52-3, and MacIntyre, After Virtue, chs. 5, 14.

human end. Modern science has rendered the general explanatory notion of the telos redundant; this might seem to cast into doubt any more limited, "local" teleology of human nature.

In reply, Deborah Achtenberg (1992) interestingly argues both that modernist versions of virtue theory such as MacIntyre's are essentially compatible with Aristotle's teleology of man and that the least plausible of Aristotle's metaphysical assumptions are not needed to underwrite the anthropological teleology his ethics requires.¹³ MacIntyre, she argues, "has every metaphysical commitment that he imputes to Aristotle"--a notion of specific human nature and corresponding human aims, some account of potentiality and act, of man's essence as a rational animal, and of a human telos.¹⁴ Aristotle's biology does not rest on erroneous metaphysics in at least three important ways it is sometimes claimed to, writes Achtenberg: "Aristotle does not define 'the good' as a fact; he does not 'claim that human beings move by nature toward their telos'; and does not claim 'in the ergon [function] argument, that human beings are 'fixed' rather than versatile."¹⁵ MacIntyre's insistence that any ethics that does not see itself as a

¹³Deborah Achtenberg, "On the Metaphysical Presuppositions of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*," Journal of Value Inquiry 26 (1993): 317-40.

¹⁴Ibid., 335.

¹⁵Ibid., 317.

corrective to untutored human behaviour is incoherent (since there is no need to prescribe what agents will naturally do anyway) represents a powerful rationale for some sort of legitimate "local" (human) teleology. Without upholding some image of perfected human nature, he argues, ethics can be no more than descriptive of de facto behaviour, and without a human teleology there can be no notion of perfected human nature.

Achtenberg's point is that modern ethics can make do with an adequate notion of a human telos that bears a limited resemblance to Aristotle's and does not offend (directly, at least) against modern physics. Apart from her controversial claim about Aristotle's separation of facts from values, her views are attractively plausible.

3.4 The Sense of "Virtue"

We suggested above that the precise identities of the virtues depend to some extent upon the specifiability of the idea of flourishing, although the general functional mode of all moral virtues is that of facilitation of social cooperation. In addition to the risk of vagueness in the content of specific virtues, there are concerns about vagueness in identifying what sort of thing in general a moral virtue is. David Elliott (1993) asserts that "no central, well-defined nature can be ascribed to the concept 'virtue'" because it does not fit perfectly into any of

three likely categories--a technical skill, a character trait, a tendency to act in particular ways in particular contexts.¹⁶ Elliott points out that virtue can be distinguished from skill on the grounds that "skills [unlike virtues] are abilities to do a particular activity" and that an agent cannot make a voluntary moral lapse without its detracting from the agent's moral status, unlike a voluntary lapse of one's skills.¹⁷ Elliott rejects the third description, the tendency to act in certain ways in certain circumstances, because, for example, either killing or not killing a vicious dog could demonstrate courage, depending on the wider context. This appears to leave the second-mentioned class, character traits.

Indeed, one commonly encounters the phrases "quality" or "disposition" in discussions of moral virtue. Elliott's reservation here is that it is hard to see "what differentiates [virtues as] states of character from other subjective states of a person."¹⁸ What he concludes from his "agnosticism about...the psychological nature of the virtues" is that a wider belief-system must be what clarifies the nature of distinctively moral virtue; some sense of conceptual clarity in "the good" beyond the notion

¹⁶David Elliott, "The Nature of Virtue and the Question of its Primacy," Journal of Value Inquiry 27 (1993): 317.

¹⁷Ibid., 322.

¹⁸Ibid., 323.

of virtue itself. This position accords nicely with the view of Stephen Hudson (1981), who concurs with what he takes to be Aristotle's opinion that the virtues apply primarily to persons, not their actions.¹⁹ That is, virtues are not "dispositions or tendencies to act in certain definable ways in certain circumstances" but rather have closer reference to the general beliefs and desires of the agent.²⁰

Thus, these views are in accord with our prior discussion of eudaimonia: clarity of general moral beliefs and desires is linked with clarity in one's sense of eudaimonia. But my proposal that all facets or interpretations of eudaimonia be regarded as entailing the requirement of social cooperation should help dispel Elliott's concern. I am proposing understanding moral virtue as any kind of quality or disposition of character that directly conduces to cooperative social projects. The exercise of justice (broadly taken and comprehending prudence and temperateness), courage and trustworthiness--and arguably benevolence--are all essential to the success of cooperative society. Cunning, charm, and determination are examples of character traits that can have a major impact on the success or failure of eudaimonia but are only

¹⁹Stephen Hudson, "Taking Virtues Seriously," Australian Journal of Philosophy 59 (1981): 189-202.

²⁰Ibid., 198.

morally good or bad according to the goodness or badness of the aims for which they are employed. Some other qualities of character (e.g. musicality or fastidiousness) can imaginably be put to moral or immoral purposes, but have no direct reference to one's choice of ends, and are not basically essential to cooperation, unlike justice, courage and trustworthiness. Thus they are only indirectly relevant to morality and are not moral virtues as such.

Virtues as Ethically Thick

Bruce Brower (1988)²¹ and Conly (Ibid.) reject the view of Williams that virtue-related terms such as "courage" and "brutality" are what he calls "ethically thick"--pretheoretical, bedrock notions of what is morally good and bad--and that they bridge the fact-value gap by having a fixed evaluative content as well as a fixed descriptive one.²² Williams' critics seek to undermine the reliability of virtue intuitions by constructing thought experiments meant to show that realizable empirical conditions could reverse the values we attach to such terms of virtue and vice. I choose to discuss these almost endlessly resourceful scenarios in some detail because it is not possible to point to what I take to be their hidden

²¹Bruce Brower, "Virtue Concepts and Ethical Realism." Journal of Philosophy 85 (1988): 675-93.

²²Williams (Ibid.), 53.

implications without doing so.

Brower posits a possible world in which all humans have been successfully and permanently enslaved by a superior species. Any human who demonstrates courage or benefits from another's courage is permanently tortured. Evidently, in such a world, human courage has disvalue. For her part, Conly imagines "a species of cowards...who believe that in all cases the dominant consideration is personal security."²³ On Conly's view such a species seems able to flourish indefinitely, in spite of their unwillingness to put some things ahead of personal security. (Conly's own intent is to show that the concept of flourishing cannot fix precisely what dispositions are necessarily virtues.) Brower acknowledges that it seems requisite to regard a necessary condition of courageous acts that one overcomes one's fear only when it is rational to do so. In his imaginary world what would in our world be called courageous behaviour is necessarily self-destructive and therefore neither rational nor courageous. Brower tries to overcome this objection by showing that it leads to attributions of non-courageousness to agents who are merely mistaken about the reasonableness of their deeds. Moreover, he argues, there are possible worlds in which not even reasonableness is of value. But once one must resort to hypothesizing about worlds in which only unreasonable things

²³Conly, 90-1.

are reasonable, the usefulness of the thought experiment seems to be at an end. Perhaps more importantly, the fact that defiance to the master race is to no purpose need not imply that there are no other contexts for the slaves in which what we regard as personal courage has value, unless the master race has in effect negated all semblance of community among the slaves by isolating each of them. If there is no residual sense of community among the unfortunate humans in Brower's scenario, then flourishing is impossible for the wretched slaves and talk of virtue in general seems accordingly out of place.²⁴ The point is that if one goes so far as to render the concept of community irrelevant, then certainly intuitions about virtue terms will be invalidated, but it is unclear any virtue theorist would want to claim otherwise.

Conly's assumptions are perhaps even more inadvertently revealing. She seems to regard courageous acts as fundamentally opposed to personal security; how else could

²⁴It is interesting to note in passing that Pincoffs' proposal to understand virtues merely as "qualities that serve as reasons for preference in the ordinary and not so ordinary exigencies of life" is loose enough to apply to the wretched existence of these imaginary isolated slaves. But Pincoffs' "ship of state" has become a means to an external end rather than whatever end(s) of choice its seamen determine. My point in recalling Pincoffs here is to show that a conception of virtue that confusedly takes eudaimonia to be wholly superfluous or arbitrary can stretch the identity of moral virtues to the point where their exercise is "morally right" merely because such conduct conduces to a way of life that is objectively undesirable. Brower's mistake is to think that the character of "flourishing" is so relative as to apply to a dehumanized "society."

people whose foremost concern was personal security collectively be cowardly? However, if (as any plausible account of the relationship between courage and flourishing indicates) the fundamental role of courage is to make people's lives more secure, then the scenario appears incoherent to begin with. (Of course, one's acts of courage may in specific cases harm one's personal security. But this is against a more fundamental alignment of the two through one's concern for the security of all the persons comprising the community to which one belongs.) Conly could always specify more clearly that the cowardly species has no sense of the worthwhile beyond one's own personal security. But then, once again, there is really no sense of community at all so it is equivocal in the least to assert that the species can continue to flourish. Like Brower, Conly appears to make her point about the relativity of intuitions at the sacrifice of a fundamental assumption about the subject matter of morality: that the human good is necessarily social as well as personal in scope. As has been suggested elsewhere, perhaps the usefulness of other-worldly thought experiments is often overrated by philosophers.

3.6 The Choice of Virtues

The role of cultural context in shaping moral ideals has been well discussed. MacIntyre emphasizes how some

dispositions that are virtues in one society may be vices in another; Aristotle "would have been horrified by St. Paul."²⁵ The conflict between Classical and Christian ideals is one of the typical illustrations of incompatible virtues from different cultures.²⁶ It is interesting to note that Pincoffs, for example, suggests ruling the virtues of benevolence as nonessential.²⁷ Aquinas' Christianized Aristotelianism suggests that it is possible to ally dispositions that appear at odds provided one is allowed sufficient scope and resourcefulness in redefining terms. But in this case taking liberties with definitions simply seems to evade the problem of whether really distinct dispositions are compatible. As suggested in the thesis, possibly the difference between Athenian and Christian senses of goodness is more one of tone and emphasis than of bluntly contradictory traits.

More broadly, how are we to take compendia of virtues as extensive as those of someone like Aristotle and assess whether each of the many qualities of character is applicable to our own age? If there is no clear way to ascertain whether or not many of these virtues are choiceworthy for us, what does this say about the clarity of content of these same dispositions, and our ability to

²⁵MacIntyre, After Virtue, 184.

²⁶Ibid., 182; Cordner, Ibid.

²⁷Pincoffs, 91.

discern dispositions through inspection of behaviour?

Moreover, it is conceded that the interpretations of given virtue-terms develop over time and are subject to disparate readings even within any community, as when Plato and Aristotle offer definitions of sōphrosunē (temperance) that are narrower than or at odds with the understanding of the notion among their contemporaries (MacIntyre 1988).²⁸

Clearly there are adverse implications for the universalizability and specifiability of virtue ethics.

Clearly it is not necessary to take the most extreme position that only one set of dispositions is best for all times and in all places simply because one is sympathetic to aretaic ethics; Stuart Hampshire (1983) is no doubt correct in claiming that "human nature...always underdetermines a way of life" and that "there is no ideally rational way of ordering sexuality...family and kinship relations" (and so on).²⁹ As I tried to show in Chapter One, however, even this sort of claim points to the concession that there are certain universal features of human life, such as the need for social cooperation and the necessity to adopt some dispositions or other in relation to certain sorts of

²⁸MacIntyre, "Sōphrosunē: How a Virtue Can Become Socially Disruptive," in French et al., 1-11.

²⁹Stuart Hampshire, "Morality and Conflict," chap. in Morality and Conflict (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983), 153; 163.

universally encountered needs.³⁰ These constants enable one to say that certain core virtues--at least quite broadly understood--such as courage, justice and honesty can be said to hold in some describable form in all communities (although the virtue of honesty may be distinct from the other two in not always being culturally prescribed under all circumstances). In MacIntyre's words, these three virtues are so, "whatever our private moral standpoint or our society's particular codes may be."³¹ But are the cultural variants even of such most elementary virtues very different from one another, such that trying to specify a universal sense of any virtue cannot work? How much variation in the sense of the flourishing community follows from such variety in the interpretation of specific virtues?

One can note that certain recurrent dispositions, such as military valour in defence of one's homeland (Aristotle's conception, or at least paradigm illustration, of courage) seem to meet with almost universal appreciation, and this measure of universality is in accord with the thesis that there is also some very basic cross-cultural consistency in the features of the flourishing community (in the present example, that a community is prepared to try to preserve its

³⁰Martha Nussbaum makes a good case for the requiredness of finding universalist terms to denote one's dispositions with regard to such ubiquitous problems. See her article, "Non-Relative Virtues: An Aristotelian Approach," in French *et al.*, 32-53.

³¹MacIntyre, After Virtue, 192.

integrity against external attack). Perhaps one could similarly claim that the inclination not to use one's recognized powers of democratic office in order to indulge one's personal material appetites, an inclination related both to temperance and justice, is universal as a morally desirable disposition in the same way that the notion of constitutional office is universal.³² Admittedly, however, once one tries to explicate a meaning of the cardinal virtue of justice considered alone and in its completeness, the limits of this sort of argument appear. For example, one must justify the rule of law and the claim of the limits of constitutional power before judging personal political conduct against such rules and limits.

To conclude this section, it should be conceded that an analysis of moral virtues that is indifferent to particular cultural and legal contexts is feasible, but it is also necessarily limited. In order further to clarify particular virtues and their implications for conduct, it seems necessary to relate the virtues to these particular contexts of tradition and law, the sort of work that is done all too

³²An immediately apparent problem entailed by this claim is how to regard temperateness, which is one of the "cardinal virtues" Aristotle clearly took to be fundamental. Why does MacIntyre, for example, choose not to assert the universality of temperance alongside that of the other three mentioned virtues? Perhaps he thinks Aristotle's judgment is culturally conditioned here, but such a view does not seem compatible with my speculation (developed below) that the doctrine of the mean is an important transcultural insight. Temperateness seems to be the virtue that best exemplifies this doctrine, doing so with respect to the bodily appetites.

little in arguments on behalf of the virtues.

3.7 Conflicting Virtues

Just as one culture's interpretation of a certain virtue may be at odds with another's, some writers claim that within a given culture some moral virtues are incompatible with others. There is a range of positions among exponents of virtue ethics about the compatibility of the virtues, from a strict unity thesis (Aristotle and even more so in Aquinas) that holds no conflicts arise--except as the result of one's own past moral errors--to one that sees radical oppositions implying that no one can ever be unqualifiedly virtuous.³³ In between is the view that, for example, one can possess all of the virtues but only if none of them is held to an exceptionally pronounced degree.³⁴

One's sense of the prominence of conflict is affected by a number of considerations, perhaps most importantly that of how "virtue" is understood. It is easier to impute a conflict if one can maintain that two distinct virtues do positively apply in a given dilemma, since they may presumably apply by entailing distinct and incompatible forms of behaviour. On the other hand, it may be plausible

³³For example, Philippa Foot, "Moral Realism and Moral Dilemma," Journal of Philosophy 80 (1983): 379-398.

³⁴A.D.M. Walker, "Virtues and Character." Philosophy 64 (1989): 349-62.

to claim that one of the virtues does not apply in such a circumstance, and that behaviour in conformity with what one takes to be the characteristic pattern of that virtue is not prescribed by that virtue in such a case. Clearly any aretaic framework that manages to dispel all sense of difficulty in the making of moral choices is a fanciful theory hopelessly out of touch with reality; alternatives all of which lead to tragic consequences may sometimes be forced upon one, and more commonly, less exacting alternatives require decisions about which one will at least feel natural regrets.³⁵ Again, however, the existence of tragic or merely unpalatable moral choices clearly implies only that, however the moral virtues do interrelate, they cannot provide the means to make one feel their appropriate exercise is always untroubling and wholeheartedly satisfying.

If one holds to some kind of doctrine of virtue-as-a-mean (for more on this question see below), then the notion that a virtuous disposition can be somehow intensified indefinitely and yet remain virtuous is ruled out. In his discussion of patience and courage, Callan (1993) sees each virtue as conceived partly by reference to the other. This also appears to be the position of Putman (1990), who writes

³⁵For a discussion of the nature of necessary personal repudiation of moral goods, see Bernard Williams' "Ethical Consistency," chap. in Problems of the Self (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 166-86.

that "to exemplify the virtue of kindness requires weighing the minimal requirements of the other virtues....kindness and justice must co-exist and the agent must consider the limits of each or there is, in fact, no virtue."³⁶ The view (which Putman is rejecting) that virtues, once present, can conceivably be intensified indefinitely is suggested by Walker (1989).³⁷ Thus what Walker calls his "intermediate view" about compatibility regards virtues as harmonizable provided that the agent is not exceptionally disposed to some virtue or other. Walker adds, however, that he is not endorsing the position of Gary Watson (1984)³⁸ that this endless augmentation of dispositions never compromises their value. Rather, the stronger the disposition, the greater is the virtue, provided that it doesn't in the process violate the minimal requirements of any other virtue. (If virtues are optimal means, then all three views in effect converge.)

Doubtless the notion of unity among the virtues is theoretically and emotively more appealing, inasmuch as moral goodness is an ideal condition whose attainment one would like to be as coherent and intelligible a goal as possible. Yet one may suspect that the virtue-as-a-mean

³⁶Daniel Putman, "The Compatibility of Justice and Kindness" (discussion note), Philosophy 65 (1990): 517.

³⁷Walker, Ibid.

³⁸Gary Watson, "Virtues in Excess." Philosophical Studies 46 (1984): 57-74.

view is at least in part an attempt at "victory by definition." One can assert, for example, that practising leniency towards a repeat offender does not conform with the virtue of kindness because it is not kind to fail to ensure that offenses are stopped and that the offender grasp the unacceptability of his behaviour. But the understanding of virtues employed in such an argument seems to beg the question by assuming that kindness "properly understood" is compatible with retributive justice. If we insisted by contrast that essential kindness is intensified rather than diminished by one's showing more leniency, then this would seem to load the dice in favour of incompatibility. Which definition does one favour?

It seems more excusable to presuppose an inherent compatibility among the virtues until there is strong evidence that this assumption cannot be maintained without one being forced to interpret virtue terms in a way that is hopelessly at odds with ordinary beliefs. To see kindness or charity in a more balanced fashion, as did Aquinas, is more consistent with recognizing that kindness or charity is not the only good and desirable quality, and that some other good and necessary qualities are quite different in their character from kindness. It seems very likely that one virtue will necessarily incapacitate some very different ones if the former is taken to have a manifest application in every context. We ought to be more at liberty to

stipulate definitions than we are to assert that any quality on this or that interpretation of it is morally desirable simply because some people have an intuitive sense that it is. (That "kindness" broadly conceived, without regard to its intensity or exaggeratedness, is in some sense admirable does not seem to preclude its not being properly moral.)

Insightful discussions of the relationships among definitions, compatibility, and cultural context are provided by A.O. Rorty (1986, 1988).³⁹ On the whole Rorty seems to favour the view of Callan and Putman (also broadly endorsed by the thesis) that all the moral virtues help delimit each particular virtue. Rorty calls this the "checks-and-balances view." Rorty's concern is in part that we can understand and prize the morally uncertain dispositions associated with particular virtues, such as the association of fearlessness with courage, without grasping the wider moral context that must be considered in the exercise of such dispositions in order to judge whether they are genuinely good. Courage loosely understood (merely as the capacity for any dangerous undertakings) is morally dubious. Rorty thinks it is "magnetizing and expansionist": people will aim at possession of the trait for its own sake, so it tends to promote a whole way of life that is centred upon risking dangerous activity and that occludes the

³⁹A.O. Rorty, "The Two Faces of Courage," Philosophy 61 (1986): 151-71; idem, "Virtues and Their Vicissitudes," in French et al., 136-47.

application of all qualities not closely allied with this capacity."⁴⁰ (One could speculate that the same risks attend one's dedication to charity or kindness alone, loosely understood, as discussed above.) Rorty is in agreement about the critical importance of the clarity in our grasp of each virtue's meaning, but also emphasizes that the only way to clarify the virtuous use of dispositions is by their reference to particular, concrete goods (seeing "community as the context of character").⁴¹ We can choose to define courage as "the virtue that enables virtue,"⁴² which combines courage's distinctive feature of a willingness to face unpleasant obstacles with the end of preserving what one holds to be worthwhile. Provided one is able to shed light on what things are worth the risks of facing the obstacles, this conception of courage is morally far more satisfactory. Can we shed light on what goods justify the dangers?

One could develop this point by reference to Aristotle's detailed discussion of courage, in which he compares what he regards as several simulacra of the genuine virtue with it.⁴³ The closest form to genuine courage is what he calls "citizen courage," in which soldiers are

⁴⁰"The Two Faces of Courage," 155.

⁴¹"Virtues and Their Vicissitudes," 144.

⁴²"The Two Faces of Courage," 151.

⁴³Nicomachean Ethics III.6-9.

motivated to stand their ground through the expectation of the public honour they will thereby earn and the fear of shame and punishment if they do not maintain discipline. Public honour devolves to the soldier because it is in the utmost interest of the state that it be able to survive against outside aggression (or, to put the case more authentically perhaps, to win whatever wars the state chooses to prosecute) and without courage the war would more easily be lost to the enemy. Honour and shame are central both to true courage and its closest simulacrum, but the vital difference appears to be that the truly courageous soldier has a direct allegiance to the perceived good--the state's goal of self-preservation or perhaps that and self-aggrandizement--whereas in citizen courage the soldier is more concerned with the appearances and the outward manifestations of his conformity with this prime political concern. In other words, Aristotle conceives genuine courage in such a way that the most basic concrete good in flourishing--the security and survival of the community itself--is built into the paradigm form of the virtuous disposition itself.

3.8 Degrees of Virtue

I have not encountered a case in the literature where this issue receives direct attention, but it is clearly germane to the thesis, and hence I address it briefly.

If one adopts a very strict unity thesis, it would seem that possessing the virtues is an all-or-none matter, and agents are properly divisible as basically moral or immoral. While the classificatory scheme looks crude, a strict unity thesis is not at all so, as it holds virtue to a spectacularly high standard. I have already strongly suggested a measured endorsement of the unity thesis, an endorsement facilitated by narrowing the application of variously named character traits inasmuch as they are to be taken as genuine virtues. It is unclear whether the strict unity thesis would add to or detract from the likelihood of a "moral elite." One encounters large numbers of people who do not seem to be basically untrustworthy, unjust, cowardly, uncharitable, and so forth, so if moral competence is very common it is not an attainment that warrants extraordinarily high self-esteem.

On the other hand, one should keep in mind that it is in everyone's self interest to appear to lack all of these vices whether or not one really does, and only rather intimate and long-term experience of a person may enable others to verify the appearances. This suggests that the proportion of all-around morally good agents is smaller than we might assume. Yet human communities only seem likely to continue functioning if most of their inhabitants are largely moral.

Perhaps a more plausible position to take is that the

virtues are not so strongly interdependent that it would be impossible to tend to have some or even most of them without having them all--or even without having any of them in a fully adequate way. The characteristics of the simulacra of the virtues might approach those of the genuine virtues to different degrees as well. Two phenomena that lend some credence to the more moderate unity view, both raised by Aristotle, are weakness of will and that of the varying severity of vices. There are other parameters of relevance as well, such as one's choice the most desirable ends in life, but in the interests of economy we ignore them.

The weak-willed agent does not unreservedly settle upon wrong actions. The agent thinks that the right ones are right in the more comprehensive perspective, but in the end--at least on occasion--adopts the bad decisions through a strong and interfering desire for the (often shorter-term) ends they offer. It seems reasonable to see the moral condition of a weak-willed person as faulty but not as corrupted as that of a person who wholeheartedly desires and chooses the wrong actions for the wrong ends, who genuinely does not believe in a better alternative.

Aristotle also claims that for every virtue there are exactly two vices opposing both one another and the virtuous "mean," and that one of these vices is worse and more common than the other. While there are sensible reservations about some of the details of his claim (as discussed in the

following section), I think the basic point is true. We would not want to say that someone who takes both goodwill towards others and forgiveness of their flaws to excess, regrettably compromising the requirements of justice in the process, is as immoral as someone who is harshly over-critical of people in general (lacking goodwill almost completely) and who fails to be just as well.

If there are different ways of failing to be moral and some of them are worse than others, then moral goodness is more likely to admit of a wide range of degrees, and it might be that only a small class of people attained virtue to the highest extent while a very large class achieved moderate virtuousness. This is the sort of distribution I envisage in supposing in the thesis that humility for morally excellent people has real-world relevance. Clearly the considerations I have brought to bear on the issue in this section cannot make a very convincing case for this distribution. It remains quite conceivable that while these phenomena of degrees of moral failure are real, the gap between the least flawed agents and the typically moral agent is not very great.

3.9 The Doctrine of the Mean

As just raised above, a well known tenet of Aristotle's version of virtue ethics is that for every virtue there are just two vices opposing both one another and the virtue

which is a mean state between them; that is, for instance, even-temperedness is a virtuous balance between irascibility and apathy. The most facile criticism of the doctrine is that it is hopelessly vague and hence empty. (In the terms just stated, one does not know what the doctrine prescribes in a given circumstance save that it cannot be unbridled anger or complete calm as the case may be.)

Yet the doctrine-of-the-mean is not to be confused with some doctrine of moderation--or more to the point, of insipidity--espousing emotional restraint whatever the circumstances. As we saw in Chapter Three, Aristotle makes clear that some actions and feelings are categorically wrong. In addition, as W.D. Ross (1949) once remarked, the doctrine entails the definite view contra Kant that each contrary vice is more different from its counterpart than is either from virtue.⁴ Aristotle's account of the doctrine also incorporates other meaningful features such as the view that one vice is both more serious and more common than the other. However, one can concede that Aristotle is not very forthcoming about just what the proper measure of virtue is, other than to say it is doing as a virtuous person would do. The more penetrating criticisms of the scheme are well represented by Hursthouse (1980), who faults Aristotle for conflating instances of the wrong intensity of emotion (i.e.

⁴Sir David Ross, Aristotle, 5th ed. (London: Methuen, 1949),

too much or too little of the relevant feeling) with improper choices of conduct (doing something at the wrong time, in the wrong way etc.); only to some limited extent may these correspond.⁴⁵ Hursthouse also thinks it false to assert there are always exactly two opposed dispositions relevant to each virtue (where this is true, as in the case of courage, she thinks, it is so fortuitously).

Many writers such as J.B. Schneewind (1990) appear unconcerned as to whether or not one endorses the virtue-as-a-mean view, believing that abandoning the doctrine of the mean need have no bearing on the overall approach to ethics.⁴⁶ However, the doctrine of the mean may be vital to the way one understands virtue ethics in at least two ways.

Firstly, Aristotle and most later writers sympathetic to him reject the view that virtue is a matter of mastering one's feelings (particularly passions like rage), although occasionally Aristotle has been interpreted in this fashion, as by G.H. von Wright (1963).⁴⁷ If virtue meant mastering passions, then dichotomies such as anger/detachment might be adequate to represent the spectra of given types of

⁴⁵Hursthouse, "A False Doctrine of the Mean." Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society 80 (1980-81): 57-71.

⁴⁶J.B. Schneewind, "The Misfortunes of Virtue," Ethics 101 (1990): 47.

⁴⁷Georg Henrik von Wright, The Varieties of Goodness (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963), 147.

dispositions. But if overcompensation is possible even for an ill-tempered person, as must be the case if great wrongs justify great anger, then a third disposition (a second faulty one) must be identified--in this case, apathy or lack of spirit. Secondly, if one takes seriously the notion of the unity of virtues as raised above, then a condition of virtue is that one strikes a balance with regard to a plurality of other disparate virtue considerations. This is conceptually suggestive of the doctrine of the mean. Peter Losin's (1987) defence of the doctrine sees its key idea as that practical wisdom involves an awareness of the diverse ways in which one can err and an ability to compensate for all these kinds of errors." Perhaps the one-virtue, two-vice triad is the simplest representation of the sometimes contradictory considerations at play. At the same time, it is not necessary to endorse the suspiciously simple view that only one emotion intensity-spectrum is relevant to each virtue. Supporters of the doctrine of the mean like Urmson (1973) acknowledge that justice does not seem to fit in this scheme at all." Nonetheless, Hursthouse may be overlooking the fact that other virtues besides courage

"Peter Losin, "Aristotle's Doctrine of the Mean," History of Philosophy Quarterly 4 (1987): 329-41.

"J.O. Urmson, "Aristotle's Doctrine of the Mean," American Philosophical Quarterly 10 (1973): 223-30.

(such as even-temperedness and liberality) do seem to represent intermediate levels of a specific inclination. It is not hard to understand how generosity can be excessive in harming the basic welfare of the benefactor--even harming his ongoing ability to be generous--just as miserliness, while seemingly less at odds with the material security of the same agent, does likely harm him indirectly by excluding him from voluntary participation in enterprises concerned with goods more comprehensive than the most limited, personal ones.

3.10 Lack of Justification

This catch-all criticism refers to any unmentioned species of the general complaint that virtue ethics is "all assertion and no argument" (as Hursthouse reports it).⁵⁰ Perhaps the foremost factor behind this nagging sense is the persistent influence of Aristotle's ethical thought, which does seem deserving of the charge in a number of vital respects summarized by Schneewind: Aristotle does not deal with moral skepticism; he does not make knowledge of virtue accessible to those who lack the example of a paradigmatically good individual; he does not suggest how to resolve serious disagreement among two virtuous agents; his ethics does not work in a society lacking a recognized class

⁵⁰Hursthouse, "Virtue Theory and Abortion," 230.

of superior citizens."⁵¹

It is true that, unlike Plato, Aristotle lacks any overt response to moral skepticism and he does not seem to be interested in directly engaging in metaethics. Instead, Aristotle takes the congruence between genuine self-interest and moral interest as a starting premise rather than seeing the ethical project as the task of somehow proving that congruence. The premise is reflected in the fundamental assumption that, since human beings are political animals, the point of ethics is to show how one can realize the self-evident formal goal of living within a flourishing community. The notion that human flourishing necessarily involves a well-developed communal life and the character dispositions required to sustain it might be seen as anthropological sophistication based on Aristotle's commonsense respect for empirical evidence rather than as unphilosophical presumption. Perhaps every ethical philosophy, no matter how remote it supposes itself to be from cultural constraints on its perspective, must employ bedrock assumptions comparable to Aristotle's; for example, that it is objectively obvious that collective human suffering be minimized; that moral necessity must be found in reason alone; that the point of the state is ultimately to provide personal security and to protect personal property. With regard to the way Aristotle relates the

⁵¹Schneewind, 62.

virtues to eudaimonia, Schneewind may underestimate the cogency of reasoning in the Ethics and Politics, as well as the heavy weight Aristotle places upon social observation.

So far I have raised criticisms about the basic concepts of virtue ethics or about the relations among these basic concepts. While close interrogation exposes some significant unclarities, I hope the tentative responses have gone some way in suggesting that there remains in the aretaic approach a coherent and distinctive perspective upon ethics in spite of these weaknesses. Next we move to address a few criticisms more concerned with the consequences of employing the aretaic approach to moral life.

3.11 Virtue Ethics and Duty

Much of the impetus for virtue ethics comes from dissatisfaction with the notion of ethics as the study of obligatory action in the other moral frameworks. As proponents of the virtues see it, there are two main difficulties with this "duty-based ethics": its reliance on the view that moral prescriptions are categorically binding upon the agent because of some special feature unique to morality, and its assumption that "the good" is subordinate to "the right" (the latter tenet applying to contractarianism and deontology rather than utilitarianism).

But the minimizing of the role of duty in virtue ethics has equally raised many doubts. Marcia Baron (1985) sees the virtue framework as denying that one must be "governed by a concept of duty" in order to be perfectly moral whether or not one has articulated this concept to oneself "in deontic terms" (and suggests that Foot, Williams and others expound such a view).⁵² On this basis, Baron claims a morality of virtue is incoherent because an ethics without at least an implicit notion of duty cannot distinguish valuing from simple desiring and thus fails to meet an elementary condition of any ethics worthy of the name.

Anscombe's argument (1958) is often regarded as the seminal critique of duty-based ethics.⁵³ But in spite of her insistence "that the concepts of...moral obligation and moral duty...ought to be jettisoned if this is psychologically possible,"⁵⁴ Anscombe does seem to recognize that there is an implicit notion of a general duty to be moral in the virtuous agent, provided that this duty not be seen in terms of categorical imperatives that transcend all possible subjective interests. (The idea is that agents in general do have a subjective interest in

⁵²Marcia Baron, "Varieties of Ethics of Virtue," American Philosophical Quarterly 22 (1985): 47.

⁵³G.E.M. Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," Philosophy 53 (1958): 1-19.

⁵⁴Ibid., 1.

being moral.) In other words, the fairness of Baron's sort of critique of virtue ethics may depend on how one understands the phrase "moral obligation." Defenders of virtue ethics could try to argue that specific obligations and rules (in the form of a legal code, procedures of retributive justice, perhaps a bill of rights, and so forth) are somehow harmoniously added to the requirement simply to be virtuous, but little attention has been given to this problem. It simply will not suffice to reply as Hursthouse does that every virtue yields a corresponding prescription.⁵⁵ Compatibilism between virtue and rights and duties can also blunt the force of a related possible objection that only if duties and rights are at least implicit do supererogatory acts have their fullest moral worth. As John Tomasi (1991) puts it, "You cannot truly be generous with what you do not know is yours."⁵⁶ If the virtuous agent understands her implicit rights, then she is more able to practice virtues such as generosity knowingly.

3.12 Decision-Guiding Power

Robert Louden (1984) complains that virtue theory fails

⁵⁵Hursthouse, "Virtue Theory and Abortion," 227.

⁵⁶John Tomasi, "Individual Rights and Community Virtues." Ethics 101 (1991): 526.

to show one how to act in specific situations." By this he appears to mean that it does not issue in general directives about what to do in simply and generally characterized circumstances. For example, it does not indicate whether capital punishment is a just form of retribution for premeditated murder, or whether passive non-voluntary euthanasia is an acceptable practice where the patient is in an irreversible coma. Hursthouse (1991) and Trianosky (1990) respond that such directives will be spurious whatever framework they issue from; the nature of morally difficult situations is such that the right response depends on multiple and highly detailed personal considerations, and the hope that moral theory can resolve them decisively is mistaken.⁵⁶ (This is far from meaning that under no conditions is the correct response clear and simple.)

A possible reply is that the dilemmas would not be real if their genuine moral dimensions were not in conflict with one another, and moral philosophy has traditionally set itself insurmountable and misleadingly isolated tasks in its fixation on specific moral quandaries (one of the key themes of Pincoffs). Presumably, then, the answers to these moral controversies must remain indeterminate until more precise

⁵⁷Robert Louden, "On Some Vices of Virtue Ethics." American Philosophical Quarterly 21 (1984): 229.

⁵⁸Hursthouse, "Virtue Theory and Abortion," 235 ff.; Trianosky, 341.

descriptions of each dilemma are given. The most suggestive discussion of this issue is that of Hursthouse on abortion. She writes that "the sort of wisdom that the fully virtuous person has is not supposed to be recondite; it does not...wait upon the discoveries of academic philosophers [about] the status of the fetus" and argues that most debates on the issue ignore a host of vitally relevant concerns such as the conditions of life in the given community, the mother's knowledge of her own moral character, the "worthlessness" of the idea of "having a good time" as one's aim in life."

The persuasiveness of this sort of rebuttal depends on one's views of the potential and raison d'être of moral philosophy, or more specifically, the plausibility of utilitarianism, deontology etc., to be decision-guiding in the way virtue ethics is rightfully faulted for not being. Williams is the best known exponent of the recently emergent view that the discipline of ethics should not aim to transform moral knowledge but can at best clarify and sharpen pretheoretical moral reasoning. If one speaks not of notorious moral controversies but of one's broad conduct in life, then virtue ethics is unambiguously prescriptive, and its prescriptions are typically clear. It counsels honesty and trustworthiness except in clear and exceptional instances where this does more harm than good, unqualified

"Hursthouse, "Virtue Theory and Abortion," 235-45.

courage whenever resistance to the fearful is rationally preferable in its results, consistent justice in the sense of treating people according to relevant merits, and so forth. As we noted earlier, Williams himself draws attention to the common currency of virtue terms and the general sense that they are the factors which collectively point to closure in situations of moral uncertainty.

3.13 Virtues, Acts and Character

There is some uncertainty about the link between having a virtue and acting virtuously, just as there is about the link between the moral character as a whole and the possession of this or that virtue. As noted earlier, Hudson uses Aristotle to argue that character traits apply more to persons than to their actions. "Virtues belong primarily to particular characters" with reference to "the beliefs and desires of those individuals"; these beliefs and desires "cannot be reduced to one's behaviour in certain situations."⁶⁰ Montague uses what he takes to be the essential claim of virtue ethics that moral appraisal of acts ultimately depends on the traits they manifest to argue that virtue ethics is wrong-headed. His reasoning appears to be like this: either the moral status of traits is based on that of acts or vice versa, unless traits and acts are

⁶⁰Hudson, 197.

"explanatorily unrelated" to each other.⁶¹ But it cannot be that traits and acts are explanatorily unrelated because, for example, "the goodness of honesty [a trait] arises from its containing a disposition to refrain from lying [an act]."⁶² Montague apparently thinks that acts such as those of benevolence and of promise-keeping show that traits are explicable in terms of acts, so that the thesis of virtue ethics is wrong.

If Montague's point was that it is hard to make sense out of traits or of character-as-a-whole unless one has some feeling for the moral quality of specific deeds as well then it would be more persuasive, but virtue ethics does not repudiate such a view in that it does not oppose actions and traits in the way Montague seems to in order for his argument to be compelling. The very notion of an act invokes some conception of one's framework of beliefs and desires--one's character--in that an agent must interpret what he is doing as significant on the basis of some such framework if he is to acknowledge performance of an act at all. Thus, the point of virtue ethics is to bring home that an adequate conception of acts necessitates judgments and assessments about the traits and character of the agent as well. Character is more fundamental in the sense that what appears to an observer to be a bad action may be to some

⁶¹Montague, 56.

⁶²Ibid., 58.

extent redeemed if, for example, it is realized that the agent acted with great reluctance or inadvertently, to a different purpose, as Aristotle argues. Perhaps it makes more sense to say that these considerations lead to a redescription of the act than to claim that here, character or traits have taken some sort of precedence over actions. Aristotle acknowledges that our habits are gradually formed, and can be gradually altered, by the accumulation of actions about which we have some freedom of choice.

By claiming that for moral understanding we should concentrate our attention on a handful of paradigm historical individuals, Harold Alderman (1982) may mean to imply that character-as-a-whole is much more important than is possession of this or that character trait.⁶³ Louden would see this as the most pronounced form of the tendency in defenders of virtue ethics to shift attention away from the act itself. Louden attacks virtue ethics in the Aristotelian tradition as both superficial and conducive to self-deception as a result of this tendency. The more emphasis that is put on character qualities and even on one's moral identity as a whole, the more arbitrarily and uncritically one can interpret any possibly suspect features of one's own particular deeds.⁶⁴ Since the notion of a

⁶³Harold Alderman, "By Virtue of a Virtue," Review of Metaphysics 36 (1982): 127-53.

⁶⁴Louden, 231-4.

morally unsurpassed individual is a central focus of the preceding thesis, the risk of presuming that whatever one does is justified by the assumption that one is a just, courageous, trustworthy, or simply good person seems to be especially relevant.

The risk of self-deception can be emphasized by pointing to the fact that virtuous dispositions have to do with feelings about one's deeds as well as one's choice of deeds. One could easily imagine a strong element of reluctance in reflecting on one's having done something which seems morally suspect when viewed mainly in isolation, as an act. (In other words, one could know that one's act in itself looked bad, and use the claim that this act was done out of character to excuse oneself from blame or moral concern.) Furthermore, if the morally exemplary agents are the sole standards of moral rectitude, does this not presuppose that people with the best characters cannot ever make serious mistakes, indeed experience moral degeneration? It is unclear how such errors or declines could be recognized.

It does seem unwise to privilege one's overall character as something really independent of the whole cluster of one's virtues (or vices), so that Alderman's perspective on virtue ethics is dubiously one-sided. I have maintained in the essay that the relatively good person is to be judged as such on the basis of her extent of

possession of the different moral virtues in comparison with other people, as well, perhaps, as her sense of the unconditional goodness of these virtues in themselves.

With regard to the threat of self-deception, one can readily agree that where self-appraisal is at issue, judgment is perhaps more difficult than it is in the case of estimates of other people whom the judge knows very closely. By understanding humility as accurate self-appraisal, we presuppose that the self-assessment is a realistic one that would match the best possible estimate of the most competent and intimately acquainted fellow agent. It would seem that such self-appraisals are unlikely to develop without a great deal of social guidance and input (including many instances of moral assessment of one by other people). That is, other observers must clearly play a central role in the developing self-appraisal of one's traits and character. If virtue ethics is more prone to agent self-deception than are other kinds of moral framework, then it must put a correspondingly greater emphasis on the interpersonal elaboration of moral understanding and specific moral judgments of persons.

3.14 Self-Absorption

A related criticism we have already raised (in Chapter Two) is that a virtue-based sense of goodness is essentially too concerned about self-image to be entirely admirable as

an approach to ethics."⁵ In striving to be virtuous for its own sake, one is striving to conform to the appearance of goodness, whereas on at least one account of the Christian view, for example, one cannot even find goodness by aiming at it directly.⁶ More sympathetically, Stocker (1976, 1981) contends that a truly virtuous person acts and feels as he does not for the sake of being virtuous, but from what is conventionally called "second nature"--out of the virtue itself⁷--while, of course, possession of a virtue such as friendship entails love of the other's welfare.⁸ Granted, an aspiration for moral nobility might play a dominant role in motivating the person who is not yet properly virtuous to become so. Yet it is unclear why a person who is fully virtuous should not act both out of love of virtue and out of attachment to the concrete goals of his actions, since these harmonize fully for such an agent. Aristotle, for example, portrays allegiance to virtue itself as a powerful motive among the most virtuous, but he never suggests that such an impulse excludes the more down-to-earth desires of the good agent. In contrast to Gaita's

⁵See especially Cordner's paper (Ibid.).

⁶Gaita (Ibid.), Ch. 6.

⁷Michael Stocker, "Values and Purposes: The Limits of Teleology and the Ends of Friendship," Journal of Philosophy 78 (1981): 747-65.

⁸Stocker, "The Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theories," esp. 461-3.

view of Aristotle's place within a so-called "shame-culture," White (Ibid.) sees Aristotle's new achievement as an internalized and relatively autonomous moral sense (as opposed to the prior dependency of one's sense of goodness on an image of such goodness that will find public recognition).⁷⁰ Moral goodness on the Classical, secular understanding does seem qualitatively different from that on the Christian view, but it remains to be seen whether the double motivation can be fairly judged as more superficial.

3.15 Conservatism and Intolerance

Gregory Pence (1984) remarks that MacIntyrean virtue ethics seems premised on societies marked by the most rigidly conservative traditions in that only they are able to resist individual rebellions that could open the door to moral skepticism. "Tolerance is not a virtue in such traditions," Pence says.⁷⁰ Once traditions and practices are questioned, according to MacIntyre's sense of the role of virtue, the virtues themselves will be devitalized and moral skepticism grows.

The Greek example suggests that moral skepticism can be a tendency in the richest and most vital cultures, though it may well be intensified in collapsing ones. Presumably,

⁷⁰White, 249-62.

⁷⁰Gregory Pence, "Recent Work on Virtues." American Philosophical Quarterly 21 (1984): 284.

just as there can be conflicting conceptions of what constitutes a virtue within a given society, there can also be conflicting views of the proper character of the culture's practices, institutions and conventions.

It is unclear whether virtue ethics is more suggestive of conservatism than it is of liberalism. Kymlicka and Norman (1994) observe that there is much new work in liberal theory on the need to promote "virtues of citizenship," which suggests that virtue ethics can be just as sensitive to a need to reform society as it is inclined to emphasize the importance of social traditions as contexts for the practice of virtue.⁷¹ If one understands by liberalism an older conception that chiefly emphasizes individual rights and "negative" liberty, then the criticism (that we need a moral framework that promotes tolerance) can be turned against the classical-liberal opponents of communitarianism themselves: laissez-faire liberalism can promote intolerance by failing to engender mutual understanding among different groups through political dialogue.

3.16 Elitism and Anti-Egalitarianism

⁷¹Will Kymlicka and Wayne Norman, "Return of the Citizen: A Survey of Recent Work on Citizenship Theory," Ethics 104 (1994): 352-81.

MacIntyre (1988) and Richard Taylor (1985)⁷² oppose Cordner on the question of the value of virtue ethics, but all three agree that anti-egalitarianism is a prominent trait in Classical, aretaic thought which puts it at odds with the modernist ethos and its reflection in any moral theory our age can countenance. As MacIntyre puts it, it would be nonsensical from Aristotle's viewpoint to give equal consideration to everyone's beliefs of what his satisfaction consists in, since only the virtuous individual has a correct understanding of the worthwhile.⁷³ Cordner thinks virtue ethics cannot be reformed into an egalitarian theory without abandoning Aristotle's understanding of it altogether. (The anti-egalitarian cast of mind is often illustrated by reference to Aristotle's ethnocentric and sexist attitudes, which contemporary exponents of virtue theory typically, of course, reject.)

My recurrent argument in the thesis that an assumption of universal human equality need not be at odds with recognition that some agents are morally better than others is one reply to this criticism. The principle of meritocracy is enjoying something of a revival in liberal theory because of criticisms of equality of opportunity, the practical obstacles to correcting natural disparities in

⁷²MacIntyre, "Sōphrosunē,"; Richard Taylor, Ethics, Faith and Reason (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1985).

⁷³MacIntyre, "Sōphrosunē," 6.

individuals, and so forth. The notion of a "natural aristocracy" based solely on merit is certainly elitist, but many liberals would deny it is anti-egalitarian. With regard to Aristotle, the most infamous institutional arrangements endorsed by him, such as slavery, imperialism and the non-enfranchisement of women, may help support the overall structure of the state he defends. But there is little reason to believe that these arrangements are required, or that they do not have more palatable substitutes (such as, in the case of slavery, the wise use of technology).

Finally, it is unclear that any extra-aretaic ethical framework does endorse the idea that every individual's preferences are to have equal weight except in a *prima facie* sense. For example, some people may have radically anti-liberal political opinions (such as a preference for dictatorship) but such preferences can be inherently at odds with assumptions implicit to, say, contractarian ethics, and hence in effect these opinions receive no weight at all.

4. Two Key Advantages to Aretaic Ethics

Having offered a partial catalogue of alleged weaknesses in virtue theory, I conclude by drawing brief attention to what seem the most important distinctive benefits this approach to ethics offers. I take these to be

the central role afforded to affect in moral life and, especially relevant to the topic of the thesis, the related capacity of virtue ethics to accommodate the realm of the supererogatory.

There has been in Western philosophy a current of distrust and doubt about the possible role for affect and habit in doing the basic work of morality, a current perhaps best exemplified by Kant. The traditional presumption against the importance of dispositions seems itself to stand in need of support, supposing that one need not choose between reason and emotion or reasoned decisions and a learned capacity to act spontaneously in conformity with such reasoning.

Stocker's two papers (Ibid.) eloquently describe how the immanence of the virtues in the actual structure of one's individual attachments provides for a complementarity between ethics and what one could call pre-theoretical moral experience. "To embody in one's motives the values of current ethical theories is to treat people externally and to preclude love, friendship, affection," he writes, continuing, "In doing something for a loved child or parent, there is no need to appeal to, or even think of, the reasons found in contemporary ethical theories."⁴

The affective and habitual attachment to the good also

463. ⁴Stocker, "The Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theories," 461,

provides a plausible account of commendable conduct that is more demanding upon the agent than is what is minimally required of him by the basic obligations and prohibitions of morality. Urmson (1958) first raised doubts about the adequacy of categorizing all morally relevant behaviour under just three headings (the required, the prohibited, and the permissible) partly on the grounds that the intuitive deep admiration we feel for saintly or heroic behaviour cannot be explained by this tripartite scheme.⁷⁵ By drawing attention to the inner motivations of the agent, a virtue perspective can suggest how an agent is unlikely to lapse into indifference the moment his conduct has fulfilled minimal moral demands. Genuine concern for the good extends into the domain of voluntary measures taken on its behalf; motives, as well as deeds, are praiseworthy and blameworthy. Thus, argues Trianosky, our need sometimes to make excuses for failing to perform supererogatory acts.⁷⁶

Doing away with the assumption that moral concerns essentially relate to obligation helps lend moral significance to all forms of human conduct, including both supererogatory deeds and those that are rather trivial in nature (hence difficult to absolutely prescribe or proscribe) but still socially desirable or undesirable.

⁷⁵J.O. Urmson, "Saints and Heroes," in Essays in Moral Philosophy, ed. A.I. Melden (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1958.)

⁷⁶Trianosky, 27-8.

This is not to say that rights and duties cannot remain within such a broadened moral domain; on the contrary, their presence may add depth to non-obligatory deeds. To the extent that inner dispositions allow for the possibility of conduct that exceeds the minimal demands of the society, virtue ethics also makes room for personal variability in moral standards. Perhaps this can go some way to explaining the contrasts between, for example, Pincoffs' claim "that [a person] demands more of himself than others is not something in itself admirable, but is what is to be expected of him if he is to have a distinct moral character"⁷ and the often-voiced methodological assumption that a coherent moral system should exhibit no more than a symmetry or reciprocity in regard to agents' expectations of others and of themselves.

5. The Relationship of Virtue Ethics To General Moral Philosophy

This issue has already been addressed in one way by earlier reference in the appendix to the relationship of aretaic ethics to the question of the notion of duty and categorical moral obligations. This concluding section makes some broader claims about what the implications of this discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of virtue ethics are for its relevance to moral philosophy as a whole.

⁷Pincoffs, 26.

The forgoing discussion has hopefully indicated the following suppositions of a workable virtue theory. The virtues are partly constitutive of individual and collective human flourishing and partly instrumental to it; virtue is partly sought out of a desire for the natural goods of flourishing rather than only for its own sake. By and large, virtues harmonize moral reason with subjective inclination in the highly moral agent. Living by virtue is compatible with at least implicit notions of moral duty. Flourishing can take many personal and social forms, but anyone who speaks of moral virtues must presuppose that flourishing involves a well-established political and social community. Human flourishing is not attained or sustained as a matter of course, but the alternative is intrinsically bad. Consequently, there is always a need for virtue and the education of virtue. Certain core virtues are universally valued, but the content of them and also the basic identity of many others may be shaped by cultural particulars.

I would suggest that the most important caveat about the limitations of virtue ethics for moral philosophy that our discussion has raised is that it does not seem possible to construct a thoroughgoing account of what moral goodness entails in practice without some well-elaborated conception of the organization of the state and its laws, as well as a reasonably detailed picture of traditions, practices and

institutions (i.e., cultural particulars). Aristotle's attempt to describe justice in detachment from a political theory--if that is a fair characterization of Book V of his Ethics--is notoriously insufficient. Aristotle's Politics, however, attempts to relate his interpretations of the central virtues (and not only of justice) to arguments about good and bad systems of government. One wonders if the complaint that Aristotelian "ethics" mainly deals in bald assertions has lost sight of the Classical presumption of the unity of scientific inquiry.

A more general conclusion that may be suggested by the above catalogue of possible difficulties is that it appears more plausible to regard the ethics of virtue as a perspective that is complementary to those provided by utilitarianism, deontology and contract theory rather than to see them as radically incommensurable alternatives from among which the moral philosopher must choose. Particularly suggestive of this is R.M. Hare's (1981) nuanced version of utilitarianism, which claims that the parental objective of fostering a child's own overall welfare in the myriad unknowns of later life provides a sufficient rationale for inculcation of the moral virtues.⁷⁸ Perhaps there is an implicit concept of eudaimonia in anyone's vague notion of a person's well-being in life and, conversely, an implicit

⁷⁸Richard M. Hare, Moral Thinking: Its Levels, Method and Point (Oxford: Clarendon, 1981), Ch. 11.

notion that it is in the flourishing moral community that suffering and barbarism are least endemic. Similarly, the notion that only moral philosophy of Classical lineage gives a central significance to virtue has recently been rejected by some of those sympathetic to deontology such as Onora O'Neill (1983) and Louden (1986)."

Since the charges against virtue ethics do not seem exceptionally persuasive, even if some of its insights are derivable within other ethical theories, the more unique features of this approach warrant its consideration along with that of the other theories.

"Louden, "Kant's Virtue Ethics," Philosophy 61 (1986): 473-89; Onora O'Neill, "Kant After Virtue," Inquiry 26 (1983): 387-406.

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