

AN ARISTOTELIAN CONCEPTION OF DIGNITY:  
MAGNANIMITY AND THE HAPPY LIFE  
OF THE PHILOSOPHER

by

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## ABSTRACT

The contemporary global conversation concerning human rights is centered around the concept of inherent human dignity. Because we lack an adequate justification for a concept of inherent worth that is capable of transcending national, generational, and religious barriers, however, cross-cultural progress in the realm of human rights is stifled. This paper serves as the initial phase of a project motivated by the desire to provide an in-depth historical analysis of the conceptual development of dignity through philosophical thought in response to the current lack of a justification for human being's inherent possession of dignity.

Providing an interpretation of an Aristotelian conception of dignity, this paper presents a cohesive account constructed through the lens of magnanimity and the most final good in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. Whereas magnanimity has historically received negative attention from philosophers, I herein argue that magnanimity is something more closely related to the most final good in Aristotle's account. Moreover, because dignity as proper consideration of others is necessitated by magnanimity as proper consideration of self, dignity also plays an integral role in Aristotle's ethics. Through making possible the elevated virtue of magnanimity and undergirding the remaining moral virtues, dignity for Aristotle is something both instrumental and valuable.

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## INTRODUCTION

In contemporary conversations concerning the global fight for human rights, dignity has become a buzzword that carries with it both great weight and an air of mystery. The concept of human dignity is used as the basis for humanitarian efforts and the foundational element in such important documents as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states, “Recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice, and peace in the world”—a heavy task for such a single concept.<sup>1</sup>

Despite its binding implications for signatory nations to international conventions and declarations, the buzzword dignity has failed to adequately serve as a compelling foundation for universal human rights. This is largely in effect due to the surrounding conversation’s failure to create an effective cross-cultural conversation concerning dignity. That is, while individuals and communities may be independently convinced on their own of the inherent dignity possessed by all human beings without qualification, their reasons for being so convinced do not guarantee transcendence beyond religious, cultural, or generational barriers.

In an attempt to assist the creation of a cohesive and successful international, intercultural, and interreligious account of dignity, this paper serves as the initial step in a project that involves the historical analysis of the development of the concept of dignity in philosophical and political thought. In order to uncover the inherent nature of dignity, I propose to examine its role and status throughout history by tracing prominent philosopher’s conceptions of dignity.

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<sup>1</sup> “The Universal Declaration of Human Rights”, (1948).

The primary focus of this paper is Aristotle's ethics in particular, I shall argue for a constructive interpretation of his concept of dignity, alongside clarifying tensions arising from translational and interpretational problems related to his notorious conception of magnanimity and *eudaimonia*<sup>2</sup> as the most final end.

Whereas dignity as we conceive of it today is something both descriptive of an individual agent's worth and prescriptive of how we ought to interact with other agents—not unlike Immanuel Kant's idea of treating human beings as ends in themselves and never merely as a means—dignity has historically been a relatively vague concept free of prescriptive force. As I shall show, Aristotle's concept of dignity is different from contemporary conceptions of dignity in morally significant ways. Nevertheless, I argue that dignity plays an integral role in his ethics through its association with magnanimity, the heroic virtue of honor-lovers. Aristotle's account of magnanimity and the magnanimous person as outlined in *Nicomachean Ethics* IV.3 is as contentious as it is complex.

However, prior to investigating the complexities and intricacies present in Aristotle's account of magnanimity and dignity, one must have a proper understanding of the central component of Aristotle's virtue ethics—*eudaimonia*. Understanding the status and role of *eudaimonia* as the most final good will ultimately serve to help us make sense of the magnanimous person's role in society and dignity's role in the virtuous life. I will begin this paper, then, by analyzing his conception of *eudaimonia* and its relation to the moral virtues, particularly magnanimity, before offering an interpretation of an Aristotle's conception of dignity.

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<sup>2</sup> 'Eudaimonia' is standardly translated "happiness", but as we shall see, Aristotle does not mean by "happiness" what we typically mean. For him happiness is not a psychological state, but rather an activity of the soul.

### PROBLEMS ASSOCIATED WITH HAPPINESS

In both the *Eudemian Ethics* (*EE*) and the *Nicomachean Ethics* (*EN*), Aristotle undertakes the task of seeking a systematic answer to the question of “What is the best life?” How he proceeds in answering it has given rise to issues concerning his conception of *eudaimonia* as the highest good, choiceworthy in itself, and not for the sake of anything else.

Although Aristotle states in the *EE* the importance of not confusing “the indispensable conditions of happiness with happiness itself,”<sup>3</sup> when faced with the account of happiness in the *EN*, scholars disagree about whether Aristotle conceived of happiness as an accumulation of first-order goods or as a first-order end that acts as a dominant end. In other words: Is Aristotle offering an inclusivist account of happiness insofar as it includes all the intrinsically valuable goods as parts (i.e. virtues like courage, moderation, wisdom, knowledge, etc.),<sup>4</sup> or a dominant-end view of happiness as distinct from other intrinsically-valued goods? In this paper, I provide an analysis of the two distinctions and argue in favor of a slightly weaker monistic interpretation of *eudaimonia*.

Regardless of whether the dominant-end view or the inclusive view is correct in the end, Aristotle is clearly committed to three conditions (two explicit, one implicit) for an ultimate end in *EN* I.2: (1) it be desired for its own sake, (2) that every desire is desired for the sake of it, and (3) it is not desired for the sake of anything else.<sup>5</sup> This ultimate end is the highest good and from this, he argues that *eudaimonia* is the highest

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<sup>3</sup> *EE*, 1214b24-26

<sup>4</sup> Aristotle divides the virtues into two groups: (a) intellectual virtues that are acquired through learning, and (b) moral virtues acquired through habit.

<sup>5</sup> Cooper (1986), 90.

good. The tension arises from Aristotle's puzzling account of the nature of *eudaimonia* and its relation to other goods or ends.

The inclusive view casts *eudaimonia* as "a list of first-order ends taken together with ordering principles" that guide the process leading to those ends, and "an assignment of weights to first order ends."<sup>6</sup> While this interpretation allows different activities and interests that lead or contribute to happiness to have more than instrumental value towards *eudaimonia*, it also suggests that *eudaimonia* would not have any character "over and above the individual constituent ends."<sup>7</sup> Still, the view of the ultimate end as a single, comprehensive end is appealing at the very least for its ability to reconcile Aristotle's conception of the virtues as ends in themselves and not *merely* as means to other ends.

The dominant-end view casts *eudaimonia* as "a maximum of some one concrete good [that] is achieved and everything else pursued is pursued as a means to attaining this dominant end."<sup>8</sup> All desire chains terminate in such an end that is over and above other ends. This view appears to be problematic, however, because to suggest that all things leading to the ultimate end derive their value solely from that end requires that moral virtues and virtues of thought be reduced to instrumental goods in the pursuit of *eudaimonia*. As Gabriel Richardson Lear states, "a means does not simply have less value than the end (1094a5-6); it has *no* value outside the context of aiming at this end."<sup>9</sup>

The dominant-end view, then, appears to be at odds with Aristotle's lengthy discussion of the virtues as things worth pursuing in and of themselves<sup>10</sup>, and motivates a certain skepticism about the supposed worthwhile pursuit of virtue. Moreover, if we

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<sup>6</sup> Cooper (1986), 97.

<sup>7</sup> Lear (2004), 393.

<sup>8</sup> Cooper (1986), 98.

<sup>9</sup> Lear (2004), 39.

<sup>10</sup> See *EN* 1096b15-30.

interpret happiness as a dominant-end, Aristotle's assumption "that all our chains of ends converge on a single good" is more improbable than if we were to suppose the ultimate end were inclusive and furthermore seems to commit him to a well-known quantificational fallacy:<sup>11</sup> simply because all chains of desire must come to cessation in some end "does not imply that there is just one ultimate goal where all desire rests."<sup>12</sup> However, if he does not treat *eudaimonia* as a single end, then he returns to his problem of the multiple existing views regarding what the final end is.<sup>13</sup>

In light of these inconsistencies, most scholars have historically sided with the inclusive view and agree that it does seem as though the ultimate good would be supreme only if it supports "the goodness of every one of the specific ends."<sup>14</sup> However, it seems the goodness of these ends can only be upheld under the inclusive understanding of *eudaimonia*.

### ANALYSIS OF LEAR

Lear argues for an account of *eudaimonia* as a monistic, dominant-end that avoids many of the interpretational concerns associated with the dominant-end view. Lear interprets Aristotle's with an eye to his theory of causality and a fully refined account of *teleion*. She rejects the inclusivist reading of *EN* based upon an investigation of the two main criteria Aristotle explicates for a thing's being *the* final human good, namely that it be (a) self-sufficient and (b) the most final end.

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<sup>10</sup> The fallacy takes the same form as this one: inferring from the fact that everyone has a mother, that there is a mother of all of us.

<sup>12</sup> Lear (2004), 392.

<sup>13</sup> Shields (2007), among others, suggests that perhaps happiness as morally virtuous activity is a sort of the inclusive view, while happiness as contemplation is the dominant-end, first-order end, and thus more final and good.

<sup>14</sup> Broadie (1991), 11.

### *The Finality Criterion*

Given Aristotle's account of (a) the *telos* of natural things presented in his biological works, and (b) of natural human functionality, something exists as an end if it "sets the standard for the process leading to it" and "guides the appropriate pursuit of the things leading to it and is their source of value."<sup>15</sup> As suggested earlier, the problem arises when goods, such as moral virtues, are presented as both choiceworthy for their own sake and for the sake of the highest good (ulterior *telos*). Lear suggests that the type of *telos* Aristotle proposes *eudaimonia* to be is one that acts as a continuous realization and achievement of a person's fulfillment of his or her natural capacity.<sup>16</sup> Whereas the *telos* of a process (*kinesis*) is understood in terms of cessation, the *telos* of an activity (i.e. *eudaimonia*) connotes achievement of capacity without cessation of the activity.<sup>17</sup>

Thus, while the moral virtues may be seen as states that result from the process of habit-forming actions or education, *eudaimonia* is viewed as a person's continuous active *realizing* and *achieving* of these states. This distinction entails three types of ends:

- (1) Those choiceworthy in and of themselves.
- (2) Those choiceworthy for the sake of something else, *and*
- (3) Those choiceworthy in and of themselves *and* for the sake of some higher end.

If *eudaimonia* as a monistic *telos* is virtuous activity, then virtuous states can be choiceworthy for themselves insofar as they obtain and guide results from the processes leading to them, but can also be choiceworthy for the sake of a higher end *if* that end is an activity and not also a resulting state. From this, Lear argues that given that *eudaimonia*

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<sup>15</sup> Lear (2004), 9.

<sup>16</sup> Lear (2004), 11-12.

<sup>17</sup> Lear (2004), 12.

is an activity, the finality of this good does not necessarily restrict virtuous states as instrumental goods. If this is true, it becomes less problematic to suppose that *eudaimonia* exists as a dominant-end that guides the process leading to it and provides further value for middle-level ends.

By avoiding a traditional objection to a monistic interpretation, Lear's interpretation differs from the standard dominant-end view insofar as she poses the difference between the *telos* of virtuous states and the active *eudaimonia* as a difference of kind, not of degree. As opposed to simply suggesting that *eudaimonia* is the highest good because it is most *final* chronologically or hierarchically, she argues that the distinctive *telos* of an activity sets *eudaimonia* apart as the highest, most final good.

Although happiness is more closely related to virtuous states here than in the standard dominant-end view, Lear also avoids commitment to inclusivist interpretations by pointing to a distinction between the *telos* of states and activities. Happiness is not a comprehensive collection of the moral virtues, but rather an activity expressing those moral virtues sought for their own sake, and now, for the sake of contemplation as well. The finality criterion specifies the relationship between happiness and its subordinate goal-directed goods.

### **The Self-Sufficiency Criterion**

The criterion that *eudaimonia* be self-sufficient persuades most scholars to adopt an inclusivist interpretation of *eudaimonia* because it seems intuitive that what makes a life complete and lacking nothing, *by itself*, could not do so unless it possessed all the goods that we ascribe to making a life choiceworthy. Lear, on the other hand, suggests a

slightly weaker reading of the self-sufficiency criterion that requires only that *eudaimonia* be “the final end of a life that lacks nothing essential to its desirability.”<sup>18</sup> This reduces the strain of the self-sufficiency criterion and allows Lear to establish *eudaimonia* as a dominant end that doesn’t necessarily need to intrinsically possess all that is considered to make a life lacking nothing.

Ultimately, Lear argues, problems associated with the self-sufficiency criterion as requiring an inclusivist interpretation are irrelevant in light of Aristotle’s original question of what the guiding principle of a choiceworthy life is, not what constitutes a choiceworthy life.<sup>19</sup> Happiness, then, makes a life good by “being its organizing principle” rather than by providing all the constituents of what we perceive to be the good life. Lear suggests:

When Aristotle says the human good is self-sufficient, he means that when a person treats that good as his most final end he develops a network of decisions, actions, and projects undertaken for its sake which, taken as a whole, is worth choosing.<sup>20</sup>

For Lear, making a life choiceworthy consists in making sense of all that is reasonably pursued.

The most final end will be self-sufficient insofar as it makes a life choiceworthy in itself—that is to say it *causes* a life to be choiceworthy. In order to clarify Aristotle’s understanding of the self-sufficiency criterion, Lear cites an insight that Plato expresses in the *Philebus*. In the *Philebus*, Socrates describes an organizing principle as something

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<sup>18</sup> Lear (2004), 69.

<sup>19</sup> Lear (2004), 51.

<sup>20</sup> Lear (2004), 52.

that acts as what we would call an Aristotelian efficient cause.<sup>21</sup> Aristotle, on the other hand, conceives of this organizing principle as a final cause—an idea represented in his account of biological growth and development. A final cause *causes* something insofar as it is the sake for which it exists; a human’s final cause is that at which humans aim, being a rational animal, and it has already been shown how human beings aim at happiness. Aristotle accepts Plato’s requirement that the good be self-sufficient as presented in the *Philebus*, but rejects Plato’s idea that the final good is something not humanly achievable.<sup>22</sup>

Lear holds that because we, like Socrates, intuitively conceive of causal relations along the lines of efficient causality, we do not immediately recognize an organizing principle as a cause.<sup>23</sup> Lear rejects the notion that efficient causality is how we ought to conceive of *eudaimonia* before showing how it is possible that an organizing principle *causes* a life to be choiceworthy by setting the standard for and guiding the process leading to a choiceworthy life.<sup>24</sup> In so doing, she is able to avoid yet another common objection to the monistic interpretation. The discussion of the *Philebus* in relation to Aristotle’s ethics demonstrates where Aristotle parts ways with Platonic thought because Aristotle thinks that “*the* good is one of the humanly achievable monistic goods,” and not something transcendent of human goods.<sup>25</sup> Aristotle is thus turning away from the Platonic idea that *the* good is unachievable for human beings while also espousing the idea that the same good is not something transcendent of other intrinsic goods.

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<sup>21</sup> *Philebus*, 27b1-30e1.

<sup>22</sup> Lear (2004), 9.

<sup>23</sup> Aristotle thinks of “cause” (*aitia*) along the lines of an explanation of why a thing is the way it is.

<sup>24</sup> Lear (2004), 9.

<sup>25</sup> Lear (2004), 53.

After establishing the coherency of a monistic good as being self-sufficient, Lear addresses the idea that self-sufficiency also requires a life lacking nothing of value. She denies the popular idea that *eudaimonia* provides the security that valuable goods *will* be introduced into the happy life and that *eudaimonia* entails good fortune. Again, Lear adopts a weaker view of the requirement that self-sufficiency makes a life lacking in nothing, and claims that Aristotle conceives of a choiceworthy life as lacking nothing for being happy (as opposed to lacking nothing desirable).<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, she argues that the highest good “must make sense of and order our concern for the happiness of our loved ones and our desire to seek happiness in common with them.”<sup>27</sup> Lear argues that the problem with the monistic interpretation is that the superiority of *eudaimonia* is not absolute and that the self-sufficiency only supplies the happy person with a practical confidence that amounts to nothing more than knowing that the good is that which orders a good life.

While there are further distinctions to be made and more tensions to address concerning Aristotle’s conception of *eudaimonia*, it is important to have first assessed the differences in interpretation concerning what type of end the ultimate good is, what type of relation it bears to its constituents, and how it makes a life choiceworthy. However, what has proven to be most vexing is the tension that arises from Aristotle’s conception of happiness (*eudaimonia*) as morally excellent activity in the practical context of daily life in the *polis* and the extended account of happiness as theoretical contemplation.<sup>28</sup>

Lear provides a clear account of *eudaimonia* as a monistic, dominant-end that is separate

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<sup>26</sup> Lear (2004), 62.

<sup>27</sup> Lear (2004), 63.

<sup>28</sup> Broadie (1991), 47, suggests that the two conceptions illustrate distinct activities- morally virtuous activity as an activity *of* (Distinction 2) and the logically superior activity of theoretical contemplation towards happiness (Distinction 1). Still, Distinction 1 is ethically superior and thus more of interest to us.

from, but closely related to morally virtuous states. Her monistic interpretation overcomes many of the traditional objections to dominant-end views and maintains the intrinsic value of the first-order goods while also upholding Aristotle's two criterion for the highest good. In so doing, she has also alleviated the tension between *EN* I and X.

### **HAPPINESS AS A PART OF THE BIGGER PICTURE**

Lear's interpretation avoids giving up the finality and self-sufficiency of the final end and the intrinsic value of the moral virtues will ultimately allow me to address, in a new light, Aristotle's controversial conception of magnanimity as presented in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. By arguing that happiness is the continuous "realizing" of and achieving the states of moral virtues, Lear has provided an account of *eudaimonia* that is more closely related to the moral virtues than the *eudaimonia* of the traditional "dominant-end" interpretation.

Aristotle's lengthy and divisive discussion of magnanimity as a moral virtue in *EN* presents magnanimity as something perhaps more closely related to *eudaimonia* than the other virtues. At the end of the so-called function argument in *EN* I.7, Aristotle concludes,

Therefore, the human good turns out to be the soul's activity that expresses true virtue. And if there are more virtues than one, the good will express the best and most complete virtue. Moreover it will be in a complete life.<sup>29</sup>

Is Aristotle suggesting that there *is*, in fact, a most final virtue that is more closely related to happiness? If so, could it be the case that magnanimity is this most final virtue?

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<sup>29</sup> *NE*, 1098b17-19.

I argue that Aristotle's presentation of magnanimity shows that magnanimity is more closely tied to happiness than the other moral virtues. Whereas moral virtues such as temperance, courage, and friendliness are states that can be achieved *at a distinct moment* in a person's life, magnanimity seems to require *a complete life* in order to be fully realized. Happiness, then, is the activity of a magnanimous person over her complete life.

Two features of magnanimity distinguish it as something more closely related to *eudaimonia*. First, Aristotle describes magnanimity as the "adornment [or 'beautiful ordering'] (*kosmos*) of the virtues,"<sup>30</sup> a qualification that uniquely positions magnanimity among the other moral virtues. Second, Aristotle thinks that the magnanimous person is always concerned with the truth. The magnanimous person, then, knows that he is worthy of honor precisely because of this concern with and possession of the truth. Before turning to magnanimity as the adornment of the virtues, I argue that such a possession of knowledge seemingly requires an extra degree of intellectual commitment that others, exclusively concerned with practical matters, fail to make. Aristotle's descriptions of the magnanimous person in Book IV of the *Ethics* and the person of contemplation in *Ethics X* and the *Metaphysics I* provide evidence that he conceived of the magnanimous person more along the lines of being both a person of practical wisdom as well as a leisurely person of contemplation having a primary claim to happiness.

I argue that Aristotle's remarks in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Metaphysics* about the magnanimous life and the philosophical life suggest that living magnanimously is also sufficient for living philosophically as a person of contemplation. Aristotle claims in *Metaphysics I 2* that the wise person must give orders, not take them, and those who are

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<sup>30</sup> *NE*, 1124a1-1124a5.

less wise must follow their orders, not he theirs (982a17-21). Given magnanimity's status as the adornment of the virtues and the magnanimous person's concern for the truth, and knowing that he has the truth, there is a case to be made that the magnanimous life could only be satisfied by the philosopher, and not, say, the politician.

This conception of magnanimity has implications for Aristotle's conception of happiness in the *Ethics* that Lear has not fully considered. I present magnanimity as something beyond the ordinary moral virtues to show the consistency of Aristotle's description of the magnanimous person with his description of the philosopher. I then show how this conception of magnanimity helps alleviate the tension between the two "apparently" conflicting conceptions of *eudaimonia* in the *Ethics*.

Moreover, because magnanimity pertains to both one's honor and consideration of one's self worth in relation to others, I think dignity (*semnotês*) as consideration of others is not only implicitly contained within, but also a necessary component of magnanimity, and thus *eudaimonia*. By more closely relating happiness and magnanimity, not only do I hope to alleviate the tension between the two "apparently" conflicting conceptions of *eudaimonia* in the *Ethics*, but also to later on elicit any vague sense of dignity from Aristotle's works.

### **THE LIFE OF THE MAGNANIMOUS PERSON**

In *NE*, Aristotle claims that the magnanimous person justifiably thinks less of others, rarely faces dangers, honors few things, is unreceptive of "charity," loves to be reminded of the good he performs, displays superiority only in the presence of those

deemed competitive, is largely inactive, and finds nothing astonishing.<sup>31</sup> On the other hand, the magnanimous person is concerned with the truth and lives a life of leisure with fine and unproductive possessions.<sup>32</sup>

Although many have found the described character of Aristotle's magnanimous person to be "utterly repellent,"<sup>33</sup> R.A. Gauthier has suggested that the life of the magnanimous person is the life of the philosopher and that the description even "evokes Socrates."<sup>34</sup> Both Socrates and the magnanimous man reject the idea that life is worth saving at any cost (*Apology* 38a), both are brave, and both *speak the truth*.

While Lear finds this characterization to be an overinterpretation, she posits that if Gauthier's claim turns out to be correct, then "the philosopher living for the sake of theoretical contemplation is also the most glorious in his practical wisdom."<sup>35</sup> Ultimately, she concludes that although the truthfulness of the magnanimous person's actions is indeed important, "his greatness of soul is expressed in his pursuit of honors and in his assessment of his *practical* performance" and not purely in philosophical contemplation.<sup>36</sup> Lear later claims, however, that the excellent activity (of magnanimity) is fine because (1) it shows the individual finding happiness in leisure, spent in philosophical conversation, rather than in conventional busyness and (2) it displays the individual's understanding that the truthfulness he loves can be found in practical excellence.<sup>37</sup>

But, Lear's interpretation seems even stronger than this. For example, she claims,

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<sup>31</sup> *NE* 1124a30-1125a15.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> MacIntyre, 78-80.

<sup>34</sup> Lear (2004), 170.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

[A]lthough anyone who spends his time in leisure needs greatness of soul, it is particularly important for the philosopher, since the philosopher's preferred use of leisure is entirely unconcerned with human beings and human affairs.<sup>38</sup>

However, the particular importance of leisure for the philosopher suggests that the leisurely life associated with discovering truth is necessary for the philosopher. Since the magnanimous person's life is characterized by concern for the truth and outwardly exhibits leisurely activity, this would seem to suggest that magnanimity is necessary for the philosopher. According to Lear, the philosopher's preferred use of leisure is that which is unconcerned with human affairs.

Though perhaps this is too strong a reading. Consider what Aristotle says about the person of contemplation in *Metaphysics* I. He explicitly states,

But someone who is studying needs none of these [external] goods, relative to (*pros*) that activity: indeed relative to (*pros*) study, we might say they are even hindrances. But insofar as he is human and [therefore] lives together with a number of human beings, he chooses to do the actions expressing virtue. So, he will need the sorts of external goods [that are needed for the virtues], for living a human life.<sup>39</sup>

Even in the case of the "more divine" philosopher, Aristotle does not go as far as to deny the fact that humans are essentially social beings. Here, Aristotle's point is that *relative to* the life of study or contemplation, such a person need not bother with expressing virtue or acquiring external goods. But this does *not* entail that such a person need not bother with or lacks total concern for virtue or external goods. Only *relative to* the activity of

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<sup>38</sup> Lear (2004), 174.

<sup>39</sup> *Metaphysics* 1178b3-7.

contemplation does the philosopher need not worry about them. In other words, Aristotle's claims do not specifically entail that the person of contemplation prefers to contemplate. Rather, the person of study is first and foremost a human, and humans are social beings concerned with practical matters. But, in the case of the philosopher *in the act of contemplating*, other human beings or external goods play no direct role in the activity of contemplation. This is not to say, however, that they play no role at all in the life of the philosopher.

In addition to the consistency of the magnanimous person's lifestyle with that of philosopher's that Lear considers in her discussion of magnanimity, some of the perceived negative qualities of the magnanimous person seem to be characteristics fit for philosophers as described in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. For example, Aristotle explains that philosophy is not productive because it is for the sake of escaping ignorance (i.e. gaining knowledge) and nothing further.<sup>40</sup> Thus, his claim in *EN* that the magnanimous person possesses things that are fine yet not productive suggests that the magnanimous person possesses knowledge above and beyond practical wisdom.<sup>41</sup>

He additionally asserts that philosophy is the most honorable science.<sup>42</sup> If philosophy is the most honorable science and it is the science concerned with knowledge and truthfulness, then the philosopher arguably possesses knowledge of this worthiness of honor. Moreover, Aristotle holds that philosophy has a superior claim to wisdom than the other sciences, and as such philosophers "must give orders, not take them."<sup>43</sup> This helps makes sense of Aristotle's claims in *NE* that the magnanimous person is "justified when

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<sup>40</sup> *Metaphysics* 982b11-22.

<sup>41</sup> *NE* 1125a10-15.

<sup>42</sup> *Metaphysics*, 983a4.

<sup>43</sup> *Metaphysics* 982a16-21.

he thinks less of others since his beliefs are true” and that the magnanimous person behaves in proper accordance with his superiority.<sup>44</sup>

If we take the magnanimous person to be the philosopher, then he is justified in his thinking less of others because it stems from his true belief about his superiority. If we take the philosopher to be the magnanimous person, then he would be concerned with truth, have correct knowledge about his own worthiness of honor, and demand the honor or self-respect that he is entitled to based upon his knowledge.

Thus, perhaps Gauthier’s claim that the philosopher living for the sake of theoretical contemplation is also the magnanimous person is not as implausible as Lear posits, though this need not necessarily mean that Aristotle has Socrates specifically in mind. The magnanimous person could very well be the philosopher as Aristotle conceives him or her, and not be confined to the person of Socrates. Indeed, Aristotle makes the claim in *EE* that, “One who describes himself as he actually is, is a candid person and, in Homer’s expression, solid: altogether, he is a lover of truth (*φιλαληθης*) while the other is a lover of falsehood.”<sup>45</sup>

While the magnanimous person may satisfy the life of the philosopher, it is important to keep in mind that it is not entirely satisfied by other roles such as that of the politician. Aristotle states in the *Metaphysics* that “[I]f those who are concerned with action also investigate how things are, they do not study the cause in its own right but only the cause relative to this [end] and for this occasion.”<sup>46</sup> Thus, while an individual of practical wisdom, say, the best politician, could be good and wise in a practical sense, they do not possess theoretical knowledge or understanding that would be most worthy of

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<sup>44</sup> *NE* 1125a

<sup>45</sup> *EE* 1234a3

<sup>46</sup> *Metaphysics* 993b19-23.

honor because he or she does not have the leisure nor perhaps the interest in this more abstract knowledge. A philosopher will pursue the activity of contemplation, which is aimed at theoretical knowledge and understanding.

### MAGNANIMITY AS ORDERING OF THE VIRTUES

In addition to the striking parallels between the life of the philosopher and the life of the magnanimous person that indicate an elevated status of magnanimity in the *Ethics*, Aristotle's general discussion of magnanimity similarly points toward magnanimity occupying special space in the virtuous life. That is, despite including his discussion of magnanimity within the larger conversation concerning the individual moral virtues, Aristotle seems to present magnanimity as something much larger and different than the ordinary moral virtues such as courage, temperance, friendliness, etc. In fact, he explicitly states in Book VI,

Magnanimity, then, would seem to be a sort of adornment of the virtues; for it makes them greater, and it does not arise without them. That is why it is difficult to be truly magnanimous, since it is not possible without being fine and good.<sup>47</sup>

Beyond claiming that magnanimity is an “adornment” or “beautiful ordering” (*κόσμος*) of the virtues,<sup>48</sup> Aristotle makes the further claim that magnanimity makes (*ποιεῖ*) the virtues

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<sup>47</sup> *NE*, 1124a1-1124a5.

<sup>48</sup> *Aristotle and the Virtues*, Curzer considers Aristotle's conception of *megalopsuchia*, points out its failures, and suggests a new method of reconciling greatness and the intermediary by redefining *megalopsuchia*. Importantly, rather than taking honor to be the core of *megalopsuchia*, Curzer presents greatness, self-knowledge, and self-sufficiency as the core components. He argues “good fortunes such as honor are mainly used by Aristotle as vehicles to describe other aspects of *megalopsuchia*.”<sup>48</sup> Because *megalopsuchia* “consists partially in the greatness of other virtues” and the doctrine of the mean requires the whole virtue to be medial, Curzer concludes that it is a “different *kind* of character trait than the other virtues” and doesn't square well with the doctrine of the mean.<sup>48</sup>

Furthermore, he suggests that Aristotle unintentionally “goes beyond” the two conceptions of *megalopsuchia* when trying to describe it as both a mean between vanity and humility and greatness of

greater. Thus, magnanimity as “a beautiful ordering of the virtues” and as an end that is desirable for itself acts as both the guiding principle of the moral virtues, insofar as the practical wisdom of magnanimity leads them to a beautiful ordering, and as a source of value for the moral virtues, insofar as it makes them greater. In this way, one can conceive of magnanimity as an end of the moral virtues. In the same way that “health is a *telos* because it is the benefit to be achieved by walking” and as such affects the manner of walking<sup>49</sup>, magnanimity is a *telos* because it (being worthy of honor) is the benefit to be achieved by being morally virtuous. Directly before claiming that magnanimity seems to be “a type of adornment of the virtues,” Aristotle states that “honor is the prize of virtue.”<sup>50</sup> Magnanimity, then, can be said to be the benefit to be achieved by being courageous, moderate, truthful, etc., as well as that which guides the habit forming behaviors leading to the morally virtuous states.

Moreover, whereas the ordinary moral virtues are intermediary states that can be expressed at any given moment (assuming that the individual takes the right course of action and has the right attitude towards his behavior), magnanimity appears to be the excellence of the soul conceived over time. Interestingly, without the virtues, and without a human’s being fine and good, magnanimity would not be possible. Although it seems as though complete virtue and being fine and good are necessary conditions for

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virtue (though interestingly, he does not say where Aristotle goes).<sup>48</sup> Curzer proposes that Aristotle redefine *megalopsychia* as greatness of virtue alone, and abandon his conception of *megalopsychia* as a moral virtue pertaining to honor.

Although this may appear helpful, ultimately Curzer’s conception of magnanimity fails to synthesize the entire discussion of *megalopsychia* by simply “abandoning” original conditions of the definition that were central to Aristotle’s presented conception. Still, though, it seems as though *megalopsychia* must, in some way, deal with the mind or soul beyond being general greatness of virtue. It is evident that Aristotle put much thought to what this greatness consisted in, and simplifying *megalopsychia* to merely greatness of virtue, does not quite grasp the entirety of Aristotle’s conception of magnanimity. Additionally, there is no positive discussion in the *EN* that shows where *megalopsychia* would be located in relation to the virtues (of character or thought) or *eudaimonia*.

<sup>49</sup> Lear (2004), 12.

<sup>50</sup> *NE*, 1123b33-1124a5.

magnanimity, nowhere does Aristotle say that these are both necessary and sufficient. Thus, while it may be the case that magnanimity requires all of the virtues, simply possessing the virtues does not fully explain what it is to be magnanimous—there remains a sense in which magnanimity is something beyond the mere possession of the moral virtues. For example, one characteristic of being magnanimous is to bear “many severe misfortunes with good temper.”<sup>51</sup> This suggests that magnanimity is something that is conceived over time, taking into account all of the life experiences and morally virtuous activity of an individual’s life. Consequently, magnanimity is cast as something beyond the possession of the virtues.

### STATUS OF MAGNANIMITY

Given that magnanimity seems to be beyond the ordinary moral virtues and is consequently more closely related to *eudaimonia*, *eudaimonia* is the active *telos* of the magnanimous person’s life insofar as it is the final good of that person’s life. The philosopher, maintaining a primary claim on *eudaimonia* as a monistic end of theoretical contemplation (as presented in Book X of *NE*), would also be the magnanimous person, most perfect in excellent activity of the soul, who has a superior claim to happiness than that of the *merely* morally virtuous individual making a secondary claim to happiness as morally virtuous activity rather than theoretical contemplation.

Reading Aristotle’s discussion of magnanimity and his description of the magnanimous person’s character in light of his views presented in the *Metaphysics*, alongside reading Aristotle’s conception of *eudaimonia* as a weaker monistic end (as Lear suggests), allow for a more charitable reading of Aristotle’s “honoring” of

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<sup>51</sup> *NE* 100b30-33.

magnanimity. As the characteristic of a person's life that gives value and guidance to the moral virtues, as well as leads an individual to "the wonders" of theoretical contemplation, and thus closer to the highest good, *eudaimonia*, magnanimity is not only worthy of honor, but is the *most* worthy of honor.

### MAGNANIMITY IN RELATION TO HONORS AND FORTUNE

Having now established magnanimity as a higher-order virtue, it will now be crucial to unpack the composition of magnanimity as espoused by Aristotle in *NE* IV.3 then in turn understand the role of dignity. The difficulty in this endeavor arises from the fact that 'magnanimity' admits of more than one definition—Aristotle acknowledges as much in the *Posterior Analytics*.<sup>52</sup> He explains that in order to discover the essence of magnanimity it is necessary to "take these two things and inquire what both indifference to fortune and not brooking dishonor have that is the same."<sup>53</sup> If the inquiry reveals no likeness, then "there will be two sorts of magnanimity."<sup>54</sup>

Magnanimity is a self-regarding virtue for Aristotle, and apart from being the adornment of the virtues, it is initially defined as the mean between the excesses of vanity and pusillanimity as they pertain to honor and dishonor. It is a *self*-regarding virtue insofar as it is not concerned with honor generally, but with one's own possession of and means of acquiring and responding to honor. That is, to be a magnanimous person, or to have "greatness of soul", an individual must properly understand what he is worthy of and must have the right attitude to his deserved honor. It is a prerequisite that the

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<sup>52</sup> Hanley, 2.

<sup>53</sup> *Posterior Analytics*, 97b16-24.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

magnanimous person already possess and “be great in” each of the other moral virtues, as suggested by magnanimity’s role as the “beautiful ordering of the virtues.”<sup>55</sup>

Terence Irwin envisions magnanimity manifesting itself in multiple ways, namely:

- (1) How and for what a person honors and esteems himself;
- (2) What he expects others to honor him for
- (3) Which other people he honors and for what, and
- (4) Which other people he wants to honor him.<sup>56</sup>

But to limit the concern of magnanimity to honor is to ignore Aristotle’s subsequent lengthy discussion of magnanimity with regards to fortune. That is, both the magnanimous person’s orientations towards honor and fortune are vital in assessing what exactly magnanimity consists in.

Because Aristotle conceives of being worthy as being deserving of great things and external goods, we must also consider the magnanimous person’s disposition towards the fortune resulting from his greatness. Aristotle turns away from his primary concentration on the role of honor in his conception of magnanimity,

As we have said, then, the magnanimous person is concerned especially with honors. Still, he will also have a moderate attitude to riches and power and every sort of good and bad fortune, however it turns out. He will be neither excessively pleased by good fortune nor excessively distressed by ill-fortune, since he does not even regard honor as the greatest good.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> *NE*, 1123b30

<sup>56</sup> Irwin, *NE*, Second Edition, 56.

<sup>57</sup> *NE*,

Transitioning his account of magnanimity from pure disposition towards honor and dishonor to a conglomerate of attitudes towards honor, fortunes, and others, Aristotle highlights the role of external pleasures and pains. Ryan Patrick Hanley argues that “moderation with respect to external pleasures and pains is perhaps the central distinction between the magnanimous and the vain,” insofar as the magnanimous person responds to good or bad fortune gracefully and without suffering.<sup>58</sup> Their greatness surpasses preoccupation with honor and fortune and necessitates goodness. Thus, Aristotle’s magnanimous person, far from being the self-absorbed Greek hero typically associated with magnanimity, is a unique individual characterized by both extreme greatness and moral goodness—conferring upon him honor and nobility respectively.

Interestingly, the mean in which Aristotle attempts to locate magnanimity is not quantifiable in the same way that the other means such as courage, temperance, magnificence, and liberality are—any sense of “amount” is irrelevant to magnanimity as a mean. What makes magnanimity a mean between two states is not the number of claims to honor made, but rather the justification behind each claim made. Aristotle posits, “The magnanimous person, then, is at the extreme insofar as he makes great claims. But insofar as he makes them rightly, he is intermediate.”<sup>59</sup> Thus, it is the individual’s knowledge of, and not merely his behavior towards, his honor that results in his greatness of soul. What makes the claims “right” is that the knowledge of his worth is based upon having a justified belief about his worth and deserts that is true independent of his thinking they deserve honor. The vain person has no justification and is unable to

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<sup>58</sup> Hanley, 12.

<sup>59</sup> *NE*, Book IV, Chapter 3, Section 8, Line 1

demonstrate his worthiness of honor, while the pusillanimous person lacks belief about his worth.

### SELF-CONSIDERATION AND MODERATION

The driving element behind Aristotle's conception of magnanimity is this enlightened consideration of self that makes possible the greatness of soul. Having been previously highlighted numerous times, it is in possessing true understanding of one's own greatness in relation to others that distinguishes the magnanimous person. It is not merely their being great and good which is of concern to us, but also their ability to accurately understand their greatness and goodness in a way that escapes the extremes of vanity and pusillanimity. Aside from this epistemic condition, however, there lies another central distinction between the magnanimous person and, say, the vain person. Hanley argues that this distinction pertains to the magnanimous person's moderation with respect to external pleasures and pains.<sup>60</sup> The cognitive mechanisms that allow for true knowledge of one's own greatness, together with the reliance on others required by moderation in external pleasures and pains, require an explanation of how other individuals in the community factor into a magnanimous person's life. Indeed, Aristotle admits as much, "As we have said, then, the magnanimous person is concerned especially with honors. Still, he will also have a moderate attitude to riches and power and every sort of good and bad fortune, however it turns out."<sup>61</sup>

In his introduction to his account of the highest good, Aristotle provides a brief consideration of honor that contains important implications for magnanimity as the moral

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<sup>60</sup> Hanley, 12.

<sup>61</sup> *NE* 1124a15

virtue pertaining to honor. He states, “For it [honor] seems to depend more on those who honor than on the one honoured.”<sup>62</sup> It appears evident without argument to Aristotle that the magnanimous person is primarily concerned with honor. Thus, a great paradox arises in the case of the self-sufficient magnanimous individual. Whereas the great-souled man is surely self-sufficient insofar as he can lead a happy life of leisure, he also knows better than most that the honor he possesses depends on those who confer it. Hanley takes this to mean that to cherish this honor is to depend on others for one’s happiness.<sup>63</sup> Succinctly put, the tragedy of the magnanimous man is:

The thing he appears most to want, self-sufficiency, cannot be attained in the city, yet that for which he is best known, his greatness, cannot be discovered outside it.

These two contrasting aspirations might seem to doom him to being unable to live either within or without the city, with or without others.<sup>64</sup>

Although the magnanimous person’s life may be well suited for the life of the philosopher, it cannot escape the need for others demanded by honor.

If we consider this further, we will see that each of these two criterion of magnanimity—the self sufficiency of a magnanimous individual, as well as the epistemic requirement that their belief about their worth is indeed correct—require an additional explanation independent of the magnanimous person. These additional problems arising from the more charitable reading of Aristotle’s presentation of magnanimity, it is also the case that these gaps in explanation bring about the previously unconsidered need for consideration of others in the broader context of the magnanimous person’s society.

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<sup>62</sup> *NE* 1095b23

<sup>63</sup> Hanley, 13.

<sup>64</sup> Hanley, 14.

### DIGNITY AS CONSIDERATION OF OTHERS

The proper consideration of others necessary for the possibility of the magnanimous person's being self-sufficient and accurate in his self-conception is what Aristotle refers to as "*semnotês*". In the *EE*, Aristotle includes a discussion of qualities of character that mirror the moral virtues championed in *EN VI*, yet differ in morally relevant ways. Specifically, whereas the moral virtues are said to be states consisting in a mean between excessive or deficient expressions of emotions or desires or attitudes, these qualities of character pertain to emotions specifically. They are capable of being praiseworthy and blameworthy as well as being excessive or deficient, yet they do not occur as states because they are thought to occur naturally.<sup>65</sup> Consequently, Aristotle thinks they contribute to the virtues.

Dignity in particular consists in a mean between the excess of churlishness and the deficiency of servility. Thus, a "person of dignity defers in some matters but not in others, and only to those who are worthy of regard."<sup>66</sup> To be a person of dignity, then, is to be an individual who pays the proper amount of attention to those in one's given surrounding community. It is important to note, however, that Aristotle is not herein making a prescriptive claim about how much one ought to pay to others as if others are deserving of a basic level of attention or aid. Rather simply that the person of dignity will pay the amount of attention to others as to result in an accurate conception of one's own position in society. This conception, however, could turn out to be a multitude of things

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<sup>65</sup> *EE*, 1233b30-a31.

<sup>66</sup> *EE*, *ibid.*

ranging from being a base person, such as a slave (which Aristotle infamously defended), to being a respected politician or learned philosopher.

Without much argument, it is easy to begin to see how dignity might play a crucial role in Aristotle's conception of magnanimity as a moral virtue that dually acts as the adornment of the virtues. Without dignity as proper consideration of others, it would not be possible to be a truly magnanimous person. It would be virtually impossible to have an accurate perception or knowledge of one's own position in society and desert of honors independent of considering those other constituents of one's society. To attempt to do so would inevitably result in the excess or deficiency with respect to both magnanimity and dignity. Moreover, while the cognitive mechanisms leading to dignity and magnanimity are indeed inextricably intertwined with one another insofar as they fuel one another, it is important to keep them as distinct concepts. While magnanimity is a self-regarding virtue, dignity as consideration of others is evidently not.

### **DIGNITY, SUPERIORITY, AND MORAL GREATNESS**

Beyond fulfilling this epistemic condition arising from the requirement that the magnanimous person possess the truth, dignity also helps clarify the paradox concerning the self-sufficiency of the magnanimous man raised by Hanley. Rehashing the paradox in a different context, how are we to make sense of the magnanimous expressing his greatness in the virtues through performing good deeds for those surrounding him in light of his reported "coolness and aloofness and plain disdain that otherwise seem to characterize his attitude towards others?"<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Hanley, 17.

Hanley offers a counter-intuitive response to this perplexing question, and in so doing, I posit, draws out an important component of magnanimity that additionally makes sense of the role of dignity if not acting as a normative guide. Hanley argues that contrary to any sense of benevolence or philanthropic love contributing to the moral greatness of the magnanimous person, it is rather egalitarianism's inverse—that love of superiority—which motivates the magnanimous person's good deeds.

Aristotle indeed reflects this very sentiment in his discussion of the magnanimous man's puzzling character. For example, the magnanimous man loves being a benefactor but loathes being the recipient of beneficence, solely on the grounds that the latter is indicative of inferiority.<sup>68</sup> Hanley continues on to draw the conclusion,

Greatness of soul thus draws less on the love of one's neighbors and more on a love of superiority and a consciousness of self-worth to actuate its possessor to perform the beneficent services that distinguish him.<sup>69</sup>

Therefore, while it may not be the case that the magnanimous person's consideration of others is inspired by a recognition of some sense of inherent desert possessed by every individual, this need not relegate the magnanimous person to the realm of selfishness. Indeed, in nature of possessing dignity, which is epistemically required as a prerequisite for being magnanimous, the magnanimous person cannot be selfish. Consequently, it must be the case that this self-love that inspires acts of beneficence is of an elevated sort very distinct from the empty vanity of the mere honor-lover. Understanding the actions and motivations of the magnanimous person in this way, in turn assists in our understanding of the self-sufficiency of the magnanimous man as requiring others in

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<sup>68</sup> *EN*, 1124b10.

<sup>69</sup> Hanley, 18.

order to express moral greatness while evading any sense of inferiority that would prove problematic for the magnanimous person satisfying the life of the philosopher.

Moreover, this additionally serves as a clarification of the role occupied by the consideration of others as being instrumental to the overall flourishing of the magnanimous person insofar as it advocates arriving at the mean in respect to the moral virtues. That is, a person is paying proper consideration to others, she is not only going to possess true understanding of her own position in society, but inevitably will also have an accurate perception of in what respect each communal virtue ought to admit of the mean. Moral virtues such as generosity, friendliness, and truthfulness become less complicated if one is properly considering his or her surrounding community constituents.

### **DIGNITY IN ARISTOTLE'S OVERALL ETHICAL ACCOUNT**

While for the purposes of this paper I bracket my own considerations of Aristotle's conception of dignity as it pertains to magnanimity, there is much more to be said about the integral role dignity plays in Aristotle's ethics. In expounding upon this Aristotelian conception of dignity, one cannot only make sense of Aristotle's otherwise problematic accounts of magnanimity and consequently eudaimonia, but can also catch a glimpse of what it means to be a person of dignity in a culture in which the concept is free from normative and prescriptive claims. Through considering those around us, we are able to understand our own place in the world—getting evermore closer to possessing the truth and perfecting the moral virtues, guiding us closer to the happiness that makes life worthwhile. If we are paying the correct amount of attention to others, we are also intuitively also hitting the mark with how we ought to treat them. Thus, although

Aristotle's notion of dignity may not give us a prescriptive, normative claim about how we ought to recognize other individual's inherent worth, it nevertheless plays an integral role in his ethics that provides insight into the historical importance of what has come to serve as the foundation of human rights.

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