

Some Developments in Aristotle's Conception of Magnanimity

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El tratamiento de la magnanimidad en las tres obras éticas de Aristóteles nos da una oportunidad de comparar sus diferentes discusiones y sus diferentes tratamientos de las concepciones del sentido común así como diversos ideales de magnanimidad. Una comparación de las tres éticas sugiere que la *Ética a Nicómaco* provee el mejor y más duradero tratamiento de la virtud.

The treatment of magnanimity in Aristotle's three ethical works gives us an opportunity to compare his different discussions, and his different treatments of common-sense views and various ideals of magnanimity. Comparison of the three *Ethics* suggests that the *Nichomachean Ethics* provides the latest and best treatment of this virtue.

Introduction

It is often easy to form the impression that Aristotle's ethical doctrines are an uneasy and unstable compromise between philosophical theory and common sense. Aristotle's anxiety not to violate common sense may readily appear to result in a blurred and inconsistent position lacking the clarity of, say, the more uncompromising Socratic, Platonic, or Stoic doctrines.

His account of magnanimity may understandably create such impressions. For Aristotle has in mind a rather definite and, for his contemporaries, recognizable type of conventionally admired behaviour. His description includes many of the trivial aspects of conduct and manners that remind us of the rather oppressive social conventions underlying the satires in Theophrastus' *Characters*. Such a description hardly convinces us, on first reading anyhow, that magnanimity, as Aristotle conceives it, is a genuine virtue. Even though Aristotle may admire it, it does not seem to demand respect or admiration from people in quite different social and historical conditions.

I think these impressions of Aristotle are largely false, and that his treatment of magnanimity is a good test case to show that they are false. Here I focus only on two lines of inquiry: 1) the relation between Aristotle and common sense; 2) the development of his views in the three ethical treatises. From these two lines of inquiry, I hope we can form some more reasonable views about what Aristotle tries to do, and how well he does it¹.

¹ This paper simply presents a sketch of some views about magnanimity that I hope to have an opportunity to develop more fully. I do not try to survey all the evidence, and I do not cite secondary literature, even though I have often found it useful. I have especially benefited from Gauthier, R. A., *Magnanimité*, Paris, 1951; Rees, D.A., "'Magnanimity' in the Eudemian and Nicomachean Ethics", in: Moraux, P. and D. Harlfinger (Ed.), *Untersuchungen zur Eudemischen Ethik*, Berlin, 1970; Hardie, W.F.R., "Aristotle on Magnanimity", in: *Phronesis*, 23 (1978).

Common sense

To see how common sense regards magnanimity, we might begin from Aristotle's own comments. In the *Posterior Analytics* he mentions magnanimity simply as an illustration of a problem about definition. He considers when one definition does or does not correspond to one name: "For instance, if Alcibiades is magnanimous, or Achilles and Ajax, what is the one thing they all have? Refusal to endure insult; for the first went to war, the second was angry, and the third killed himself. Again <what is there in common> in other cases, e.g. Lysander or Socrates? If <this common feature> is being indifferent in both good and bad fortune, then I take these two common features and ask what there is in common between indifference to fortune and refusal to endure being dishonoured. If there is nothing in common, there will be two species of magnanimity"².

These examples show why it is difficult to find a single definition covering all cases of magnanimity, since they seem to illustrate exactly opposite attitudes to failure and dishonour. For Ajax dishonour is unbearable, but for Socrates it is indifferent, as long as it is a matter of ill-fortune, and not his own fault. For Ajax honour matters so much that he cannot live without it; for Socrates it matters so little that the loss of it is no harm to him at all.

Does Aristotle give us an accurate account of the ordinary use and extension of "magnanimity"? It is easy to see why Ajax is mentioned, but very hard to see why Socrates should be.

Demosthenes cites Ajax's suicide, in encouraging the Aiantids to imitate their illustrious ancestor: "They know very well that when Ajax had been robbed of the prize of highest merit (*aristeia*), he thought his life was not worth living (*abiôton*) for himself"³.

In suggesting that Demosthenes lacks any sense of honour and self-respect, Aeschines compares him unfavourably with Ajax: "Certainly none of you will have any fear that Demosthenes —this magnanimous man outstanding in war— if he fails to win the prize of highest merit (*aristeia*) will go home and make off with himself—a

² *Posterior Analytics*, 97b 17-25.

³ *Dem.*, 60.31.

man who has so little respect for any sense of honour (*philotimia*) towards you that he... inflicted thousands of wounds on his head and made money by bringing a suit for premeditated assault"⁴.

Aeschines suggests that Demosthenes so completely lacks Ajax's magnanimity that there is no danger of his displaying it as Ajax did by suicide. Achilles showed similar magnanimity in his eagerness to avenge the death of Patroclus; his desire to avoid dishonour was so strong that he was indifferent to everything else⁵.

These examples suggest that magnanimity is regularly connected with love of honour. Isocrates appeals to the magnanimity of the dead Evagoras to explain why Evagoras will be pleased with the magnificent honours paid to him at his tomb, but even more pleased with Isocrates' account of his achievements and the dangers he faced: "For you will find that honour-loving and magnanimous men not only want to be praised for such things, but calmly choose death in preference to life, and take their reputation more seriously than their life, sparing no effort to leave behind an immortal memory of them"⁶.

In so far as one gains honour by doing things on a large and impressive scale, magnanimity leads one to large ambitions; that was why the Persian king regarded Evagoras as a dangerous opponent because of his magnanimity⁷. Demosthenes contrasts the lofty ambitions that Philip formed, despite his humble origins, with the Athenians' insouciance about losing their former supremacy⁸.

The same pattern appears in the remarks about magnanimity in the *Rhetoric*, where Aristotle is not presenting his own account of the virtue, but relying on a common-sense conception of it. It is described as a virtue productive of large benefits⁹. Emulation (*zêlos*) is characteristic of young and magnanimous people, since it involves thinking oneself worthy of goods that one lacks¹⁰. Magnanimity is a predominant feature of young people, because of their hopeful outlook: "They

⁴ *Aeschin.*, 3.212.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.145.

⁶ *Isoc.*, 9.2.3.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.59.

⁸ *Dem.*, 18.68-9.

⁹ *Rhetoric*, 1366b 17-18.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 1388a 37-b3.

are magnanimous; for they have not yet been humbled by life, but are inexperienced in necessities, and thinking oneself worthy of great things is magnanimity; and all this is characteristic of a hopeful person"¹¹.

Thinking highly of oneself may result in a rather distant attitude to inferiors. Hence Paris's retreat to Mount Ida is mentioned as behaviour that might be cited as evidence of magnanimity¹²; Achilles and Ajax might also be taken to display their magnanimity by their withdrawal. People may also display magnanimity by their attitude in misfortunes¹³. Aristotle suggests that it is apt to praise someone who was relatively undistinguished in favourable circumstances, but formed more ambitious plans in misfortune and managed to realize them.

While magnanimity is characteristically regarded as a virtue, it is not obvious that the magnanimous action is always right. Though Ajax's suicide might be regarded as the brave and honourable response to defeat, it might also be criticized as a self-indulgent reaction to misfortune. Euripides' Heracles is eventually persuaded that his plan to commit suicide is, or might seem to be, really a cowardly reaction¹⁴. If he had committed suicide, it might have been a gesture of stubborn self-will (*authadia*¹⁵), a futile refusal to adapt himself to his circumstances. Such criticism suggests that magnanimity is morally ambiguous, liable to conflict with other moral principles.

The evidence I have discussed so far suggests that in picking Ajax's refusal to endure dishonour as characteristic of magnanimity, Aristotle captures common sense quite well. I can find no good evidence suggesting that Socrates' indifference to misfortune was regarded as an equally clear case of apparent magnanimity.

Our impression of common sense is confirmed by Aristotle's own approach in the three ethical treatises. For in all three the outlook of Ajax is the starting-point; and in all three Aristotle argues that an appropriate modification of Ajax's attitude results in a genuine virtue of magnanimity that avoids the criticisms levelled at Ajax. Com-

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 1389a 29-32.

¹² *Ibid.*, 1401b 20-3.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 1367b 14-17.

¹⁴ *HF*, 1246-54, 1347-57.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 1242-3.

parison between Aristotle's three discussions shows how he changes his mind about the degree of modification that is needed to make Ajax's attitude into a genuine virtue. In his latest discussion the modification involves quite radical revision; and in the course of this revision Aristotle returns to the magnanimity of Socrates.

*The account in the Magna moralia*¹⁶

In *MM* i25 Aristotle treats magnanimity rather briefly and simply. It is the virtue concerned with honour and dishonour, "not about honour from the many but the honour from virtuous people, and indeed with the latter in preference <to the former>"¹⁷. Moreover, he cares about these people's judgment because he cares about the sort of good that he is honoured for, and the people with good judgment honour him only for the right sort of good: "for neither is he concerned about every kind of honour, but about the best kind and the sort of good that is honourable and has the status of a first principle"¹⁸.

Nothing more is said, however, about the sorts of goods that deserve honour, or about whether they include good character, wealth, good birth, worldly success, or a combination of them. Aristotle implicitly criticizes Ajax for valuing honour from the wrong people; but he does not say that Ajax had the wrong view about what deserves honour, or that he reacted wrongly to the prospect of a life without honour.

The account in the Eudemean Ethics

In *EE* iii5 the account proceeds in five stages. In the first three Aristotle elaborates the account in the *MM*, arguing that the magnanimous person need not have the faults of Ajax. But he argues that such

¹⁶ I am assuming that the *MM* is substantially genuine, and earlier than the other two ethical works. This assumption needs to be tested by comparative discussion of specific topics that are treated in all three works. This paper sketches one comparative discussion.

¹⁷ *Magna moralia*, 1192a 23-4.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 1192a 28-9.

an account of magnanimity does not distinguish it from virtue of character in general; and in the last two stages he tries to isolate the distinctive features of magnanimity.

In the first three stages the basic feature of the magnanimous person is the feature mentioned second in the *MM* —his true judgment about what deserves honour. He cares only about some goods as grounds for being honoured, and hence cares only about being honoured by the people who honour him for these goods. This selective attitude to the people honouring him was mentioned first in the *MM*; in the *EE* Aristotle reverses the order, suggesting that the selective attitude to goods is more fundamental.

Aristotle suggests that if we require the magnanimous person to make the right comparative judgments, we will approve of the disdainful attitude that we would otherwise rightly condemn. The appropriate sort of disdain does not consist in contempt for other people, but in seeing the lesser importance of things that are really less important and rejecting the judgments of people whose judgments we ought to reject. Aristotle suggests that when the apparently unattractive features of the magnanimous person are the result of true judgments of value, we will see that they are not so unattractive after all.

Aristotle now changes course: "Nonetheless there is one <particular virtue of> magnanimity apart from the other virtues, so that we must also speak of the person who has this as magnanimous in the special way"¹⁹.

To isolate the special virtue of magnanimity he appeals to its connexion with greatness. Among goods some are honourable, and among these some are great. The magnanimous person's character is expressed in his attitude to honourable goods. He is the one who correctly believes himself worthy of great honours and other honourable goods and actually is worthy of them²⁰.

The *MM* requires the magnanimous person simply to be correct in his estimate of the goods he deserves, and not to think he deserves either more or less than he really deserves²¹. I could satisfy this condition if I correctly believed I deserved rather few goods and little

¹⁹ *Eudemian Ethics*, 1232b 25-7.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 1233a 4-7.

²¹ *Magna moralia*, 1192a 32-4.

honour and acted on my estimate. Such a modest and realistic person who would meet the condition for magnanimity in the *MM* does not count as magnanimous in the *EE*, and Aristotle explicitly excludes him²².

The amendment in the *EE* can claim the support of common sense. Isocrates connects the magnanimity of Evagoras with his ambition, *philotimia*, and his actual superiority²³. Isocrates offers Demonicus advice about large ambitions: "Think immortal thoughts by being magnanimous, but mortal thoughts by measured enjoyment of what you have"²⁴. Unwarranted ambition would be boastful pretension rather than magnanimity; but we might mistake it for magnanimity, whereas we would never make the same mistake with realistic modesty. Aristotle is entitled to claim, then, that in the *EE* he captures a feature of common sense that is overlooked in the account of magnanimity offered in the *MM*.

He does not say, however, what a magnanimous person must achieve have the appropriate view of what he deserves; for the *EE* does not say what sort of achievement deserves honour. He might, for instance, believe that some spectacular success, rather than some admirable effort, is needed for honour; and he might believe that the success is appropriately honoured whether or not it is a mere stroke of luck unrelated to his efforts and intentions. The amendment in the *EE* does not fully explain the sort of character and attitude to be expected of a magnanimous person.

Nor does it explain the role of honour in a magnanimous person's conception of his good. Here as in the *MM*, Aristotle fails to say whether Ajax was right to believe that a life without honour was not worth living. It is clear that the magnanimous person should not aim exclusively at honour, since he demands it from the right people for the right achievements; hence he will not care if he is dishonoured by people who have a false conception of what deserves honour. But if he lives in an environment without other virtuous people to honour him for the right achievements, how serious a loss does he suffer? Aristotle does not say.

²² *Eudemian Ethics*, 1233a 16-19.

²³ *Isoc.*, 9.45.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.32.

He therefore fails to explain how far the magnanimous person's pursuit of honour forces him into conflicts with the aims of the other virtues. We saw why Ajax's magnanimous attitude leaves him open to criticism; and Aristotle does not separate his magnanimous person from Ajax sharply enough to disarm the criticism.

The Nicomachean Ethics on magnanimity and the supremacy of virtue

Almost everything in the *EE* account reappears in *EN* iv3. But the account in the *EN* is much longer, adding many details about the attitude and behaviour of the magnanimous person that are not present in the *EE*. The most important revisions of the account in the *EE* are these:

1) Aristotle does not regard the magnanimous person's concern with honour as fundamental; it is secondary, since it is a result of his more general concern with the external goods that include honour.

2) His concern with honour reflects his view about the proper ground for honour. The magnanimous person correctly believes that the highest honour is due to virtue, and that only the virtuous person really deserves honour.

3) These views about external goods and about the proper ground of honour result in turn from the correct view about the relative value of virtue and external goods. The virtuous person correctly believes that virtue is more valuable than any combination of other goods, and that therefore any other good is small in comparison with virtue.

None of these claims is present in the account of magnanimity in the *EE*. Together they imply an important change in Aristotle's view of this virtue. The importance of the change is clearer once we connect it with a broader difference between the two works.

Virtue and fortune

In *EN* i9-11 Aristotle deals at some length with the comparative importance of virtue and of external goods in happiness. He concludes

that happiness is indeed vulnerable to fortune, but its dominant component, virtue, is not. The happy person can lose his happiness, but will retain his virtue, and therefore will remain happier than he would be if he had retained the other goods without virtue. Aristotle remarks that the appropriate virtue for facing the vicissitudes of fortune is magnanimity²⁵. This brief remark is expanded and defended in iv3 when Aristotle describes magnanimity as the correct attitude to goods of fortune, resting on a correct estimate of the supreme value of virtue.

The *EE* is different on some related points. 1) The chapters in *EN* i on virtue and external goods have no close parallel in the *EE*. The passage corresponding to *EN* i8-12 is in any case much shorter²⁶, and says nothing about the virtuous person's attitude to ill fortune, or about the relation of this attitude to magnanimity. 2) *EE* iii5 does not say that the magnanimous person will take a moderate and reserved attitude to fortune and external goods.

These claims about the relative status of virtue and honour commit Aristotle to an answer to a question that the *EE* leaves unanswered. In examining the virtuous person's attitude to honour, we have to distinguish two cases: a) He is unjustly dishonoured by the misguided opinions of vicious people, but honoured by virtuous people. b) There are no virtuous people to honour him, or they are not in a position to give him the honour that is his due. The *EE* assures us that the magnanimous person will be relatively unconcerned in the first case; but it does not say what he will think in the second case. In the *EE* Aristotle certainly rejects the view that the virtuous person should always act virtuously only for the sake of honour, since the virtuous person acts virtuously for its own sake. But we could consistently believe this, and still believe that life is not worth living if our virtuous action does not receive its proper honour; and nothing is said to suggest that this is not the attitude of the magnanimous person.

To this extent, the welfare of the magnanimous person, as the *EE* conceives it, may depend to a significant degree on external conditions, and especially on the attitudes of other people. In the *EN* Aristotle unambiguously rejects such an attitude. He claims that the

²⁵ *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1100b 32-3.

²⁶ *Eudemian Ethics*, 1219a 39 - b 17.

magnanimous person takes a "moderate" (*metrios*) attitude to all external goods, so that he is neither overjoyed by good fortune nor excessively grieved by misfortune²⁷. His moderate attitude is described as calm in the face of misfortune (*eukolôs*²⁸). The *EE* says nothing to suggest that this will be the magnanimous person's attitude.

Aristotle advocates calm in the face of misfortune because he argues that the virtuous person's character, expressed in virtuous actions as far as possible, is important enough to outweigh any other loss. In claiming this, he relies on an assumption that is common to the *EE* and *EN*, that happiness is at least to some considerable extent something that depends on the person himself rather than external conditions²⁹. This assumption is quite vague, and Aristotle accepts it only with severe qualifications whose extent and implication are hard to grasp. But in the *EN* he thinks it is true to the extent that a virtuous person is never miserable, *athlios*, in a condition where his life is not worth living; for "he will never do what is hateful and base"³⁰. Though external conditions deprive him of happiness, they do not reduce him to misery.

In making this claim about the resilience of the virtuous person, Aristotle goes clearly beyond anything in the other ethical works. His view affects his attitude to magnanimity; for the magnanimous person who takes the right attitude to honour will face its loss with the reserved attitude that is suitable for all external goods. This demand for resilience distinguishes the view of magnanimity in the *EN* from the view in the other ethical works.

The magnanimous person's resilience also introduces the magnanimity of Socrates in contrast to that of Ajax. Socrates makes it clear that he does not regard the loss of external goods as a serious matter; and the *EN* explains why this attitude is relevant to magnanimity. Magnanimity requires the appropriate attitude to great honour; but this attitude requires the proper evaluation of honour; this proper evaluation requires the proper evaluation of external goods, since

²⁷ *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1124a 15-16.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 1100b 31-32.

²⁹ *Eudemian Ethics*, 1215a 12-19, 1099b 9-25.

³⁰ *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1100b, 33-35.

honour is one of them; and the proper evaluation of external goods results in the virtuous person's moderate and reserved view of them.

The view that magnanimity requires a reserved attitude to external goods determines the conception of magnanimity that prevails in Stoic ethics. The Stoics define magnanimity as "the knowledge raising one above the things that naturally happen to virtuous and vicious people alike"³¹. They agree with Socrates in advocating indifference to misfortune; and at this stage in the *EN* it is easy to form the impression that Aristotle takes a large step in the Socratic and Stoic direction.

But how large a step does he really take? The attitude attributed to Socrates in the *Analytics* is indifference to misfortune. The attitude defended in the *EN* is moderation and reserve towards external goods. A later stage of Aristotle's discussion helps to distinguish the two attitudes.

The status of honour

The virtuous person's attitude to honour in relation to virtue raises two related questions: 1) Does he suffer some genuine harm if he lacks honour? 2) What does he think is an appropriate ground of honour?

We will suppose that Aristotle takes the Socratic view on the first question, if we interpret his remarks on the smallness of honour as signs of indifference. He claims that the virtuous person is resilient in good and bad fortune "because he does not regard even honour as the greatest good"³²; since for him honour is small, the other external goods will also be small for him³³.

The difference between this attitude and the Socratic attitude is the difference between thinking honour is small in comparison with virtue and thinking it of no account. Though the magnanimous person thinks it is small, he is pleased to get it³⁴, and also makes some sig-

³¹ *SVF* iii 264, *Stob. Ecl.*, 11 61.15-17 W.

³² *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1124a 16-17.

³³ *Ibid.*, 1124a 19-20.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 1124a 5-7.

nificant effort to get it. For though he does not join in the ordinary contests for honour, he is interested when there is a prospect of 'great honour or <a great> achievement (*ergon*)'³⁵, and though his actions are few, they are great and noteworthy³⁶. He must positively pursue honour; he does not confine himself to receiving honour graciously when it comes to him for actions he would have done anyway.

In Aristotle's view, then, Socrates cannot be magnanimous. Socrates counts himself worthy of honour (since he suggests that the Athenians award him free meals in the Prytaneum); but he does not display the positive and effective desire for honour that Aristotle takes to be necessary for magnanimity. This is why Aristotle's magnanimous person must suffer significant harm if he faces a life without honour.

The grounds of honour

On the second question, about the grounds for honour, Aristotle's view is a bit harder to see. Four different possibilities arise: 1) being virtuous, irrespective of its results in action; 2) being virtuous and doing virtuous actions, irrespective of their success; 3) being virtuous, doing virtuous actions, and being successful in them; 4) being virtuous, doing virtuous actions, being successful in them, and having external goods.

In the first case, every completely virtuous person justifiably demands honour for his virtue, whether or not he has an opportunity to express it in action. In the second case, he admits that some occasion for action is needed. He expects to be honoured more if his community actually faces some danger and he has an opportunity to risk his life, even if he risks it unsuccessfully for reasons that he could not have been expected to know. In the third case, he admits that it is reasonable to honour him more if his brave action leads to victory than if it unfortunately miscarries. In the fourth case, he agrees that other circumstances less directly related to virtuous actions and their results are further legitimate grounds for honour. Any of these views is con-

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 1124b 24-5.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 1124b 25-6.

sistent with the belief that virtue deserves more honour than any of the other goods, and hence is consistent with the reserved attitude to external goods that Aristotle recognizes.

His actual view of the magnanimous attitude is not quite clear. He argues that only a good person can be magnanimous; “for honour is a prize (*athlon*) of virtue, and is awarded to good people”³⁷. This might suggest the first attitude, that simply being virtuous is the only ground for any honour.

It is rather difficult, however, to reconcile such an uncompromising attitude to the grounds for honour with a distinction that Aristotle draws in *EN* i12 between objects of praise (*epaineta*) and objects of honour (*timia*). He remarks that praise is awarded to virtues and to other states and characteristics of a person, whereas honour is awarded to the achievements (*erga*) that are the subjects of encomia³⁸. In general, he suggests that the best goods have to be honourable rather than praiseworthy³⁹.

This discussion of honour and praise would be in sharp conflict with the account of magnanimity if it implied that virtue is praiseworthy *and not* honourable; for in iv3 Aristotle insists that the virtuous person is honourable, and that honour is the proper reward of virtue. I do not think i12 implies any such conflict in Aristotle’s views. We can regard virtue as a state tending to promote some good, and hence as praiseworthy; but we can also properly regard it as a good in itself, and hence as honourable. While praise and honour are not directed to the same properties of virtue, Aristotle can quite properly claim that they are both directed to virtue.

Still, in this passage he seems to imply that if one good is better and more complete than another, it is more honourable, even if it is no more praiseworthy. And he definitely believes that virtue combined with successful virtuous actions and other external goods is better than virtue alone; hence he seems to be committed to regarding external goods as legitimate sources of honour additional to virtue.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 1123b 35 - 1124a 1.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 1101b 12-18, 31-4.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 1101b 21-7.

If the account of magnanimity is consistent with this claim, then we have to take the claim that honour is a prize of virtue as a partial description of the grounds for honour. And when Aristotle mentions the strokes of good fortune that “seem to contribute to magnanimity”⁴⁰, we should take him to agree that in fact they do contribute to it. His later remarks are not quite decisive: “Hence such things as well <as virtue?> make people more magnanimous; for <those who have them> are honoured by some people. In reality only the good person is honourable; but the person who has both <virtue and these goods of fortune> is counted as worthier of honour”⁴¹.

The general principle underlying these judgments about worthiness of honour is the view that “everything superior in good is more honoured”⁴². The account of praiseworthy and honourable goods in *i12* seems to support this view; and hence we should take Aristotle to accept the common beliefs that he mentions in this section of *iv3*.

Why do these goods make someone more magnanimous? Aristotle explains that people are honoured for having these goods; but this fact alone does not imply that the person honoured is worthier of honour, and hence more magnanimous. He becomes worthier of honour only if these goods are indeed legitimate grounds for honour. Hence, if Aristotle believes that such goods really make people more magnanimous, he must regard them as legitimate grounds for honour.

He does not endorse the view that goods of fortune alone make someone magnanimous or worthy of honour; but he does agree that they are an appropriate basis for additional honour besides the honour deserved by virtue. In saying that only the virtuous person is honourable in reality, he means that being virtuous is necessary for deserving any honour, and sufficient for deserving some honour; but he does not mean that only the virtuous person's virtue deserves honour.

Aristotle does not, then, endorse the outlook of Socrates as genuine magnanimity. While the *EE* retains a modified version of the outlook of Ajax, the *EN* does not replace this with the outlook of Socrates; it introduces an outlook that sharply disagrees with both of them, refusing to recognize either of them as a genuine case of mag-

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 1124a 20-21.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 1124a 23-26.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 1124a 23.

nanimity. Magnanimity retains its connexion with ambition and the pursuit of honour, since the magnanimous person thinks honour worth pursuing in addition to virtue, and therefore cares about things that Socrates would not care about. He thinks it legitimate to be honoured for possessing external goods, and therefore will care about acquiring them, even apart from their contribution to virtuous action. Though Aristotle drastically revises the popular belief in the connexion between magnanimity and ambition, he does not completely reject it.

Honour for virtue and for other goods

The magnanimous person regards himself as worthy of the greatest honours. He is said to know that "there can be no honour worthy of complete virtue"⁴³; and he regards the greatest honour that can be given as less than is deserved by complete virtue. Now Aristotle insists that the magnanimous person retains his magnanimity even in misfortune; it is precisely his magnanimity that allows him to face misfortune appropriately. Hence he still deserves the highest honours even in misfortune, and hence deserves them even if he is prevented from doing the distinguished actions that he would normally be honoured for. If he still deserves the greatest honours when he cannot perform the distinguished actions and when he has lost the conspicuous external goods, how can he also acknowledge that actions and external goods deserve greater honour than virtue alone?

If we think of a scale of honours as a scale of rewards or prices paid for different services or benefits, we might think that if I reward you with \$100 for mending my furnace and with \$1000 for being just, then mending a furnace ten times is of equal value to being just; and we might think some similar scale could be fixed among honours to represent the value of different actions and other objects of honour. Aristotle argues that such a scale would rest on a misconception, if it assumed that some accumulation of external goods could properly represent the value of virtue; the assumption would be wrong because (in his view) no accumulation of external goods could reasonably be traded for any virtue.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 1124a 7-8.

If this is what he means by saying that there is no honour adequate to virtue, Aristotle is free to claim that a combination of virtue and other goods is more valuable and honourable than virtue alone. The magnanimous person consistently believes that he deserves the highest honours if he is merely virtuous and unsuccessful, but deserves still higher honours if he is both virtuous and successful.

Perhaps another example will support this claim. Suppose that you do some great good for me that I had no right to expect, and at some cost to yourself. We might say that I owe you a debt I can never repay. From the fact that I cannot repay the debt it does not follow either that I should treat you as though you had done nothing for me, or that I ought to benefit you in every way that is possible for me. If I decide to do something for you, not in complete payment for what you have done for me, but in recognition of it, and then we also make an ordinary business arrangement for you to mend my furnace, I still owe you the normal payment for mending the furnace. The fact that I have decided to do something to acknowledge the benefit I cannot repay does not mean that I cannot or should not repay a smaller benefit.

This example of a small debt added to an infinitely large one helps to explain Aristotle's claims about honour. For he discusses benefits that cannot be fully repaid (to the gods, to one's parents, and to one's teachers of philosophy⁴⁴); he insists that benefactors in these cases should not soak up the whole of one's efforts, and should not even soak up all the honour one is capable of according⁴⁵. For similar reasons, Aristotle need not agree that the merits of the virtuous person should monopolize all the available honour.

Aristotle, therefore, resists the moralizing of honour to the point where degrees of honour correspond entirely with degrees of virtue. He moralizes it to an important and controversial degree, by insisting that being virtuous is a necessary condition for the highest honours, and that virtue deserves higher honour than anything else. He resists complete moralizing by recognizing other grounds for honour that might assign different degrees of honour to two equally virtuous

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 1164b 2-6.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 1165a 14-18.

people. His position is less easy to understand than the purely moralizing position; but it is a reasonable and defensible alternative.

Magnanimous behaviour

The rest of *EN* iv3⁴⁶ has no *EE* parallel. It is a sketch of various sorts of behaviour characteristic, or reputedly characteristic, of the magnanimous person. The degree of anecdotal detail is unusual in Aristotle's description of the virtues of character, but here it has a special point. As in the *EE*, Aristotle wants to show that some, though not all, of the traits conventionally associated with the magnanimous person really belong to a genuine virtue, if magnanimity is understood correctly.

The magnanimous person refuses to live "with reference to another"⁴⁷, with the important exception of a friend. Aristotle now considers the traits of character that the other two *Ethics* associate with willfulness. He asserts that the magnanimous person displays the appropriate dignity in his attitude to other people (*semmunesthai*⁴⁸), and now explains further why his refusal to live "with reference to another" falls short of culpable willfulness. The *MM* treats dignity as a virtue in its own right; the *EE* treats it as one of the desirable traits that do not count as virtues. The *EN* eliminates it as a distinct trait, and makes it simply an aspect of magnanimity.

Aristotle implicitly recognizes that willfulness is easily confused with magnanimity, and explains why the confusion should be avoided. The magnanimous person will appear willful, in so far as he refuses to be guided by other people's views, and in so far as he attaches strictly limited value to conciliating them. But he will not be indifferent to them; since he attaches some value to honour and other external goods, he will want to conciliate people in so far as he can do this without undermining the aims he counts as more important.

The extent to which the magnanimous person might seem to be, but really is not, willful is explained by his attachment to virtue. If he

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 1124b 6 - 1125a 16.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 1124b 31 - 1125a 2.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 1124b 21.

is guided by the choices and preferences of an equally virtuous friend, he will not be subordinating his own correct view of what virtue requires to the desire to conciliate other people. The reference to a friend expresses a clear limit on the magnanimous person's independence of external conditions. His independence of other people's opinion does not cause him to ignore the opinions that deserve respect and attention, or to reject attachments that involve possible loss to him.

Other aspects of the magnanimous person's attitude to others are less easy to understand. We can see why he wants to be active in benefiting others, and remembers the past benefits he has conferred. But it is harder to see why he is justifiably ashamed of receiving benefits because that is the mark of an inferior person⁴⁹, and forgets the benefits he has received⁵⁰. Aristotle says he is reluctant to admit these signs of inferiority; but why should he be so reluctant? The magnanimous person wants to be superior in virtue; but such superiority does not imply that he will never need help from others, and why should he be ashamed that he does need their help? He should be ashamed only if he has to rely on others for some service he ought to have been able to do for himself; but this is a far more limited degree of shame than Aristotle seems to have in mind.

Perhaps we can come closer to understanding Aristotle's point of view if we consider independence of external conditions. Someone who depends on the services of others has not fully secured himself against external conditions; and awareness of his dependence on them will be a matter for regret. This does not mean he will do whatever is necessary to cut himself loose from such dependence, or that he will be ungrateful to others when they benefit him. But the dependence implied by such benefits will be a matter of regret to someone who sees that his dependence exposes him to fortunes that are beyond his control. If we do not exaggerate Aristotle's point, we can perhaps see something reasonable even in this apparently unappealing aspect of the magnanimous person. These aspects display the attitude to exter-

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 1124b 9-10.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 1124b 12-14.

nals that makes him prefer what is fine in itself over what is useful for protection against external hazards⁵¹.

The magnanimous person's attitude to external conditions perhaps explains his rather surprising tendency to forget that he has received benefits and his rather surprising reluctance to be reminded that he has received them⁵². It is relevant to contrast the magnanimous person with the person who takes pleasure in his good fortune and boasts about it; such a person will be pleased to think of the external goods he has been able to accumulate, rather than the benefits he has been able to confer. Pleasure in having received benefits is the mark of a vain and boastful person who likes to display the goods he has accumulated⁵³. For the magnanimous person, receiving benefits is a sign of his dependence on external circumstances, and therefore to be regretted rather than welcomed. Such regret, however, does not imply that he forgets the fact that someone has done him a good turn; we are not justified in inferring that he is unwilling to remember or acknowledge what other people have done for them. Welcoming the fact that his friend helped him when he broke his leg is quite consistent with regretting the fact that he broke his leg and had to be helped. On this point the initially surprising attitude of the magnanimous person becomes more intelligible once we follow Aristotle's advice and consider the conception of virtue and external goods that underlies his attitude.

The same outlook explains the magnanimous person's attitude to harms he has suffered. He displays "magnanimity", as we commonly think of it, in not dwelling on the harm that people have done him⁵⁴. Athenians prided themselves on their willingness not to bear grudges (*mê mnêsikakein*), and especially on their display of such willingness in the amnesty offered after the fall of the Thirty⁵⁵. It is not common to connect this conciliatory attitude with magnanimity; indeed it would be hard even to suspect any such connexion if we regarded the unforgiving Ajax as a paradigm of magnanimity. Aristotle, however, argues that the magnanimous person's attitude to external goods will

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 1125a 9-12.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 1124b 12-17.

⁵³ *Cf. Ibid.*, 1124a 26 - b2

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 1125a 3-5.

⁵⁵ *Aeschin.*, 3.208, *Andoc.*, 1.140.

lead him to take the attitude that might initially seem sharply opposed to magnanimity.

It would be wrong, then, to treat these behavioural aspects of Aristotelian magnanimity as the results of Aristotle's attempt to show that his account of the virtue covers all the commonly recognized examples of *magnanimous* behaviour. Aristotle focuses on admirable behaviour that would normally seem uncharacteristic of the magnanimous person, or might even seem incompatible with magnanimity, to show that it is actually required by a proper understanding of the virtue.

Aristotle does not assume that his readers are predisposed to believe that the magnanimous person is forgiving, or fairly relaxed about the honours he achieves, or in no rush to compete for opportunities for conspicuous service. On the contrary, he probably assumes, with good reason, that most readers will think such actions are especially difficult for the magnanimous person, and perhaps inconsistent with genuine magnanimity. Such a view would imply a conflict between magnanimity and the other virtues. Aristotle argues that this view rests on a mistake about genuine magnanimity.

Common sense realizes that magnanimity is the right attitude to honour, and that it makes the magnanimous person interested in pursuing honour. Common sense is right about this, but Aristotle argues that this correct belief fits into an account of magnanimity that avoids any conflict with the other virtues.

Conclusion

I think we should now be able to answer some of our initial questions, and to see why it is wrong to regard Aristotle's account of magnanimity as simply a compromise between common sense and the Socratic outlook.

The development of Aristotle's views shows that he never simply accepts common sense, and that on further reflexion he moves further away from it. None of the ethical treatises accepts Ajax as a genuine example of magnanimity; and in the *EN* Aristotle accepts the strongly counter-intuitive claim that someone who thinks honour is a

minor good is the only genuinely magnanimous person. Aristotle is ready to violate common sense to this degree, because he thinks he is justified by his general view of the relation between virtue and external goods.

Aristotle certainly aims to explain common-sense views, and to defend them, in so far as they are defensible within his theoretical position. His description of the minor details of magnanimity expresses this aim; it does not imply uncritical acceptance of custom and convention. The theory that Aristotle applies to the evaluation of common sense is undoubtedly disputable. But we ought not to regard this, or any other, Aristotelian virtue as a matter of purely historical interest. We should be inclined to believe that Aristotle has described a genuine virtue.