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Can Magnanimity Be Made Compatible With the 21st Century?

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I. Introduction

The apex of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (*NE*) is magnanimity (*megalopsuchia*), the "crowning virtue," at times translated as "lofty pride" or "greatness of soul." Aristotle defines the magnanimous man as being "fine and good" (*NE* 1124a 2–4). Such a man is already adorned with all the virtues catalogued in the *Nicomachean Ethics.* Because magnanimity requires all the virtues, attainment is only possible for one who already "thinks himself worthy of great things and is really worthy of them" (*NE* 1123b 3). In other words, the magnanimous man knows he is magnanimous without any sort of external promotion. The apparent bravado Aristotle affords magnanimity strikes modern readers as repugnant. It seems like an old-world notion exclusive in its membership and misogynistic toward women. Roger Crisp argues that the "'portrait' of the great-souled person" found in *Nicomachean Ethics* book IV, chapter 3 "[is] implausible or even repellent" (Crisp 170). And he "reject[s] some of the modern attempts to 'rehabilitate' the great-souled person" (170). In other words, it would be erroneous to glean anything of value from magnanimity and apply it to the modern world. Yet the traits Crisp calls "repellent"—among which

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include masculinity, stature (*NE* 1123b 6), and a deep, measured voice (*NE* 1125a 14)—are alive and well. CEOs, for example, tend to be taller than the average person, and those with a deeper voice have a greater earning power (*USA Today*; *Huffington Post*). Perhaps Crisp's "rehabilitation" is unnecessary; magnanimity may be immune to the equalization necessitated by modernity. Despite the possibility that magnanimity may be a static virtue, unable to reshape itself when called upon for rehabilitation, I contend that there *is* leeway within Aristotle's original definition to modify—*modernify*—magnanimity to include women, and that the crowning virtue remains relevant in the twenty-first century, specifically in business.

Before proceeding, I wish to review greatness of soul as found in *NE* IV.3. Aristotle considers magnanimity to be the greatest virtue. It is concerned with high honors above and beyond what is possible for the average person. This is similar to the virtue magnificence (*megaloprepeia*) found in the preceding chapter (*NE* IV.2), which is concerned with large-scale generosity. Proper exercise of magnificence can only be performed by one already wealthy and able to donate on a scale far grater than what is expected or possible for the average person. Aristotle suggests "This sort of excellence is found in . . . expenses for the gods—dedications, temples, sacrifices, and so on, . . . and in expenses . . . for the common good" (*NE* 1122b 20–4). A modern equivalent would be a member of the top income bracket (the so-called "1%") offering charitable donations on a scale far in excess of the combined annual incomes of many middle-class workers. Likewise, the magnanimous man is already honorable to an extent far beyond what is, on average, attainable.

The magnanimous man is worthy of being awarded with high honors, though he is only moderately pleased when honors are bestowed upon him from already magnanimous peers, because nothing, not even *their* honors, can appropriately match the magnanimous man's "complete virtue" (*NE* 1124a 5–9). When among honorable peers, Aristotle suggests the magnanimous man self-aggrandizes (or shows off in a manner which would not compromise being virtuous) because "there is nothing ignoble" in impressing already honorable persons, and, "superiority over them is difficult and impressive" (*NE* 1124b 20–2). The magnanimous man has an ambiguously defined *appropriate* disdain for ordinary honors from ordinary people (*NE* 1124a 10–2). This may be best illustrated by a magnanimous person feeling disdain at receiving the keys to the city of Provo, Utah after he had received the keys to the city of New York. The magnanimous man is not strident with the masses while in public; although, he minces words with them because he does not wish to seem condescending, but "not because he is self-depreciating" (*NE* 1124b 22–3; 1124b 31–3). He despises danger in trifling causes but would gladly risk his life for a worthy cause (*NE* 1124b 8–9). He never gossips (*NE* 1125a 6). He will only assist a worthy friend, for he prefers autonomy: he is not servile (*NE* 1125a 1–2). He is, of course, statuesque (*NE* 1123b 6).[1] What he owns is beautiful and unprofitable, meaning that he would not have to sell any of his possessions for financial stability—a sign of his self-sufficiency (*NE* 1125a 12). His movements are slow, and his voice calm, and deep (*NE* 1125a 13). Ultimately, his actions, while few, are extraordinary (*NE* 1124b 26).

The above is a handful of the 27 (or possibly more) traits of magnanimity found in *NE* IV.3. Since much of magnanimity runs counter to modern humility and the inclusion of women, magnanimity would undoubtedly be regarded as antiquated by readers approaching it from the Western tradition. Thomas Aquinas states that Aristotle's crowning virtue "is in fact the other side of the coin from greatness of soul" (Crisp 172). To illustrate Aquinas' assertion, if the magnanimous man deprives himself just deserts, his intentional depravity might reflect "something bad in him because he does not think he is worthy of [his] goods" (*NE* 1125a 21). In other words, he would be exercising magnanimity's vice of deficiency, pusillanimity (*mikropsuchia*) (*NE* 1125a 20). Magnanimity is the crowning virtue because it enlarges the virtues Aristotle presents in the *Nicomachean Ethics* "and does not arise without them" (*NE* 1124a 1–2). Magnanimity would therefore exclude all but those who are already the finest and best, and who are unashamed of their worthiness. A modern interpretation might identify such as society's proudest and most boastful.

II. Can Just Anyone be Magnanimous?

That modern readers interpret magnanimity as a prideful indifference toward others may be Crisp's motivation in objecting to its rehabilitation. A critical reading of *NE* IV.3 suggests greatness of soul is unobtainable, save for those already replete with the Aristotelian virtues. But Ryan P. Hanley attempts to reconcile magnanimity's apparent indifference with something more palatable by suggesting that, greatness of soul is better understood as a civic virtue" (1).

Hanley suggests that Aristotle's emphasis on claiming and deserving honor was to present the concept of magnanimity in such a way as to be familiar to the disposition of his audience: the youth of Athens (5). Aristotle began with the familiar before introducing the unfamiliar—using terms they could understand, and then proceeded to more unfamiliar or advanced notions, which were "introduced in a manner intended to appeal to and thereby capture the attention of a politically ambitious and honour-loving audience"(5). Once the crowning virtue was understood in lay terms, it could be understood as a lofty collection of virtues in hopes of inspiring emulation of the great-souled man (15–20). Hanley's charitable interpretation leads him to conclude that Aristotle was merely "present[ing] a conception of praiseworthiness and honourableness that might prove both useful and ennobling to an audience consisting of more than just heroes and philosophers"(20). Thus, magnanimity becomes a virtue to which the youth of Athens should aspire.

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[1] While it is true that Aristotle does not directly attribute height to magnanimity, it can be argued that "complete virtue" demands the tall, statuesque physique of a Greek athlete.

NE X.9 seems to support this view, as Aristotle suggests that those who are themselves virtuous should be the arbiters of what ought to be valued in society and be given power to enact laws, which encourage others to the same. But the text of *NE* IV.3 clearly suggests that the magnanimous man is entirely uninterested in the average person. Therefore, if the improvement of others referenced in *NE* X.9 is a responsibility of the magnanimous man, then the magnanimous man seems to be a contradiction between assisting others' rise in virtue and remaining uninterested in the average person.

In addition to the contradicting portraits of the magnanimous man found throughout the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle's original definition of magnanimity found in the *Posterior Analytics* also yields a curious contradiction:

> I mean, e.g., if we were to seek what greatness of soul is we should inquire, in the case of some great-souled men we know, what one thing they all have as such. E.g., if Alcibiades is great-souled, and Achilles and Ajax, what one thing do they all have? Intolerance of insults; for one made war, one waxed wroth, and the other killed himself. Again in the case of others, e.g. Lysander and Socrates. Well, if here it is being indifferent to good and bad fortune, I take these two things and inquire what both indifference to fortune and not brooking dishonor have that is the same. And if there is nothing, then *there will be two sorts of greatness of soul.* (*PA* 2.13.97b 16–24, emphasis added)

Aristotle presents an intolerance of insults—great enough for Ajax to commit suicide—whilst allowing for a vaguely elucidated concept resembling humility, i.e., of being indifferent to good and bad fortune.

Of these two potential species, or *eidē*, Aristide Tessitore identifies the first as being "explicitly political. All three exemplars embody a conception of greatness that expressed itself in action and battle" (Tessitore 32). While of the second—accounting for the differences between Lysander, a Spartan general who experienced "humiliation, abandonment, and defeat," and Socrates, a more perfect and less accessible exemplification of magnanimity than Lysander—Tessitore suggests it is "at root, philosophic" (32). This dichotomy led French philosopher René Gauther to admit there is: *"la magnanimité des politiques et la magnanimité des philosophes"*—"Political magnanimity and philosophical magnanimity" (Hanley 2; translation mine).

Crisp admits the difficulty in reconciling the two species: "On the face of it, these two conceptions seem inconsistent, since the first seems to require an extreme concern about honor in particular, the second a lack of such concern. . . . Both conceptions of greatness of soul, then, capture an element of the truth, yet neither is unconditionally correct"(169). If what Aristotle presents here in two species of magnanimity cannot yield an adequate definition, the notion of magnanimity becomes a contradiction, rendering the whole concept inert, between one who desires honors in war and politics, and one who desires something more akin to humility. Noting this anomaly, Tessitore defends Aristotle: "Despite the existence of different types of magnanimity, the aspiration of human greatness finds itself, on some level at least, in tension with the citizen virtue and concern for the common good. . . . I think there is merit, although unequal, in both of these views and that Aristotle's account is deliberately open ended"(32).

In addition to Tessitore, Hanley suggests the magnanimous man's "true greatness, . . . consists in his decidedly unheroic and humane disposition towards his fellow citizens"(4). Hence, magnanimity is neither entirely political, nor entirely philosophical; magnanimity is a combination which we may charitably assume is had "at the right times, about the right things, toward the right people, for the right end, and in the right way . . ." (*NE* 1106b 21–2). This secures it as "the intermediate and best condition" (*NE* 1106b 23) between pusillanimity and magnanimity's vice of excess: vanity.

If Aristotle intended for magnanimity to be vague and unobtainable merely to encourage societal change, then perhaps magnanimity ought to be disposed to rehabilitation. Perhaps Aristotle was thinking along the same lines as Christ when He commanded: "Be ye therefore perfect"(*King James Version*, Matt. 5.48). If true, women might be included, as well as the vertically challenged, and people whose tessitura (singing range) ends far from the nether lines of the bass clef. Indeed, these exceptions could be innumerable. But in staying true to Aristotle, any exception must not stray too far from the text of IV.3, though I contend that any rehabilitation of magnanimity must acknowledge societal advance.

III. Women Can Be Magnanimous

Women now head some of the world's largest *Fortune 500* companies. They do so without a deep voice, though some report donning high heels to appear more dominant (*USA Today*). These women are magnanimous in that they have the same polished surety in themselves as the magnanimous man, and they are willing to achieve their goals and not, as Aristotle describes, "run away (from danger when a coward would), swinging [their] arms (to get away faster)" (*NE* 1123b 31 parentheticals in original). Women who are magnanimous know they are worthy of great things and seek for high honors.

But in Aristotle's day, impositions placed upon women by the state prevented them from having opportunities to be magnanimous (Beckett 463–74). Aristotle notes in this male-dominated society that "in women, the deliberative element of the soul lack[ed] authority" (468). Mischa Beckett questions whether that "lack of authority [was] intrapersonal or interpersonal" (468). Was it a problem with the fundamental constitution of women? Beckett asserts that Aristotle never answered such a question due to an unwillingness to question the sexist attitudes of his day (468). She argues that Aristotle's own word choice: *akyron*—meaning invalidity or lack of authority—provides clues as to his stance. First, that lack of public deliberation disenfranchised women; second, that men paid no heed to women; third, that women needed no authority "because her desires [were] better ordered;" and, fourth, that the visible pains of childbirth were an outward sign of an inward inability to exercise rational control over emotions (468). In Aristotle's day, these reasons provided justification for why women could not be magnanimous. Beckett suggests that women's lack of deliberation made it nearly impossible for them to develop the prudence necessary to obtain magnanimity, let alone any other virtues (at least not to their fullest extent) (471). The realities of Aristotle's day prevented women from ever being able to make an attempt to be magnanimous. Lacking an Aristotelian example of a magnanimous woman, Beckett suggests that historical figures such as Catherine the Great, Elizabeth I, Margaret Thatcher, Golda Meir, and others might provide a framework upon which to facilitate a definition (473).

A recent example of a magnanimous women might be Mary T. Barra, CEO of General Motors. In wake of the scandals affecting the credibility of GM, Barra is overseeing a greater era of transparency at the company regarding its faulty ignition switches brought about by poorly planned cost-cutting measures ("General Motors CEO Warns That Recall Fixes May Take Months"). In her efforts to improve GM's image, Barra is certainly not fleeing when a coward would, nor is she risking her reputation in a small matter. In the next section, I will speak more about magnanimity in business. In lieu of any Aristotelian exemplars of feminine magnanimity, the proper "disposition towards fellow citizens" suggested in the previous section as a requirement of the magnanimous man, demands women's inclusion. But if women can be magnanimous, what exceptions must be made for their inclusion while holding true to Aristotle's original definition?

The donning of high heels by some female CEOs is curious as it pertains to magnanimity: it suggests that height remains important. However, a deep voice appears antiquated in relation to women. Even Tessitore, who defended an open-ended interpretation of magnanimity, finds Aristotle's inclusion of a deep voice comical (Tessitore 31). Perhaps Aristotle included a deep voice as a quality ascribed to magnanimity because it fosters greater respect from listeners. Therefore, to allow women inclusion into magnanimity, modernification would be satisfied only by some sort of unique quality present in the feminine magnanimous voice which would place it on par with the deep, masculine magnanimous voice. I propose that this unique quality would be something both commanding and benign, carry a lyrical yet prudent dominance, and be majestic enough to persuade the sternest naysayer to undertake an unorthodox business decision. One example of a magnanimous voice comes from the field of sports; in a recent news article regarding the NFL's push to hire its first female referee, Sarah Thomas was reportedly able to effectively officiate the rules of football to players much larger than herself (*NBC Sports*). Surely her commanding voice, along with her stature and the other traits of magnanimity, played vital roles in her skills as a referee.

Mary T. Barra and Sarah Thomas aside, it is conceivable, as Beckett argues, that Aristotle never intended for women to be magnanimous, which is why he included a deep voice as part of the crowning virtue. By contrast, I maintain that if magnanimity is to have relevance in the twenty-first century, those original traits which disqualified half the population must be rehabilitated. But will the twenty-first century allow women to be magnanimous? Aristotle might agree, not because of the gains woman have made in recent decades, but because he would have seen their active deliberation and exercise of self-control—opportunities denied to them in ancient Greece. Women, of their own accord, have made strides in Western society: women now play active roles in politics, business, and academia. Even in nations where strict gender roles are enforced, brave women stand in the face of ridicule to pursue equal rights and pay. The starkest example of this is the recent push in Saudi Arabia to allow women the right to drive (*Wall Street Journal*). Facing serious opposition, such women are: "Open in their hatreds and [their] friendships, since concealment is proper to a frightened person. [They are] concerned for the truth more than for people's opinion. [They are] open in [their] speech and actions…" (*NE* 1124b 27–9). Hence, they are magnanimous!

V. Magnanimity Has Value In the 21st Century Workplace

Though I have cited female CEOs as the primary exemplars of magnanimity in the twenty-first century, I wish now to include males and speak of magnanimity in business generally. A business person who is magnanimous is keen to make tough decisions without fear of ridicule. Alex Havard offers a summation of magnanimity in business as follows:

> It is the striving of the spirit, of the will, of the mind, of the heart towards great things. And this is the first thing that we see in real leaders.… It's a vision of self and a vision of the others.… It has to do with a sense of mission; it has to do with a sense of vocation in life; it has to do with a capacity to set for yourself very high goals, [and to set for others] very high goals …[It is] a vision that you are not [a] functionary; a vision that money is something important but it's not everything.… These people enter business not to make profit; these people that are magnanimous, enter business in order to achieve personal and organizational greatness. ("Leadership")

Havard's description in part mirrors that of Aristotle's: the magnanimous person is willing to aim for great honors (though in the Aristotelian sense he has already achieved great honors). Havard cites as an example of magnanimity in business the success of Darwin Smith who was CEO of the Kimberly-Clark Corporation from 1971–91. Smith transformed Kimberly-Clark from an industrial paper supplier to the leading producer of consumer paper goods (Barboza). *Forbes* magazine and *The Wall Street Journal* criticized Smith for his unorthodox business decisions but Smith did not relent ("Leadership"). Within three years, the results of Kimberly-Clark were better than the results of 3M and Proctor and Gamble. Havard notes that "[Smith] didn't even answer those journalists who wrote against him, saying he was crazy" ("Leadership").

Smith refrained from gossip (*NE* 1125a 6). In ignoring his critics, Smith was not "given to praising people. Hence he [did] not speak evil even of his enemies" (*NE* 1125a 9). Smith was concerned for the truth more than others' opinions (*NE* 1124b 28). Smith was open in his speech and actions (*NE* 1124b 29). He did not run away from danger (*NE* 1123b 31). In reorganizing and increasing the profitability of Kimberly-Clark, Smith did not shy from the tough decisions. Some people had to be let go, others had to be convinced that their new CEO was not crazy ("Leadership"). In the end, Smith did not oversee such a profound change in his company through domineering management, he oversaw change through his vision of himself and of those around him—that they were not functionaries, that their complacency in 100 years of making coated paper was not their ultimate purpose. In speaking of complacency, Havard adds that "[Business complacency] is management. This is not leadership. Management's about how to get things done. Leadership is about how do you achieve greatness. And, by achieving greatness, making incredible things done. Not just things done, but *incredible* things done" ("Leadership"; emphasis added).

Business leadership in this sense would seem to model Aristotle. Magnanimity becomes the fearless spark of the entrepreneur, or the vision of the daring CEO who intends to restructure a company. Normal things are replaced by incredible things. And, modernification allows business magnanimity to be attainable by all courageous enough to achieve great things.

VI. Conclusion

The crowning virtue remains valuable in the twenty-first century. Though its original description in the *Nicomachean Ethics* is dated, the concepts and surety ascribed the magnanimous man or woman seem to retain their salience in an era of economic uncertainty. Modernified magnanimity is the trait of leaders. I believe the average person has strayed from magnanimity and that this trend is to the detriment of society. This straying is perhaps most exemplified in the high rising terminal or upward voice inflections which increasingly end both statements and questions—so-called uptalk. Such passive phraseology signals a larger problem. The problem may be the same Aristotle was trying to solve, that young people not be idle, but be sure of themselves and given lofty goals for which to strive. For in the absence of such goals, decadence and complacency often set in. There may be no more lofty goal than magnanimity, which is why a study of magnanimity may incite a surety of character; a realization that one is not to be dominated but to work with others, displaying greatness among one's peers, not because superiority over them is difficult, but to lift them up.

I agree in part with Crisp's objection to magnanimity's rehabilitation. If strictly interpreted, the crowning virtue truly is repugnant and unobtainable. But surely the study of Philosophy encourages new incite into all ideas, young and old—a review of thought which may reveal pathways of knowledge leading to the betterment of society. Hanley was right to propose that Aristotle was speaking to the youth of Athens of magnanimity in hopes that they might emulate the crowning virtue and encourage others to do likewise. The modernified magnanimous man or woman of our day is the leader, the future president, the person who seeks to lift others, and together, achieve greatness.

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