What's Wrong With Megalopsychia?[1]

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Abstract
This paper looks at two accounts of Aristotle's views on the virtue of megalopsychia. The first, defended by Christopher Cordner, commits Aristotle to two claims about the virtuous person that might seem unpalatable to modern readers. The second account, defended by Roger Crisp, does not commit Aristotle to these claims. Some might count this as an advantage of Crisp's account. However, I argue that Cordner's account, not Crisp's, is actually the better interpretation of Aristotle. Nonetheless, this does not ultimately spell trouble for Aristotle, since, as I argue, the claims that Cordner's account commits Aristotle to are, on closer inspection, not really problematic.

Christopher Cordner argues[2] that Aristotle commits himself to claims about the nature of virtue that modern readers would likely reject. As he puts it,

> there are some things which Kant, certainly, and perhaps many of us, would see as external to virtue which Aristotle holds to be properly internal to it. These include a proper regard for honor and esteem from one's peers, the desire to avoid shame, and a proud valuing of oneself as a person who has succeeded in constituting himself as virtuous.[3]

According to Cordner, Aristotle commits himself to these claims in his discussion of the virtue of megalopsychia (often translated as 'greatness of soul' or 'proper pride').

In this paper, I will look at Cordner's account of Aristotle's views about megalopsychia and contrast it with an alternative account defended by Roger Crisp.[4] It seems that by emphasizing a different passage of NE, IV.3 than Cordner does, Crisp ends up with an

[1] I would like to thank Fred Feldman, Casey Perin and especially Gary Matthews for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

[2] Christopher Cordner, 'Aristotelian Virtue and Its Limitations', *Philosophy* **69** (1994), Pp. 291–316.

[3] Cordner, op. cit., p. 296.

[4] Roger Crisp, 'Aristotle on Greatness of Soul,' in *The Blackwell Guide to Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, ed. Richard Kraut, (Blackwell Publishing: 2006) Pp. 158–179.

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account of megalopsychia on which Aristotle is not committed to the perhaps unpalatable claims that Cordner's account commits Aristotle to. Some might count this as an advantage of Crisp's account. However, I will argue that Crisp's account faces some serious problems as an interpretation of Aristotle that Cordner's does not. Nonetheless, this does not ultimately spell trouble for Aristotle, since, as I will argue, the claims that Cornder's account commits Aristotle to are not as problematic as they might at first seem.

1. What Modern Readers Might Find Objectionable

What Cordner thinks modern readers would find objectionable about megalopsychia is its close connection with a concern for honor. It is difficult to pin Cordner down on exactly what it is he thinks moderns dislike about megalopsychia. However, I propose that there are two seemingly problematic claims that Cordner thinks Aristotle is committed to in virtue of what he says about megalopsychia in NE, IV.3. The first claim concerns the motivations of the virtuous person, while the second concerns virtuous action.

VM: *An essential part of the virtuous person's motivation is a desire to obtain honor and avoid losing it.*

VA: *Honor-procuring behavior (i.e. acting in ways that help one obtain honor and avoid dishonor) is an essential part of acting virtuously.*

Cordner explicitly says that Aristotle is committed to something like VM: 'Aristotle goes as far as to say that a desire for honor is actually internal to the motive to action of the virtuous person.'[5] When it comes to the claim about virtuous action, the following passage clearly shows that Cordner takes Aristotle to be committed to VA as well: 'It is not that [the megalopsychos] just takes pleasure in such honours when they happen upon him. He actively seeks and claims them as his due.'[6] Furthermore, Cordner goes on to say that 'Aristotle's suggestion here... seems to be that an appropriate worldly self-assertion is not only consistent with, but even a proper part of, the greatest moral virtue [megalopsychia].'[7] *Why* does Cordner take these two claims to be part of Aristotle's view? The

[5] Cordner, op. cit., p. 299.
[6] Cordner, op. cit., p. 298.
[7] Cordner, op. cit., p. 298.

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main reason, I think, is that Cordner's account of megalopsychia entails them.

2. Cordner's Account of Megalopsychia

In his account of what megalopsychia is for Aristotle, Cordner seems to focus on the passage around 1123b25, where Aristotle says: 'Honours and dishonours, then, are the objects with respect to which the proud man [the megalopsychos] is as he should be.'[8] Call this *Passage B*. By contrast, Roger Crisp, as we'll see later on, seems to focus on what Aristotle says at the very beginning of IV.3, at 1123b1: 'The man is thought to be proud [megalopsychos] who thinks himself worthy of great things, being worthy of them.' Call this *Passage A* (since it appears earlier than *Passage B* in Aristotle).

Emphasizing *Passage B*, Cordner explains megalopsychia as follows:

> the subject matter of megalopsychia is honour, and the virtue of megalopsychia centrally involves having the right attitude, and acting in the right way, towards honours and dishonours.[9]

If we assume that virtues are firm and settled dispositions of character, we may sketch Cordner's account of megalopsychia as follows:

Megalopsychia 1: A person, P, has the virtue of megalopsychia iff

1) P has a firm and settled disposition to have 'the right attitudes' towards honor and dishonor, and
2) P has a firm and settled disposition to 'act the right way' towards honor and dishonor.

To fully understand the first of these conditions, we need to know what is meant by the phrase 'the right attitudes towards honor and dishonor.' Given Cordner's subsequent discussion, there can be little doubt that he thinks that it consists, at least in part, in the desire to obtain honor and to avoid losing it. Consider, for instance, Cordner's claim that the megalopsychos 'actively claims and seeks

[8] This is Ross's translation. Ross translates 'megalopsychos' as 'proud man.' See Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. David Ross. (Oxford University Press: 1998) p. 90. I use Ross's translation throughout, except where indicated.

[9] Cordner, op. cit., p. 298.

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them [i.e. honors] as his due. And doing this is not a feature of his psychology merely external and additional to his virtue: on the contrary, it is what he does qua megalopsychos.'[10] Presumably the megalopsychos is so motivated because he desires honor. Accordingly, in order to have the right attitudes towards honor and dishonor, one thing that Cordner seems to think is required is that the agent be motivated by the desire to obtain honor and avoid dishonor.

Furthermore, we need to know what is meant by phrases like 'obtaining honor' and 'avoiding dishonor.' One might think that 'obtaining honor' is here supposed to mean the attainment of things like trophies, medals and privileges. However, this would seem to be a mistake, since it would make the motivations of the megalopsychos come out materialistic and superficial. So instead, 'obtaining honor' should be taken to mean the attainment of high status, good reputation, the respect and deference of others, superior social standing and other such social goods (i.e. things of which medals and trophies might perhaps be *symbols*).[11] By the same token, dishonor should be conceived of as the loss of such things. Thus honor and dishonor are not concerned chiefly with mere material objects. Rather, honor and dishonor are intimately bound up with one's relationships with others, one's place in society, with how others view one and with how one views oneself.

It would be quite implausible to suppose that having the right attitudes towards honor and dishonor would consist *solely* in being motivated by the desire to obtain honor and to avoid losing it. If megalopsychia is to be an Aristotelian virtue and fit the schema of the golden mean, then the megalopsychos must desire honor neither too much nor too little, but just the right amount. Thus it would be charitable to suppose that having the right attitudes towards honor and dishonor requires having a desire for honor *that is not too strong nor too weak*. Other attitudes, as well, are surely required in order to have the right attitudes towards honor and dishonor. Some clear examples are i) a desire to get only the honor one deserves and ii) intentions that cohere with one's honor-related desires. I do

[10] Cordner, op. cit., p. 298.

[11] This conception of honor as respect, reputation and status (as opposed to material goods like medals and trophies) seems to be shared by Crisp as well. He says: 'Also worth noting is that Aristotle does not necessarily have in mind material goods, such as wealth. The honor received by the virtuous from other virtuous people is analogous to the honor paid to the gods, in the form of respect and its symbols.' Crisp, op. cit., p. 163.

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not pretend to have given a complete account of 'the right attitudes,' however.

What, then, about the second of the megalopsychos' characteristic dispositions? To understand this disposition, we need to know what 'acting the right way toward honor and dishonor' means. We saw Cordner claiming that the megalopsychos 'actively seeks and claims them [i.e. honors] as his due.'[12] Elsewhere he asserts that 'an appropriate worldly self-assertion is not only consistent with, but even a proper part of, the greatest moral virtue [i.e. megalopsychia].'[13] This suggests that Cordner thinks the megalopsychos will do that which would allow him to win honor. So it seems reasonable to assume that for Cordner 'acting rightly' towards honor and dishonor would consist in doing what would help one obtain the former and avoid the latter.

So far the proposal is quite vague. What if a certain action, A, will win one a bit of honor, but there is something else one could do instead, B, that would enhance one's honor much more? The action A would indeed 'help one obtain honor,' but it would clearly not be the action to pick in order to act rightly towards honor and dishonor. Acting rightly towards honor and dishonor seems to require doing that which would increase one's honor the most – or whenever increasing one's honor is not possible, doing that which would decrease it the least. Thus we should revise the account of acting rightly towards honor and dishonor and say that this consists in doing what would maximize the amount of *net honor* – i.e. the amount of honor minus the amount of dishonor – that one possesses.

Now a further problem becomes apparent: maximizing the amount of net honor one possesses might require one to do horrible things. Suppose that slandering and assassinating one's political rivals would maximize one's net honor. According to the present proposal, this would be the action to choose in order to act rightly towards honor and dishonor (and it would be what the megalopsychos would do). But it would not be virtuous. So this cannot be 'acting rightly' towards honor and dishonor. This problem, too, can be avoided if we revise the account of acting rightly towards honor and dishonor, this time by taking a cue from Aristotle himself.

Aristotle says repeatedly that the megalopsychos has the other virtues. For instance: 'greatness in every virtue would seem to be

[12] Cordner, op. cit., p. 298.
[13] Cordner, op. cit., p. 298.

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characteristic of a proud man [a megalopsychos]' (1123b30). So the megalopsychos would presumably not do *just whatever* maximizes the amount of net honor he possesses, but rather, in acting rightly towards honor and dishonor, he would do what *without being vicious* would maximize his net honor. So to avoid the present problem, we should revise the account of acting rightly towards honor and dishonor so that now it consists in doing what, *within the limits of what virtue in general permits*, maximizes the amount of net honor one possesses. More specifically, the proposal on the table is this. In order to figure out which of your alternatives constitutes 'acting rightly' towards honor and dishonor, you should follow this procedure: 1) start by ruling out all the alternatives that are vicious, and then 2) of all the remaining alternatives, find the one, A, such that none of the other remaining alternatives would result in your possessing a greater amount of net honor than doing A would result in. This action maximizes the amount of net honor you possess (note there may be ties for first place) and it would constitute 'acting rightly' towards honor and dishonor. This is the most plausible rendering I can give of Cordner's sketchy claims about what 'acting rightly' towards honor and dishonor consists in. One must, I take it, have a firm and settled disposition to act in this way in order to fulfill the second condition in *Megalopsychia 1*.

If *Megalopsychia 1* is the correct interpretation of Aristotle, he clearly would be committed to VM and VA. For one thing, having megalopsychia requires having the right attitudes towards honor and dishonor. This involves, among other things, being motivated by a desire to obtain honor and avoid dishonor. Accordingly, since the virtuous person has the virtue of megalopsychia, his motivation would necessarily include a desire for honor – just as VM states. Furthermore, the second condition of *Megalopsychia 1* requires that one be disposed to act rightly towards honor and dishonor. Thus the virtuous person, having megalopsychia, would necessarily engage in honor-procuring behavior – just as VA states.

3. Crisp's Account of Megalopsychia

If Cordner's account of megalopsychia is correct, Aristotle would be committed to two claims, VM and VA, which modern readers might find problematic. However, Roger Crisp suggests an interpretation of megalopsychia according to which Aristotle would not be committed to the claims VM and VA. Whereas Cordner thinks the

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subject matter of megalopsychia is honor, Crisp claims that the subject matter of megalopsychia is 'thinking oneself worthy of great honor.'[14] Thus Crisp takes the megalopsychos to be the one who 'think[s] himself worthy of great honor at the right times, for the right reasons, and so on . . .'[15] As Crisp subsequently makes clear, in order to think oneself worthy of great honors for the right reasons (and thus have megalopsychia), one must in fact really *be* worthy of great honors. Thus we can state Crisp's account of megalopsychia as follows:

Megalopsychia 2: A person, P, has the virtue of megalopsychia iff

1) P thinks himself worthy of great honor, and
2) P really is worthy of great honor.

This account will not be complete without an explanation of what it means to be worthy of great honor. Crisp does not explicitly address this question, but several of his comments reveal that he thinks that possessing and exercising virtue, for Aristotle, is what makes one worthy of honor. To take just one example, Crisp appeals to the following claim as a premise in one of his arguments: 'honor is the reward for exercising virtue, so that smaller honor must be the reward for a lesser exercise of the virtues.'[16] This shows that Crisp thinks that the amount of honor one deserves is directly proportionate to the degree to which one possesses and exercises virtue. Being worthy of great honor would thus require being exceptionally virtuous.

Now it should be clear what Crisp's account of megalopsychia comes to. One possesses this virtue just in case one is exceptionally virtuous (viz. condition 2) and has enough self-understanding to be aware of this fact about oneself (viz. condition 1).[17] Notice that this account of Crisp's is very close to Aristotle's description of the megalopsychos in what I called *Passage A*: 'The man is thought to be proud [megalopsychos] who thinks himself worthy of great things, being worthy of them' (1123b1). Cordner's account, by contrast, according to which megalopsychia requires having the right attitudes

[14] Crisp, op. cit., p. 160.
[15] Crisp, op. cit., p. 160.
[16] Crisp, op. cit., p. 163.
[17] Howard Cruzer offers an account of megalopsychia that is practically identical to Crisp's. See Howard Cruzer, 'Aristotle's Much Maligned, *Megalopsychos*,' *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, **69** no. 2 (June 1991) p. 132.

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and acting in the right ways with regard to one's honor, bears more resemblance to what Aristotle says in *Passage B*: 'Honours and dishonours, then, are the objects with respect to which the proud man [the megalopsychos] is as he should be' (1123b25). I suspect that the differences between Crisp's and Cordner's accounts of Aristotelian megalopsychia have resulted from Crisp focusing on *Passage A* and Cordner focusing on *Passage B*.

For our purposes, the most important difference between the two accounts of megalopsychia is that on Crisp's account, Aristotle is not committed to either VM or VA. On Crisp's account, to be megalopsychos is to be virtuous and know that this makes one worthy of honor. All that seems to follow from being megalopsychos in this sense when it comes to motivation is that one will have the desire to do virtuous things. For this just follows from being virtuous in general. Of course, Crisp's account does not *rule out* the possibility that the megalopsychos will be motivated to obtain honor and avoid dishonor. But if he is so motivated, this would, in Cordner's terminology, be 'external to his virtue' – i.e. not something that is *implied* by that person's being megalopsychos. Thus on Crisp's account of megalopsychia, Aristotle would not be committed to VM.

When it comes to action, all that seems to follow from having Crisp's kind of megalopsychia is that, being a virtuous person, one will do virtuous things. The megalopsychos might be fortunate enough to win honor through his virtuous actions if they became widely known and celebrated, but he would not necessarily take any steps to ensure this result. If the actions of Crisp's megalopsychos do end up winning him honor, this would merely be a lucky accident, something external to the virtuousness of his actions. Accordingly, Crisp's megalopsychos does not necessarily engage in honor-procuring behavior, and so Aristotle would not be committed to VA either on Crisp's account.

In light of the fact that Crisp's interpretation of megalopsychia does not commit Aristotle to VM and VA, this interpretation might seem to be preferable to modern readers. However, as I will go on to argue, there are good reasons to doubt that Crisp's account is the correct interpretation of Aristotle.

4. Which Account is the Better Interpretation?

Cordner's account, as an interpretation of Aristotle, faces an important objection. The problem is that although it captures what I have called *Passage B*, it is not clear that Cordner's account captures

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Aristotle's claims in *Passage A*. There Aristotle states that 'The man is thought to be proud [megalopsychos] who thinks himself worthy of great things, being worthy of them' (1123b1). How could Cordner's account of the megalopsychos as the one who has the right attitudes and acts the right way towards honor and dishonor capture this claim of Aristotle's?

Cordner should respond to the worry by pointing out that one of the 'right attitudes towards honor and dishonor' would be a correct belief about how much honor one deserves. In order to have all the right attitudes towards honor and dishonor, not only must one have a desire (of the right strength) to obtain the former and avoid the latter, but one must also have a true belief that one is worthy of great honor. If such a true belief is one of the attitudes that one must have in order to fulfill the first condition in *Megalopsychia 1*, then Cordner's account would capture Aristotle's claim in *Passage A*. It would guarantee both that the megalopsychos *is* worthy of great honor (i.e. is exceptionally virtuous) and that he knows it.

Whereas this problem for Cordner's account of megalopsychia does not pose a real threat, Crisp's account faces three problems that do indeed undermine its plausibility as an interpretation of Aristotle. First of all, there are several passages in Aristotle that seem to indicate that the megalopsychos both desires honor and actively seeks to obtain it. This would be a problem for Crisp's account, since (as we saw) his account does not capture these aspects of megalopsychia. According to Crisp's account, the megalopsychos just is someone who believes that his virtue makes him worthy of great honor, and who, moreover, is correct in this belief. There seems to be nothing in this account that implies that the megalopsychos desires the great honor he deserves or actively seeks to obtain it. After all, a person might know that he deserves honor, while at the same time not desiring it in the least or doing anything to obtain it. His otherwise virtuous actions might happen to bring him honor, but there is nothing in Crisp's account of megalopsychia to *guarantee* that the person with this virtue will either desire or actively seek honor.

There are, however, passages in Aristotle that suggest that the megalopsychos is indeed guaranteed, because of how he behaves qua megalopsychos, both to desire and to actively seek out the honor he deserves. Consider the following passage:

> **1125a22:** For the unduly humble man, being worthy of good things, *robs* himself of what he deserves, and seems to have something bad about him from the fact that he does not think himself

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> worthy of good things, and seems also not to know himself; *else he would have desired the things he was worthy of, since these were good*. Yet such people are not thought to be fools, but rather unduly retiring. Such a reputation, however, seems actually to make them worse; for *each class of people aims at what corresponds to its worth*, and these people stand back even from noble actions and undertakings, deeming themselves unworthy, and from external goods no less. (My italics)

Aristotle here asserts that the unduly humble man has something wrong with him, since he fails to desire the good things he deserves, such as honor, and thus 'robs' himself of them. Accordingly, we may infer that the megalopsychos, since he is *not* unduly humble, would indeed *desire* the great honor of which he is worthy. This by itself is a problem for Crisp's account. What's more, it is also plausible that the passage supports the claim that the megalopsychos actively seeks honor. The fact that the megalopsychos does not 'rob' himself of the goods he deserves suggests that he would act so as to obtain them (at least under normal circumstances).[18]

The claim that the megalopsychos actively seeks honor receives further support from the following passage:

> **1124b25:** Again, it is characteristic of the proud man . . . to be sluggish and to hold back except where great honour or a great work is at stake, and to be a man of few deeds, but of great and notable ones.

Aristotle is claiming here that the megalopsychos tends to be moved to perform a given act only when it is one whose performance would

[18] The megalopsychos would actively seek honor only under normal circumstances because it seems a desire for honor would *motivate* one to actively seek it only under normal circumstances. Suppose a person is pursuing a scientific discovery that would be worthy of the Nobel Prize. Even if he desires to obtain an honor like the Nobel Prize, it needn't be the case that this desire is what motivates him to carry out his research. For perhaps he knows that people of his nationality or gender or whatever are, as a matter of fact, never granted honors like the Nobel Prize. Despite cases like this, however, there is still a tight connection between desiring something and being motivated by this desire to seek it out. The desire to obtain the honor one knows one deserves will (at least help) motivate one to actively seek it out as long as one does not believe that obtaining this honor is impossible. Thus the megalopsychos' desire for honor would get him to actively seek it only under normal circumstances.

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increase the amount of honor he possesses. This suggests that the megalopsychos actively seeks honor.

Perhaps, however, Aristotle here is merely claiming that the megalopsychos will concentrate on performing great works, which, being great, are deserving of honor. On this reading of the passage at 1124b25, Aristotle is not claiming that the megalopsychos concentrates on doing great deeds *because* he desires honor. Nonetheless, this interpretation is not very plausible. We know from the other passage just discussed (1125a22) that the megalopsychos desires the honor he deserves. But suppose we now find out that 1) the megalopsychos tends to perform only those actions that will win him honor, and 2) he insists that the reason he performs only honor-enhancing actions has got nothing to do with his desire for honor. It would then be tempting to say that he is simply being dishonest with himself. After all, our desires exert an influence (perhaps merely unconsciously) on our decisions. As a result, it is implausible to suppose that the megalopsychos' desire for honor would be no part of the reason why he tends to perform only deeds that increase his honor. So the most plausible interpretation of this passage is not that the megalopsychos just happens to concentrate on performing honor-enhancing deeds, but rather that he does so *because* he desires honor. And if the megalopsychos tends to perform only those actions that would be beneficial to his honor *because* he desires honor, it is fair to say that the megalopsychos *actively pursues* honor.

Given these two passages, it seems warranted to attribute to Aristotle the view that the megalopsychos both desires and actively seeks to obtain honor.[19] But this would be a problem for Crisp's account of megalopsychia, since (as noted above) it does not imply that the megalopsychos will either desire or actively seek out the great honor he deserves. Cordner's account of megalopsychia

[19] There are several passages that, at least at first glance, might seem to suggest that Aristotle thinks the megalopsychos actively seeks honor. In particular, the passages 1123b12, 1123b22 and 1124a5, in Ross' translation, have the megalopsychos 'making claims to great honor' and 'being concerned with honor and dishonor.' (In fact, Cordner cites some of these passages as evidence for his account of megalopsychia. See Cordner, op. cit., p. 298.) However, Ross's translation of these passages seems to be idiosyncratic. In the original Greek, these passages clearly do not suggest that the megalopsychos actively seeks honor. (A more literal translation, such as Crisp's own, makes this clear. See Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*, trans. Roger Crisp. (Cambridge University Press: 2000), p. 68–72.)

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clearly gets this right, however, and therefore seems preferable to Crisp's account on this score.

There are further problems for Crisp's interpretation lurking in other passages. One is that Crisp's interpretation seems unable to explain why the possession of megalopsychia would make the virtuous person's virtue even greater, as Aristotle says it does at 1124a23: megalopsychia 'is a sort of crown of the virtues: *for it makes them greater* and is not found without them'. Crisp tries to explain the fact that the possession of megalopsychia enhances a virtuous person's virtue by arguing that megalopsychia, in his sense of knowing that one is virtuous, 'could make virtues already great even greater, by spurring its possessor into action in situations where the timid will stand back.'[20] The problem here is that it is difficult to see why the virtuous person, already having courage, would require any extra spurring on at all. Accordingly, it is not clear what reason there could be for supposing that having megalopsychia in Crisp's sense would make the virtuous person's virtue greater.[21]

By contrast, Cordner's interpretation of megalopsychia makes it clear why the addition of megalopsychia would increase the amount of virtue one already possesses. Megalopsychia, on his view, is the disposition to have the right attitudes towards honor (e.g. a desire of the appropriate strength to obtain it) and to act in ways that will help one actually obtain it. Thus possessing megalopsychia is necessarily going to help one obtain honor, high standing and the respect of one's peers, which is, according to Aristotle, at least *one of* the important external goods.[22] Thus the addition of megalopsychia will make the already virtuous person *more virtuous* because having this virtue guarantees that one will be excellent at something that the other virtues (e.g. justice, temperance, courage) by themselves *do not* guarantee one's excellence at – namely acquiring honor, high stature and the respect of one's peers (and avoiding the loss of these). So the addition of megalopsychia in Cordner's sense would indeed make the already

[20] Crisp, op. cit., p. 167.

[21] Perhaps Crisp could respond that an otherwise courageous person would not volunteer for the dangerous mission unless he thought of himself as a virtuous person. However, it seems that in that case, the person in question would not completely have the virtue of courage. If completely courageous, one would have everything needed to get one to do courageous acts. But that means megalopsychia would not add anything to one's courage. Perhaps it will be objected that one cannot fully possess one virtue without also possessing all the others. But then it seems that *every* virtue would deserve the name 'crown of the virtues.'

[22] See Crisp, op. cit., p. 162.

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virtuous person more excellent. Cordner's account of megalopsychia thus seems preferable to Crisp's on this score as well.[23]

The third problem with Crisp's account is that, if it were correct, there would be no apparent way to explain why Aristotle provides the particular details about the megalopsychos' behavior that he does. Consider these five claims of Aristotle's about how the megalopsychos behaves: i) the megalopsychos only accepts the praise of his peers, while disdaining the honor and praise given to him by the low (1124a5), ii) he is rather indifferent towards both good and ill fortune and is not over-joyed by the former nor over-pained by the latter (1124a15), iii) he gladly confers benefits, but is loathe to accept favors (1124b5), iv) he is haughty and lofty towards those of high status, but unassuming towards those of the middle class (1124b20), and v) he does not have 'a long memory' for wrongs, but tends to overlook them (1125a3). If Crisp is right that the megalopsychos is essentially the individual who correctly believes that his great virtue makes him worthy of great honor, why would Aristotle also attribute *these* five traits to the megalopsychos? What connection is there between correctly thinking oneself worthy of great honor and, for example, accepting only the praise of one's peers, while disdaining that of one's inferiors? None, it seems. The same goes for the other four claims. Thus if Crisp's account is correct, these five additional claims describing the megalopsychos would be mysterious.

Not so if Cordner's account is correct, however. Cordner's account states that the megalopsychos is, essentially, the individual who wants honor and is good at getting it. If this is the correct interpretation of how Aristotle conceives of the megalopsychos, then we would expect Aristotle to say something concrete and non-schematic about what attitudes and behaviors *in particular* tend to help one obtain honor and avoid its loss. And the five claims mentioned above seem to convey information of just this sort. As I'll go on to argue, each claim recommends a type of behavior that, generally, it is prudent to adopt in order to achieve honor and avoid dishonor. Thus it is no mystery that Aristotle would use *these* five claims to describe the megalopsychos, if Cordner's account of megalopsychia is correct.

[23] Perhaps Crisp could respond that possessing megalopsychia in his sense *does* guarantee one's excellence at something that having the other virtues does not: namely, excellence at knowing that one is worthy of great honor. Nonetheless, this excellence would not seem to be a very valuable one to have. Unless, of course, Crisp could provide some independent explanation of why it is valuable to know that one is worthy of great honor. But this is precisely the question Crisp needed an answer to in the first place.

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Each of Aristotle's five claims recommends a good rule of thumb to follow in order to obtain honor and avoid dishonor. When it comes to the first, while it is clear that accepting the praise of one's peers will typically reflect well on one, accepting the praise of those whose stature is much lower than one's own could easily prove to diminish one's stature. For instance, consider the likely effect of a professor allowing his Introduction to Philosophy students to openly praise him in class as one of the most talented philosophers living today. Clearly the professor would lose face by allowing his students to pass judgment – even a positive one – on his philosophical ability, since they, as novices, are in no position to make this sort of call. If a student makes such a comment in class, the professor should respond with a certain amount of disdain in order to avoid losing face. This analogy illustrates the insight that Aristotle has latched on to when describing the megalopsychos as disdainful of the praise and honors offered by those with a much lower stature. To obtain honor and avoid dishonor, it seems prudent to follow the megalopsychos' example in this regard.

The same is true of Aristotle's second claim about the megalopsychos. In order to give the impression that one is formidable and worthy of respect, it is a bad idea to let oneself be seen either as eager and excited about a particular windfall or as upset and dejected about a given misfortune. To remain cool both in the face of good and ill fortune gives the impression that most gains and losses are of relatively small consequence to one. This again shows one to be a grand and estimable individual whose position cannot easily be affected by gains or losses. By the same token, one might outright *dishonor* oneself – i.e. lower the degree to which one is respected – by getting very upset about a less-than-earth-shattering loss. For this gives the impression that one cannot withstand the loss in question and that one thus is not so estimable after all. As a result, to behave in accordance with Aristotle's second claim about the megalopsychos seems to be a good rule of thumb to follow in order to obtain honor and avoid dishonor.

It also seems to be prudent, with an eye to one's honor, to comport oneself in accordance with Aristotle's third claim about the megalopsychos. This is because of the commonplace that conferring a gift tends to have the psychological effect of placing the recipient in the giver's debt and thus in a position of inferiority.[24] If this is correct,

[24] This is a commonplace at least in the fields of sociology and anthropology. The idea traces to Marcel Mauss' influential book *The Gift*. (Marcel Mauss, *The Gift*. Norton & Company, Inc. 1990). For a good contemporary

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then it is to be expected that someone who desires honor and excels at obtaining it would gladly give gifts and do favors (since this would place him in a position of superiority relative to the recipient), but would not want to receive them (since this would place him in a position of inferiority relative to the giver).

Being haughty towards peers, but unassuming towards inferiors is another good rule of thumb to follow to obtain honor and avoid its loss. There is respect and status to be won by being proud and challenging towards peers or superiors, whereas this is not the case when it comes to inferiors. As Aristotle puts the point, 'it is a difficult and lofty thing to be superior to the former [i.e. people who enjoy high position], but easy to be so to the latter [i.e. those of the middle class]' (1124b20). What's more, challenging inferiors could be quite risky business, since one only stands to humiliate oneself and lose status in the event that the inferior should unexpectedly win the challenge. On the other hand, being bested by a superior would not significantly lessen one's status. Thus haughty and challenging behavior towards superiors is prudent with an eye to honor because of the potential for large gains and the relatively small risks it involves. By contrast, such behavior towards inferiors is unwise because of the small potential for gain and the significant risks it involves.

Finally, when it comes to Aristotle's fifth claim about the megalopsychos, namely that he does not have 'a long memory' for wrongs, but rather tends to overlook them, it seems prudent to emulate the megalopsychos in this regard as well. As with Aristotle's second claim, the reasoning here is that all but the most extreme injuries would be inconsequential to individuals who are grand and estimable. Such an individual can effortlessly overlook and forgive all but the most extreme injuries done to him. Accordingly, one may advertise that one is a grand and impressive individual by overlooking and forgiving the wrongs done to one. Because such behavior tends to send the signal that one is estimable, to behave this way is prudent for the purpose of obtaining honor.

We have now seen that, for each of these five claims that Aristotle makes about the megalopsychos, bearing oneself in the recommended way is a good rule of thumb to follow in order to obtain honor and

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explanation of the idea, see W.I. Miller, *Humiliation*, (Cornell University Press: 1993), p. 17 or Campbell, J.K. *Honour, Family and Patronage* (Oxford University Press: 1964), p. 95. This phenomenon was also recognized by Hobbes. See Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chap. XI, 'Of the difference of Manners.'

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avoid dishonor. Accordingly, it is in no way mysterious, if Cordner's account of megalopsychia is correct, that Aristotle should have used *these* particular details to describe the megalopsychos. For on his account, the megalopsychos will necessarily behave in ways that are beneficial to his honor.[25] By contrast, Crisp's account does not provide any such neat explanation of why Aristotle would have picked these five behaviors, as opposed to others, to describe the megalopsychos. This counts strongly in favor of Cordner's account being the correct interpretation of Aristotle.

Thus Cordner's interpretation of Aristotle's view of megalopsychia seems to have three major advantages over Crisp's interpretation. Unlike Crisp's account, Cordner's account 1) captures Aristotle's view that the megalopsychos both desires and actively seeks honor, 2) explains Aristotle's view that megalopsychia is 'the crown of the virtues,' and 3) explains why Aristotle picked the five behaviors mentioned above, as opposed to others, to describe the megalopsychos. However, if Cordner's account is the correct interpretation of Aristotle, that would mean Aristotle is committed to the perhaps troubling claims VM and VA. So in the final section of this paper, I want to investigate why modern readers might be inclined to reject VM and VA and ask whether this inclination is justified.

5. What's Wrong with VM and VA?

There seem to be five main ways in which a modern reader might find VM and VA problematic. The first problem, which concerns just VA, is noticed by Cordner: 'Suppose on an occasion virtue demands of a person that he sacrifice his life, and he reckons it overwhelmingly likely that if he does so he will be maliciously and falsely branded a coward, whereas if he runs away he can escape all calumny.'[26] VA states that an essential part of being virtuous is to engage in honor-procuring behavior. So in the case Cordner describes, VA might seem to imply that acting virtuously would require that one run away, since this is the only way to obtain honor and avoid dishonor. But running away cannot be what acting virtuously requires, since it is a cowardly act and obviously not virtuous at all. So VA seems

[25] Christopher Taylor seems to agree with this understanding of why Aristotle makes these five claims about the megalopsychos' character. See Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*, trans. C.C.W. Taylor. (Oxford: 2006) p. 224–225.

[26] Cordner, op. cit., p. 305.

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to be false. Such a case might seem to show that engaging in honor-procuring behavior cannot be an essential part of acting virtuously.

However, this objection reflects an uncharitable understanding of the claim Aristotle is committed to. VA would imply that being virtuous requires running away in the present case only if 'honor-procuring behavior' here is understood as doing *whatever* would allow one to obtain honor and avoid dishonor. So instead VA should be understood as the claim that acting virtuously essentially involves doing that which, *of the set of actions that virtue in general renders permissible*, would help one obtain honor and avoid dishonor (if there are any). If VA is understood in this way, the above objection does not threaten. Since running away in Cordner's case is not among the set of morally permissible alternatives, VA, properly understood, would not imply that being virtuous requires running away. This is simply a case where none of the alternatives permitted by virtue would help one obtain honor or avoid dishonor.

Notice that this proper understanding of VA is precisely what Cordner's account of megalopsychia implies about the virtuous person's actions. After all, being megalopsychos in Cordner's sense involves performing whichever of one's *virtuous* alternatives would maximize the net amount of honor one possesses. So if Cordner's account of megalopsychia is correct, Aristotle need not admit that there can be situations in which acting as would the megalopsychos conflicts with what virtue in general requires.

The second problem, which concerns just VM, is similar in many respects to the previous problem. The idea here is that if VM is true, the virtuous person's desires are guaranteed to conflict under certain circumstances, which is a contingency that Aristotle admits should not be possible (cf. NE VII.1).[27] Consider a situation where the virtuous person stands to gain a large amount of honor from the performance of some immoral action. VM would seem to imply that the virtuous person, in such a situation, will necessarily have a desire to do the action that will bring him honor. But since he is

[27] NE VII.1 reveals that Aristotle thinks that the virtuous person cannot be subject to conflicting desires. There Aristotle distinguishes the virtuous person from the continent man, who 'knowing that his appetites are bad, refuses on account of his rational principle to follow them.' (1145b10). This means that the virtuous person, since he is not merely a continent person, does not have any bad appetites that he must use rationality to overcome. Accordingly, it should not be possible for the virtuous person to find himself in situations where he has some bad desire that conflicts with his other, virtuous desires.

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virtuous, he will of course also desire *not* to do something that is immoral. And even if the virtuous person, whenever he faces a conflict of this sort, would in fact always act on the latter desire, he would still be subject to a conflict of desires of the sort that Aristotle rules out in NE VII.1. Thus, it might seem, Aristotle cannot hold VM.

This objection may be deflected in the same way as the previous objection was. VM is not to be understood as the claim that being virtuous essentially involves the desire to obtain honor *by any means at all*. Rather, it should be understood as the much more reasonable claim that being virtuous essentially involves a desire to obtain honor *only by means that are not morally impermissible*. If VM is understood in this way, it will not imply that the virtuous person would desire to increase his honor by performing immoral actions. Accordingly, his attitudes would not conflict in cases like this one.

Again, notice that the second, more reasonable understanding of VM is precisely what Cordner's account of megalopsychia entails. We saw that megalopsychia, on his account, involves a desire for honor *that is neither too strong nor too weak*. But if a person desired to obtain honor by any means at all, then his desire would clearly be too strong. So what seems to follow from Cordner's account is just that being virtuous essentially involves a desire to obtain honor by morally permissible means only. Accordingly, if Cordner's account is correct, Aristotle would not have to admit that there can be situations in which the virtuous person's desire for honor conflicts with his other desires.[28]

Howard Cruzer explains the idea behind the third objection as follows:

> In the many years between Aristotle's age and our own, various egalitarian principles have gained wide acceptance. All persons are equal before God and the law. All persons have the same set of natural rights. All persons deserve equal concern and respect. (. . .) Of course we recognize that some people are stronger, smarter and more virtuous than others, but the claim that some people are better than others does not sit comfortably with the egalitarian strand in our thought . . .[29]

[28] Another response to this problem would be to point out that Aristotle's claim that the virtuous person's desires cannot conflict is itself dubious. After all, when faced with the choice between two incompatible, but equally valuable goods, it seems a virtuous person *should* have conflicting desires.

[29] Cruzer, op. cit., p. 151.

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The worry I take Cruzer to be pointing out here is that there seems to be some tension between the idea that people are in some sense 'equally valuable', on the one hand, and the pursuit of things like honor, status and superiority, on the other. The idea, more precisely, is this.

I take it that to honor someone is to respect him, to acknowledge his superiority and to show deference to him.[30] Thus to possess honor is to possess a superior social standing and to be accorded the respect and deference that such standing warrants. This, then, is what the virtuous person desires and acts in pursuit of, according to VM and VA. However, this might seem to conflict with a commitment to egalitarianism. The basic idea behind egalitarianism is that everyone is in some sense 'equally valuable,' that everyone is equally important from the moral point of view. So if some version of this egalitarian idea is true (which, as Cruzer points out, many modern readers take to be the case), then it might seem that the honor-related goals of the virtuous person – namely superior standing, being respected and being shown deference – are illegitimate.

Explicitly stated, the argument is this: 1) Suppose egalitarianism is true. 2) If, as egalitarianism maintains, everyone is 'equally valuable,' then no one should be superior to anyone else or should be shown more respect or deference than anyone else. 3) If nobody should have a superior social standing or be shown more respect and deference than anybody else, then one should not desire and act in pursuit of superior social standing, respect and deference. 4) However, if VM and VA are true, then the virtuous person *does* desire and act in pursuit of superior social standing, respect and deference (i.e. since he desires and pursues honor). 5) Therefore, if VM and VA are true, the virtuous person desires and acts in pursuit of something he should not. 6) But this is absurd. It cannot be the case that the virtuous person desires or acts in pursuit of something he should not. 7) Therefore, VM and VA must be false.

There are several ways in which one might respond to this argument. One way would be to deny the assumption that seeking honor is to seek superior social standing, respect and deference. In that case, one might propose a more innocuous construal of what the virtuous person desires and acts in pursuit of, according to VM and VA. Another way to respond to the argument would be to deny egalitarianism altogether. However, I will take a different tack. I do not want to deny the above conception of what it is to seek honor,

[30] To see this, consider what it would be to honor the gods, or to honor your king.

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nor do I want to dismiss egalitarianism altogether. Instead, I will argue that the argument rests on a confusion. On any plausible version of egalitarianism, premise 2) in the argument is false.

The egalitarian idea that everyone is equally valuable might be understood in one of two ways. On the one hand, egalitarianism might be the view that everyone is equal when it comes to that which makes people deserve respect and deference. Perhaps this is moral worth, which is directly proportionate to how morally good one is. Perhaps some other, more general kind of excellence or non-moral superiority is also involved (like intelligence, wit, musical or athletic ability, leadership skills, physical strength, political influence, etc.). Egalitarianism, on this understanding, is the claim that everyone deserves the same amount of respect because everyone has the same amount of this thing (whatever it is) in virtue of which people deserve respect. On the other hand, egalitarianism might be the view that everyone is equal with respect to *moral considerability*. When a creature has moral considerability, it means that one must take into consideration how one's behavior will impact the welfare of that creature. So on this understanding, egalitarianism is the view that the impact of one's behavior on any given person must be taken into consideration to just the same degree as the impact of one's behavior on any other person. Everyone, in other words, counts for the same amount from the moral point of view.

If egalitarianism is understood in the first way, then premise 2) in the argument would indeed be true. From the fact that everyone is equally deserving of respect, it would indeed follow that no one should be shown more respect or deference than anyone else or should be in a position of superiority relative to anyone else. The problem is that egalitarianism in this sense has no plausibility whatsoever. That there exist differences with regard to that in virtue of which people deserve respect and deference – whether this be moral worth, or general non-moral excellence – seems to be an unavoidable and unobjectionable fact. If it were the case that such differences should not exist, then it would mean that there should be no boss of the company, no concertmaster of the symphony, no mayor of the city, no commander of the military battalion, no one who leads the football team, no one whose job entails having more responsibility, authority and decision-making power than others, and no moral leaders or reformers. This would be as absurd as it is impractical. Accordingly, egalitarianism understood in the first way is entirely implausible.

By contrast, egalitarianism understood in the second way has a great deal of plausibility. I know of no good reason to deny that

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everyone is equal with respect to moral considerability. However, if egalitarianism is understood in this more plausible way, premise 2) in the argument against VM and VA comes out false. From the truth of egalitarianism thus understood, it would not follow that nobody should be in a position of superiority or be shown more respect or deference than anybody else. The claim that everyone is equal with respect to moral considerability is compatible with its being right for some people to be in a position of superiority and for some people to be shown more respect and deference than others.

To see this, first consider superiority. If one person is in a position of superiority relative to another, this does not require any difference between the two people in moral considerability. It merely requires a difference between the two in skill, or ability, or power, or fame, or reputation, or moral goodness, or whatever the relevant domain is. Next, consider respect and deference. While it is plausible to suppose that everyone's being equal with respect to moral considerability implies that everyone should be shown at least a certain *minimum* amount of respect, it clearly does not imply that nobody is ever entitled to more than that minimum. Even if everyone is equal with respect to moral considerability, it might still be appropriate to treat some people, because of their exceptional abilities or political power or what have you, with more respect and deference than this minimum amount.

Thus egalitarianism, on the only plausible understanding of it, is clearly compatible with its being right for some people to be in a position of superiority and for some people to be shown more respect and deference than others. Accordingly, on the only plausible understanding of egalitarianism, premise 2) in the argument against VM and VA is false. The argument fails because its second premise is true only if egalitarianism is understood in a way that makes egalitarianism obviously false.

The fourth problem modern readers might have with VM and VA is that these claims conflict with the ideal of humility. Terrance Irwin raises this issue in his commentary to NE IV.3, where he says: 'Aristotle's virtue of magnanimity [i.e. megalopsychia] is often taken to be opposed to the Christian virtue of humility.'[31] Given the conception of honor suggested while discussing the previous objection, it is easy to see why this conflict arises. VM and VA have the virtuous person desiring and acting in pursuit of superior social standing, respect and deference. Thus a certain amount of worldly

[31] See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin. (Hackett Publishing Company: 1999) p. 220.

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self-assertion is characteristic of the virtuous person, if VM and VA are true. However, what seems to be characteristic of the humble person is precisely that he abstains from such worldly self-assertion. Thus there is a conflict between the characteristics of the humble person and the characteristics that the virtuous person has, according to VM and VA.

Only those who regard humility as a genuine virtue need to view the present objection to VM and VA as a genuine threat. And some philosophers, Cordner among them,[32] suggest that Aristotle does not regard humility as a virtue. In that case, Aristotle would not feel the force of the present objection. Of course, for modern readers who *are* committed to the idea that humility is a virtue, the fact that Aristotle was *not* does nothing to defuse the objection as far as they are concerned.[33]

The fifth problem that modern readers might raise is that if VM and VA are true, then something would be essential to virtue that in fact has got nothing to do with virtue. More specifically, if VM and VA are true, it would be essential to virtue to desire honor and engage in honor-procuring behavior. But it seems to be a conceptual truth about morality that desiring and acting so as to procure honor – i.e. superior social standing, respect and deference – has little to do with being moral. Thus neither a desire for honor nor honor-procuring behavior would be part of virtue. Accordingly, VM and VA must be false.

This objection has intuitive appeal, but it still allows of some response. I accept that desiring and procuring honor is no part of being *morally* virtuous. However, I suggest that it could indeed be a central part of virtue in the wider sense that Aristotle seems to be chiefly concerned with. In the *Nicomachean Ethics* in general, Aristotle appears to be explaining what it takes to be virtuous in the broad sense of having personal excellence and being a flourishing, successful individual. Being virtuous in this broad sense obviously requires being virtuous in the narrower moral sense, but it also

[32] Cordner says: 'there is a range of qualities whose absence from Aristotle's canon of virtues we surely cannot avoid being struck by. In the *Nicomachean Ethics* we find no mention of kindness, compassion, forgiveness, apology, repentance, remorse, **humility** . . .' Cordner, op. cit. p. 293.

[33] Irwin suggests another way to respond to the present objection. He suggests that the Christian virtue of humility merely requires that one not exaggerate one's merits, not that one actively play them down. In that case VM and VA might not conflict with the ideal of humility. See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin. (Hackett Publishing Company: 1999) p. 220.

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involves more than that. This is clear from the fact that Aristotle regards excellences like wittiness and intelligence as virtues, even though they clearly are not *moral* virtues. So for Aristotle the claim that some trait, T, is an essential part of being virtuous should not be taken to mean that T is required for *moral* virtue; rather it should be taken to mean that T is required for virtue in the broad sense. Accordingly, although it might be correct that desiring and procuring honor is external to moral virtue, it is quite plausibly internal to virtue in the broad sense. As long as we are clear that VM and VA are claims about what is essential to virtue in the broad sense, the fact that desiring and procuring honor is no part of moral virtue does not pose any threat to the truth of VM and VA.

The conclusion to be drawn from this discussion is that the modern reader's inclination to regard VM and VA as objectionable implications of Aristotle's views about megalopsychia is largely unfounded. If Aristotle indeed is committed to the truth of VM and VA, as Cordner's account of megalopsychia implies, this need not be a mistake on Aristotle's part. All five objections to VM and VA seem to allow of some answer. Accordingly, modern readers – with the possible exception of those who are committed to the idea that humility is a genuine virtue – should not regard Aristotle's views about megalopsychia as objectionable.

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