Aristotelian Magnanimity and the Demands of Representing a Public

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I. Introduction

From debates over democratic backsliding and norm erosion, to renewed interest in the character of representatives and public officials, recent years have seen political theorists and the broader public alike calling increased attention to the failings of our elected representatives and other individuals occupying positions of power. With this attention has come renewed interest in excavating some of the classical resources that shed light on the demands placed upon those who are called upon to represent others. This paper argues that Aristotle's account of a virtue he calls *megalopsychia* (μεγαλοψυχία) is one such resource. Developed primarily in Book IV, Chapter 3 of the *Nicomachean Ethics* and typically translated as either 'magnanimity' or 'greatness of soul', both the virtue in general and Aristotle's account of it have been subject to much criticism. In particular, critics have worried that the virtue – which is associated with persons of uncommon virtue who occupy positions of social prominence, and especially with the attitudes they take towards great honors – is objectionably elitist.[1] The goal of this paper is to push back on that. More specifically the paper has two aims. First, the paper aims to show that the general skepticism of magnanimity expressed by Aristotle scholars, neo-Aristotelian virtue ethicists, and those interested in the history of moral and political thought more broadly is a mistake. Second, and in

[1] There are also briefer, but distinct and complementary discussions of magnanimity and/or attitudes towards honor in the *Eudemian Ethics*, *Posterior Analytics, Politics, Rhetoric,* and other places in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. See, especially, EE III.5, PA II.13, and Pol. III.13, but also NE V.2, VIII.8 and X.7, Pol III.10, EE VII.4 and VIII.3, and Rhetoric I.2, I.5, I.9, and II.12. For reasons we will explore at greater length in subsequent sections neither of the English translations offered for *megalopsychia* perfectly captures the notion that Aristotle seems to have it mind. In what follows I will mostly use the term 'magnanimity' primarily because it is more economical, but also because it's the term that is more commonly used in contemporary debates about related issues. However, because the 'greatness of soul' translation is so common, there are places where I use terminology without alteration (especially when quoting Crisp's translation of the *Nicomachean Ethics*).

my view more importantly, the paper argues that even those who have looked favorably upon Aristotle's account have failed to capture the most distinctive thing it has to contribute to debates about politics and leadership more broadly. That contribution concerns the demands that are placed on leaders in their capacity as representatives of a public or other sort of corporate body.

As we will see, the apparent elitism that so many have worried about follows from the nature of representative leadership itself. When someone claims to speak for a larger body, she implicitly claims to possess qualities worthy of that role. This is why we reasonably hold leaders to higher standards than we demand of private citizens, and why failures of character in seemingly private domains can prove disqualifying for public office. Magnanimity's requirement of comprehensive virtue reflects not arbitrary elitism but the demands inherent in representing collective values and aspirations. The magnanimous leader must understand which honors befit the role she occupies, learn how to accept these gracefully and without self-aggrandizement, and come to accept that behaviors and relationships which may have once been acceptable can compromise the standing of the office or institution she represents. The remainder of this paper proceeds in five parts: Section II sketches Aristotle's account and its purported problems; Section III surveys attempts to defend it; Section IV develops those resources to offer a fuller defense emphasizing the demands of representation; Section V argues for the account's contemporary relevance; and Section VI concludes by considering what magnanimity teaches us about elitism, collective values, and what we expect of our leaders.

II. Aristotle's *Megalopsychos* and Its Purported Problems

M*egalopsychia* occupies a unique place in Aristotle's discussion of the virtues of character due to a pair of distinctions that he bestows upon it. First, *megalopsychia* along with *megaloprepeia* (which is typically translated as 'magnificence' and which he discusses in the preceding chapter) are together set apart from the other virtues by their grandness of scale. More specifically, *megaloprepreia* which he contrasts with generosity exercised on a smaller scale is associated with large expenditures, especially those undertaken for the benefit of the broader community (NE

IV.2).[2] *Megalopsychia*, on the other, is concerned with great things and especially one's attitude towards them (NE IV.3). On Aristotle's account, a person is thought to be a *megalopsychos* (μεγαλόψυχος) if "he thinks himself worthy of great things – and is indeed worthy of them" (NE IV.3, 1123b3-4), and Aristotle goes on to say that there is one great thing in particular that the magnanimous man is concerned with one thing above all else, namely honor (τιμή). Here, the magnanimous person is contrasted with both the vain person and the small-souled person. The former thinking himself worthy of great things when he is not, while the latter thinks himself to be worthy of less than he in fact is. In virtue of the grandness of his claims, however, the magnanimous person is also contrasted with the merely temperate person who possesses proper pride, but being worthy of little, recognizes that his claims (though appropriate) only extend so far (1123b14-17).[3] Furthermore, Aristotle tells us that the magnanimous person's preoccupation with honor stems from the fact that it is the greatest external good, owing to the fact that it is both the good "most aimed at by people of worth" and the good which we "render to the gods" (1123b18-19).[4]

Second, magnanimity is set apart from the other virtues (this time including magnificence) insofar as it is said to make the other virtues greater. For instance, Aristotle claims that "greatness in every virtue would seem to be a characteristic of a great-souled [or magnanimous] person" (1123b30), and, as other commentators have noted, he later reiterates this claim by suggesting that magnanimity is "a sort of ornament of the virtues" (1124a1-2). More significantly, magnanimity is also the only virtue of character that is said to require the other virtues as prerequisites – which is to say magnanimity entails having the other virtues quite apart from the reciprocity that follows

[2] The account of generosity is found in NE IV.1.

[3] Aristotle further develops the account of temperance in NE IV.4, although in that discussion the virtue is unnamed.

[4] The word that is translated as honor here is τιμή. That term is more broadly defined as: 1. "*worship, esteem*, and *honour[s]*, such as are accorded to gods or to superiors, or bestowed (whether by gods or men) as a reward for services." 2. "*honour, dignity, lordship*, as the attribute of gods or kings." 3. "a *dignity, office, magistracy*, and in pl. *civic honours*." (LSJ, 1940, s.v. τιμή) We'll return to the significance of these definitions, particularly the third, later.

from having *phronesis* (1124a27-29).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, much the criticism of Aristotle's account alluded to in the introduction has been directed at these two distinctions, but there has also been a great deal of criticism levied against Aristotle's suggestion that there is a virtue concerned primarily with one's attitude towards honor and with his depiction of that virtue. Broadly speaking these criticisms come in three forms. The first concerns whether magnificence and magnanimity are genuinely distinct virtues, and, if they are, whether they pose problems for Aristotle's doctrine of the mean or with the "reciprocity" or "unity" theses. For instance, many have wondered whether there are distinctive forms of practical reasoning involved in making great expenditures or accepting great honors that properly distinguish magnificence and magnanimity from their smaller scale counterparts generosity and proper-pride (Pakaluk 2002). As we will soon explore at greater length, Daniel Russell, Terence Irwin, and Armando Perez-Gea have each rebutted this worry by making persuasive cases that the deliberative skills associated with Aristotle's virtues of greatness are in fact distinct (Russell 2012; Irwin 2019; Perez-Gea 2024). But even if one concedes that magnanimity involves distinctive forms of practical reasoning, there are those who worry about the apparent asymmetry in Aristotle's treatment of the excess (vanity or conceit) and deficiency (pusillanimity or small-souledness) with which magnanimity is contrasted (Crisp 2006, pp. 161-162). Or, alternatively, that Aristotle's account unsuccessfully attempts to weave together two incompatible qualities - indifference to fortune and concern for honor - that cannot be coherently combined (Cooper 1989, pp. 191-205; Annas 1993, pp. 116-119). And even Irwin in earlier work worried that the both of Aristotle's virtues of greatness seem to threaten the unity or reciprocity of the virtues insofar as one can be magnificent without being generous, or generous without being magnificent (or, alternatively, can have an appropriate attitude towards public honors but not private honors, or vice versa) (Irwin 1988a, pp. 61-78; 1988b, pp. 87-90).[5]

[5] Note that there are some, like Richard Kraut and Stephen Gardiner, who have responded to this criticism by suggesting revisions to the reciprocity thesis itself. Kraut argues that since magnificence and generosity both concern the same good (wealth), having one need not entail having the other, as the reciprocity thesis only requires that one be able to assess different kinds of goods properly (Kraut 1988, pp. 80-82). Gardiner,

The second strand of criticism concerns elitism. If magnanimity requires one to be worthy of great honors (and especially if being worthy of great honors requires one to occupy a position of social prominence), then it appears to be a virtue available only to an elite few. Julia Driver (2001) has levied the most prominent version of this criticism against Aristotle's account of virtue generally, while Dan Russell, who distinguishes between various ways in which a theory of virtue might be elitist, has explored this worry at length specifically with respect to magnificence and magnanimity (Russell 2012). On Russell's account, one (perhaps particularly pernicious) brand of elitism holds that certain virtues are reserved for persons of a particular social class or station, and that the natures of some persons preclude them from occupying these positions, so that *even in principle* the virtues are not available to everyone. Less pernicious is the view the virtues are in principle available to all, but that various contingent factors may place them out of reach for many. As we shall see, Russell argues that although magnificence can be defended against the charge that it is elitist in the first sense, it's less clear that Aristotle's account of magnanimity may not escape this charge.

Related to the second worry, the third strand of criticism focuses on the specific traits Aristotle attributes to the magnanimous person that (to borrow the words of W.F.R. Hardie in one of the earliest contemporary treatments of magnanimity) strike many readers as either "comic or scandalous" (Hardie 1978, p. 65). Specifically, the magnanimous person's attitude toward honors seems to belie a person who is strikingly self-absorbed and possessed of a hierarchical worldview in which the judgments of most people matter little. As Aristotle writes, the magnanimous person "will be pleased in a moderate way at great honors conferred by good people, thinking that he is getting what he deserves (or even less because there could be no honor worthy of total virtue). Nevertheless, he will accept such honors on the ground that [good people] have nothing greater to confer on him" (NE 1124a5-10). By contrast, "honor conferred by ordinary people or for unimportant reasons he will utterly despise, since it is beneath him" (NE 1124a5-10). Nor is this attitude limited to a mere indifference to popular opinion for the great-souled person also "looks

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alternatively, introduces a distinction between "basic" and "non-basic" virtues, arguing that reciprocity holds only among the basic virtues (Gardiner 2001, pp. 262-295).

down on others with justification because he has the right opinion of himself, but the masses do so capriciously" (NE 1124b6). The magnanimous person, in other words, not only dismisses the judgments of ordinary people but actively looks down upon them—a stance Aristotle presents as justified rather than problematic.

Beyond these attitudes toward honor, Aristotle's portrait includes a range of other characteristics that many find troubling. The magnanimous person "is the sort of man to confer benefits (and will remember doing so), but he is ashamed of receiving them" (NE 1124b9-12), suggesting an unwillingness to accept the vulnerabilities and dependencies that characterize normal human relationships. Similarly, "he refuses to revolve his life around another, unless it is a friend, because such behavior is servile" (NE 1124b30), and he is slow to ask for help (1124b18). Even his manner of speaking reflects his sense of superiority: he "is free of speech and tells the truth, except when he speaks in irony to the vulgar" (NE 1124b30-31), reserving his honesty for those he deems worthy while condescending to those he does not. Aristotle even describes the magnanimous person's physical bearing as an expression of his superiority: "his movements are slow, his voice deep, and his speech measured" (NE 1125a11-12).

Defenders of Aristotle have offered various strategies for rehabilitating magnanimity. Howard Curzer argues that magnanimity is best understood not as a distinct virtue but as an honorific title for comprehensive virtue (Curzer 1990). Alexander Sarch, alternatively, defends Aristotle by emphasizing magnanimity's concern with obtaining honor rather than with self-knowledge about one's virtue (Sarch 2008). Yet neither defense fully succeeds: Curzer's comes at the cost of denying that magnanimity is a virtue at all, while Sarch's fails to explain how magnanimity differs from mere proper-pride or to provide the kind of account that would make Aristotle's discussion relevant to contemporary debates about leadership.

Nor has the skepticism of magnanimity (and Aristotle's account of it) been confined to recent scholarship. As Ryan Hanley has opined "modernity has not been kind to magnanimity" (Hanley 2002, p. 1). Hanley traces the modern skepticism of magnanimity to Hobbes' declaration that "magnanimity is no more than glory" and his attendant concern that as such it is inimical to peace.

Arguably, though, the origins of this skepticism should be traced even further back to Aquinas and others in the Christian tradition who worried about the tension between Aristotle's heroic and self-confident portrayal of the great-souled man and the Christian virtue of humility.[6] And, more generally, it's reasonable to conjecture (as many have) that much of the modern skepticism of magnanimity has simply tracked the increasingly democratic and egalitarian sympathies of the public generally and moral and political theorists specifically.[7]

III. *Leitourgia*, Statesmanship, and Elitism

The previous section sketched Aristotle's account of magnanimity and the sort of person who possesses it and described several strands of criticism that have been directed at that account. The goal of this section is to begin to explore how Aristotle's account might be defended. It will do so in two ways. First, by exploring some of the attempts that have been made to rescue Aristotle's other great virtue, magnificence, and what those attempts might teach us about magnanimity. In particular, we focus on Daniel Russell's account of the Attican institution of *leitourgia* and the institutional lens it provides for looking at of Aristotle's account of the virtues of greatness. Second, we will look at how the liturgical defense of magnanimity might be complemented by some of the attempts that have been made to draw connections between magnanimity, statesmanship, and civic duty.

Before turning to the details, it will be helpful to provide some context for thinking about Russell's account of magnificence and magnanimity since his account is principally animated by two concerns. First, he is interested in showing that the two virtues are in fact distinguishable *as virtues* from their smaller scale counterparts (generosity and temperance). Second, he is interested in showing that (at the very least) magnificence is not objectionably elitist. To that end Russell

[6] See, e.g., Arhart 1983 and Keys 2003.

[7] For early accounts of how these historic concerns came to frame modern debates see MacIntyre 1966 and Smith 1986, and for a survey of how different philosophical and religious traditions have invested the concept of greatness of soul with their own distinctive values, see Vasalou 2019, and especially the contribution by Roberts.

introduces a distinction between two forms of elitism that are often run together both in discussions of Aristotle's virtues of greatness and in virtue theory generally.[8] The first form, which we can call *primary elitism*, maintains that certain virtues are reserved for persons of a particular class or station such that—even in principle—they are not available to everyone. Primary elitism is pernicious because it draws distinctions among persons with respect to the virtues appropriate to them, thereby undermining the idea that there is a common human nature characterized by excellences in which all can (at least in principle) share. On the other hand, what we might call *secondary elitism* is the view that, while the virtues are in principle available to all, various contingent factors may place them out of reach for many. Secondary elitism arises as a straightforward corollary of the thesis that the virtues require deliberative skills together with the observation that not everyone will find themselves in circumstances that call for the development of these skills. While it may be lamentable that some people (perhaps even most) will lack opportunities to develop certain virtues, secondary elitism simply reflects facts about social organization the distribution of talents rather than claims about the different natures or moral status of persons. Accordingly, secondary elitism is likely to strike most observers as less problematic.

On Russell's account, Aristotle's discussion of magnificence must be understood against the backdrop of the Attican institution of *leitourgia* which governed the provision of important public goods by assigning responsibility to the wealthiest citizens on a rotating basis (*NE* IV.2, 1122a22–1123a10). Liturgical duties governed the provision of at least five categories of goods: the outfitting of a trireme, a chorus at a festival, an athletic team, a public banquet, and the leading of a delegation to a foreign festival, and that Aristotle's account is best understood is this light is evidenced by his examples, which consistently involve these duties (Russell 2012, pp. 111-112).[9] And, even where Aristotle extends his examples to private expenditures, his focus remains on the sort of private spending that has a large or long-lasting public impact (*NE* IV.2, 1123a4-10).

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[8] Russell develops this distinction at Russell 2012, sec 2. The terminology of "primary" and "secondary" elitism is my own, but the distinction tracks Russell's.

[9] See also Hornblower and Spawforth (1996).

Understood in this context, the distinctiveness of magnificence as a virtue becomes clear. On Russell's reading, virtue does three things for a person: it makes one's reasons the right kind of reasons, it makes one's aims the right kind of aims, and it is paired with *phronesis* to make one effective in realizing those aims. The liturgical duties Russell associates with magnificence highlight each of these features. Liturgical duties fell primarily on the men of means in Athens, and fulfilling these responsibilities required them to act with an eye to public benefit. To be magnificent, then, was to spend large sums on great things for the benefit of the public. Crucially this required not just the means to make such expenditures, but knowledge of what sort of expenditures would in fact benefit the public and skill in managing the expenditures to bring about their intended effect (Russell 2012, pp. 112-114). While the former demand might simply set magnificence apart from generosity in terms of the scale of expenditure, the latter demand clearly set it apart as a virtue by calling attention to the distinctive deliberative skills involved.[10]

Alongside the liturgical account of magnificence, it's also worth calling attention to Armando Perez Gea's recent interpretation of magnificence as the virtue of giving with "splendid effects" (Perez Gea 2024). Where Irwin and Russell emphasize the social and institutional context within which large-scale expenditures are made, Perez Gea focuses on how the effect of a gift or expenditure made for the sake of others might allow us to distinguish magnificence from generosity. His interpretation turns on a distinction that Aristotle draws but that has often been overlooked: generosity is characterized as "excellence of possession" (*aretē ktēmatos*), while magnificence is characterized as "excellence of effect" (*aretē ergou*) (*NE* IV.2, 1122b14-18). The distinction marks two aspects of a gift. The possession (*ktēma*) concerns the usefulness of what is given—a generous gift is one that serves the recipient's needs well. The effect (*ergon*) concerns how the gift strikes those who witness it—a magnificent gift is one that produces an effect worthy

[10] Importantly, Russell is not alone in reading Aristotle in this way. For instance, in his 1988a Terrence Irwin makes a similar argument, and like Russell he argues that magnanimity might be distinct from proper-pride in the same way that magnificence is distinct from generosity (that is, that they differ not merely in terms of their scale, but in terms of their orientation and the deliberative skills involved). Irwin's defense of magnificence is less narrowly focused on the liturgical duties that characterized ancient Athens than Russell's, though, and his discussion is also briefer owing to the fact that his primary focus in not so much in defending the virtues of greatness, but rather exploring their implications for the unity of the virtues.

of admiration. On this reading, what distinguishes magnificence from generosity is not the size of the expenditure but the kind of effect it produces. Specifically, "a magnificent gift is a splendid gift, while a generous gift is a useful gift" (Perez Gea 2024, p. 5).

Among other things, Perez Gea's account helps explain Aristotle's remark that "with the same expenditure the magnificent person can create a greater and more suitable effect" (*NE* IV.2, 1122b16-18). Identical resources can surely be deployed towards more or less splendid effects. However, the sharp distinction Perez Gea draws between the "useful" (the domain of generosity) and the "splendid" (the domain of magnificence) is hard to maintain when we consider the paradigm cases of liturgical expenditure. Outfitting a trireme may have had the splendid effect of helping project Athenian naval power and signaling the wealth of the city and its benefactors. But the trireme projected power and signaled wealth precisely because it was a costly but effective mechanism for defending the trade routes upon which Athenian wealth depended. The same is true of sponsoring a feast to honor of the gods, hosting visiting dignitaries, or leading a delegation abroad. These expenditures were impressive not despite their utility but in significant part because of the magnitude of the public service they represent.

What this suggests is that while Perez Gea is right to resist collapsing magnificence into large-scale generosity, the positive account he offers—that magnificence concerns aesthetic effects as distinct from useful ones—doesn't quite capture what makes the liturgical cases paradigmatic. We might instead say that the magnificent expenditure achieves something of public significance in a manner worthy of admiration, where the "worthiness of admiration" is not detachable from the importance of the public benefit secured. The greatness of the effect, in other words, involves both its scale and its orientation toward the common good. And, as we will see in what remains of this section as well as the next, this same orientation to the common good is part of what distinguishes magnanimity from its smaller-scale counterpart.

Before turning our attention to magnanimity, though, it's worth pausing to consider the objection that, even if we grant that magnificence is a distinct virtue (or at least that it requires distinctive deliberative skills), it remains to be seen whether the depiction of those skills and the character

traits associated with them is perniciously elitist. Russell argues that it is not. While the means and opportunity to fulfill liturgical duties were reserved for those who possessed great wealth and prominence, by itself this simply reflects the fact that the social division of labor requires some but not others to develop specialized skills (Russell 2012, pp. 114-117). Of course, one might worry that in Aristotle's time (as continues to be true today) opportunities to acquire wealth or power were both limited and unequally distributed. But this too seems to be a contingent feature of how human societies have tended to be organized. And even if Aristotle and/or his contemporaries may have suspected that there were innate differences in the moral capacities of some persons, this view itself was/is arguably a product of the contingent circumstances and limited knowledge of those who opine on such matters.

Two lessons emerge from these defenses of magnificence that will prove important when we turn to magnanimity. First, because liturgical responsibilities were not distributed equally (or even borne by everyone), and because the magnificence was exercised primarily in the carrying out of these duties, opportunities to display magnificence would not have been available to all. Similarly, the "greatness" of magnificence lies at least in significant part in what it tends to bring about. So the greatness of the magnificent person reflects their achievements rather than any superior quality of the persons who possess it. Attention to the institutional context in which Aristotle wrote can thus vindicate what initially appears to be objectionable elitism. And, yet, as Russell notes, "there does seem to be something special about the large scale of the magnificent person's effects on a community . . . no matter how important the other virtues are, a good impact on the whole community is something that simply matters more than a similar impact on just one person" (Russell 2012, p. 118). The second lesson, then, is that although the elitism entailed in the account of magnificence is merely of the secondary type, there is an important sense in which the account remains elitist.

Turning to magnanimity, Russell notes that Aristotle's discussion is notably less detailed than his discussion of magnificence. Where the discussion of magnificence provides concrete examples of the liturgical context and the practical deliberation involved, the discussion of magnanimity is more abstract. As we have already seen, Aristotle tells us that magnanimity is concerned with

honor, particularly great honors, and that the magnanimous person "thinks himself worthy of great things and is worthy of them" (*NE* IV.3, 1123b1-2). But what makes an honor great? And what distinctive practical skills does responding appropriately to great honors require? Russell admits that Aristotle's text provides less guidance on these questions than we might hope. Nevertheless, he suggests that the two great virtues, magnificence and magnanimity are paired not merely because of their scale but because both arise from the same institutional context. Just as *leitourgia* required those of means to develop skills for providing public goods, it would also have put them in position to receive great honors for having fulfilled these duties. These honors would have been great both because they were bestowed by the public rather than coming from individual citizens and because they were honors for actions done on behalf of the public (Russell 2012, pp. 128-130).[11]

Ultimately, though, Russell argues that Aristotle's account of magnanimity fails to make this public dimension explicit in the way his account of magnificence does. As a result, magnanimity appears to be a vice of arrogance or pride rather than a virtue, at least as Aristotle portrays it. Indeed, Russell worries that even if we embrace the institutional framing he suggests, the magnanimous person's indifference to honors bestowed by ordinary people (*NE* IV.3, 1124a9-10) and the disposition to look down on others with justification (*NE* IV.3, 1124b6) give him an aura of condescending arrogance. Russell is thus skeptical that Aristotle's account of magnanimity can be defended in the way his account of magnificence can (Russell 2012, pp. 130-133).

Russell's skepticism may be too quick, though. For instance, Terence Irwin has recently offered a defense of magnanimity that helps address the charge that the virtue amounts to mere arrogance or self-absorption (Irwin 2019). Irwin's interpretation turns on a passage in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that has often seemed puzzling: Aristotle's claim that for the magnanimous person "nothing is great" (*NE* IV.3, 1125a3). At least at first glance, this claim too seems to express precisely the sort of condescending arrogance that Russell and others find objectionable. However, Irwin argues

[11] Here Russell appeals to several passages in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that provide at least suggestive evidence for this reading, e.g., *NE* IV.2, 1122a22-23; IV.3, 1123b6, 13-14; and IV.4, 1125b1-8.

that the claim is best understood in light of Aristotle's discussion in the *Eudemian Ethics*, where he elaborates on the standards by which the magnanimous person measures which goods are great and which are small (*EE* III.5, 1232a32-b3). On Irwin's account, the magnanimous person "does not suppose that no danger is a great danger, or that no material advantage to be gained by injustice is a great material advantage. But these things are 'great contrary to reason'; in other words, a correct rational judgement does not endorse the initial impression that it is especially important" (Irwin 2019, p. 35). What Aristotle means, then, is that nothing among the ends for which one might choose vicious actions is important enough to warrant choosing those actions. The magnanimous person's sense that "nothing is great" reflects not arrogance but proper evaluation—the recognition that external goods and honors, however valuable, are not worth pursuing through shameful means.

This interpretation has important implications. It suggests that the magnanimous person's apparent indifference to certain honors stems not from self-satisfaction but from a principled commitment to acting for the sake of what is fine (*to kalon*). Moreover, Irwin notes that Aristotle connects magnanimity to a distinctive form of generosity: the disposition to "not recall evils" (*NE* IV.3, 1125a3-4). This connection between magnanimity and what Irwin calls "Churchillian magnanimity"—the willingness to forgive past wrongs for the sake of present and future goods—suggests that the virtue involves outward-directed generosity of spirit rather than mere self-regard (Irwin 2019, pp. 46-47).

Irwin's defense goes some way toward rehabilitating magnanimity against charges of arrogance, but it does not fully address the worry about elitism that concerns Russell. Here the literature on statesmanship proves helpful. A number of scholars have argued that magnanimity is best understood as the virtue of the statesman—the person who takes on great responsibilities on behalf of the political community and who might then receive great honors in recognition of having discharged these duties (Arnhart 1983; Holloway 1999, 2008; Overeem 2017).

Larry Arnhart's influential treatment frames magnanimity as a virtue that makes great statesmanship possible (Arnhart 1983, pp. 263-265). On this reading, the magnanimous person is

not merely someone who happens to receive great honors but someone who takes up the responsibilities that make great honors appropriate. As Aristotle suggests in the *Eudemian Ethics*, the magnanimous person claims to be worthy of "the greatest offices (*archai*)" (*EE* III.5, 1232b10-14)—but in order to be worthy of such offices, one must conduct oneself in them properly. The honors the magnanimous person claims thus entail responsibilities. As Carson Holloway notes in his response to Arnhart, this point is implicit in Aristotle's discussion of the vices opposed to magnanimity: the vain person's excessive claiming of honor takes the form of "undertaking honorable responsibilities of which he is not worthy," while the small-souled person's deficient claiming of honor manifests itself as the avoidance of "noble enterprises" of which he is capable (*NE* IV.3, 1125a25-33; Holloway 1999, p. 587).

The statesmanship reading helps address the worry about elitism in two ways. First, it makes clear that the great honors the magnanimous person claims are not personal achievements to be enjoyed but recognitions of service rendered to the community. As Holloway puts it, "the honors the magnanimous man claims for himself do not benefit himself alone, for those honors necessarily entail exertion on behalf of the political community" (Holloway 1999, p. 587). Second, it provides content to Russell's suggestion that magnanimity, like magnificence, arises from a particular institutional context. Just as *leitourgia* provided the context for magnificence, the holding of public office provides the context for magnanimity.

Yet something important remains underdeveloped in these accounts. Russell worries that Aristotle's discussion of magnanimity lacks the explicit institutional grounding of his discussion of magnificence. That worry is partly a reflection of Russell's narrow focus which is mostly limited to what Aristotle says in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. But even the statesmanship literature that brings more texts to bear doesn't fully explain what is distinctive about the deliberative demands that holders of great offices face. Arnhart and Holloway emphasize that magnanimity is connected to taking on great responsibilities, but they say relatively little about the practical reasoning involved in discharging those responsibilities. What we need—and what the next section aims to provide—is an account of magnanimity that specifies the distinctive deliberative challenges it addresses, namely the challenges associated with representing others in virtue of

holding office and, perhaps especially, of accepting honors *on behalf of* those one represents.

IV. Civic Duty and the Representative Character of Leadership

This section fills in the missing pieces of the defense that Aristotelian magnanimity needs by attending to two features of offices that have not been sufficiently integrated into discussions of magnanimity. First, the fact that holding office is itself an honor. Second, the fact that those who occupy offices represent—in the sense of personifying or embodying—both the offices they hold and the communities they serve. As we will see, when taken together, these features explain why magnanimity is distinct from proper-pride, why it has the unique relation to comprehensive virtue that Aristotle ascribes to it, and why the megalopsychos is distinctively suited to lead (and why we might want our leaders to be magnanimous).

As Melissa Lane and Josiah Ober, among others, have prominently drawn attention to, Athenian political thought was dominated by concerns about the distribution of political offices, what the responsibilities of various offices were, and how office-holders could be held accountable.[12] And as we've already seen, Aristotle tells us that it's characteristic of the magnanimous man to seek the greatest of these offices. Importantly, though, the significance of these offices does not lie merely in the opportunity they provide to discharge responsibilities in ways that might make one worthy of honor. Rather, Aristotle explicitly treats civic offices as honors. For instance, in *Politics* III.10 Aristotle declares that "offices are positions of honor" (1281a31). Put another way, the great honors with which magnanimity is concerned include the honor of holding a position of public trust.[13]

[12] See, e.g., Lane 2016, 2019, and 2023, Ober 1989, 2008, and 2017, and also Landauer 2019, Reid 2020, and Reid and Kamtekar 2024.

[13] Note that while Skultety 2019 and Overeem 2017 anticipate some of what I say about the relationship between offices and magnanimity neither author is primarily concerned with developing or defending an account of magnanimity as I am here. Skultety's concern is with providing an account of the role of conflict in Aristotle's politics, so he is most interested in how the magnanimous man navigates conflict for high

Understanding offices as honors also helps explain why Aristotle thinks proper honor-seeking matters for political communities. As Steven Skultety has argued, the desire to seek honor through office explains why Aristotle recommends that democracies create offices as a tactic for integrating honor-loving elites who might otherwise become alienated (*Pol.* VI.4, 1318b27-19a4). But importantly offices weren't just mechanisms for redirecting the attention of elites. Instead, Aristotle inherited a cultural context in which cities had invented a new kind of honorific decree that commended philotimia specifically when it was directed toward the common benefit—"pros to koinon" (Skultety 2019, pp. 121-122). And, notably, we see Aristotle deploy this demotic terminology not just in his account of honor seeking, but also in his account of the other great virtue magnificence, where he insists that honorable expenditures include those associated with "good competitions done on behalf of the common community [pros to koinon euphilotimēta]" (NE IV.2, 1122b19-23). Moreover, as Skultety observes, Aristotle adds the prefix "eu" to "philotimēta" in this context signaling that he has in mind not just the seeking of honor but good or proper honor-seeking. While, in the *Nicomachean Ethics* he observes that those who pursue honor properly "seek to be honored by prudent people, among people who know them, and for virtue" (NE I.5, 1095b26-29), and in the Rhetoric he observes that honor "is the prize of virtue, and is awarded to good people" (Rhet. I.5, 1361a28; cf. NE IV.3, 1123b35-24a1).

Read alongside Aristotle's claims that "man is by nature a political animal (*Politics* I.2, 1253a2-3) and that politics is one of just two modes of life (alongside philosophy) that is chosen by "the men who are most eager to win a reputation for goodness" (*Pol.* VII.2, 1324a29-31; cf. NE X.7-8, 1177a12-1178b7), the observations above paint a picture of the megalopsychos as the person who seeks great honors in the right way, namely by being genuinely worthy of them and by exercising the responsibilities they entail for the benefit of the community. This of course distinguishes magnanimity from vainglory, which involves claiming honors one does not deserve, and from the vice of treating offices as instruments of private advantage. Moreover, given the essential role politics plays in promoting the common good, and the centrality of offices and liturgical duties

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office While Overeem concern is to develop an account of statesmanship, which he thinks the magnanimous man is uniquely suited for.

in Athenian politics, this also explains why Aristotle treats pusillanimity as a greater vice than vainglory.[14]

The role of offices in Athenian has political life has implications beyond how we think about proper honor-seeking, though. As Patrick Overeem has argued, Aristotle's *politikos*—the statesman—is characterized not merely by his political knowledge or activity but by the possession of virtue, such that the term functions not as neutral descriptor but rather as "a term of praise" (Overeem 2017, pp. 41-42). Echoing Holloway, Overeem suggests that, although Aristotle did not explictly draw this connection, the magnanimous man is perhaps uniquely qualified to be a stateman both because he is disposed to seek the honor of holding office appropriately and because he has the virtues needed to discharge the responsibilities of his office well (Overeem 2017, sec. 5). In particular, on Overeem's view, magnanimity is "a core feature of the statesman, because a statesman has to guide his *polis* in the best way possible, by using the best of his capacities, for the best of all" (Overeem 2017, 44). Here Overeem leans heavily on an analogy between the statesman qua founder and the craftsman. In this capacity the founder-statesman must craft a constitution that reflects (or perhaps establishes) the polis's ideals. There is more to the analogy than the creative role, though, for the founder and subsequent statesmen play an ongoing role in maintaining the polis in the face of unfavorable circumstances or defects in the laws and institutions that have been established.[15]

Overeem and Miller nicely capture the role that the statesman plays in crafting a *polis* and in maintaining the laws and institutions that help the *polis* achieve its goals and aspirations. However, neither of them captures a distinct, but equally important, aspect of the relationship between the statesman and the offices they occupy that bears on how we should think about magnanimity. The magnanimous statesman will seek out the honor of holding office

[14] See also Nieuwenburg 2010, pp. 536-537 and Benardete 2014, pp. 24-25.

[15] See Overeem 2017, sec. 4, where he references Aristotle's claim in *Politics* I.8 that "he who first founded the state was the greatest of benefactors" (1253a30-31), and *Politics* IV.1 1288b37-a7 where Aristotle discusses the role of the stateman in an established *polis*. See also Miller 2008 who Overeem cites favorably for a similar account. And for further support for the craftsman analogy we can also point to *Politics VII.4* 1325b40-, and NE I.2, 1094a27-b7.

appropriately, and will discharge the duties of office well – which is to say in ways that redound to the benefit of the *polis*. But occupying an office is not merely a matter of discharging various duties, it also involves becoming a visible embodiment of what the office represents. This is particularly evident in the case of high offices, where the occupant becomes, in an important sense, the public face of an institution or community. The university president speaks for and represents the university; in leading an army the general represents the power of the forces he commands; and the legislator represents the polity whose laws she helps to make.

Note that the representative function I'm pointing to is not primarily a matter of electoral authorization or delegation. In contemporary political theory, representation often refers to the relationship between elected officials and their constituents—a relationship involving authorization, accountability, and responsiveness to preferences. What I'm referring to is rather the sense in which leaders *embody* or *stand for* the communities, institutions, or publics they lead. On this understanding, a hereditary monarch, an appointed judge, a self-made founder, and an elected legislator can all be representatives of their communities—not in virtue of how they came to occupy their positions, but in virtue of what occupying such positions involves: claiming to possess qualities worthy of leadership, accepting honors on behalf of the collective, and serving as visible exemplars of collective values.

Admittedly, Aristotle does not explicitly describe officeholders as "embodying" or "personifying" their communities. However, several features of his account jointly support this reading. For instance, in *Politics III.6* he treats the ruling body (*politeuma*) as constitutive of the regime itself suggesting that who rules just is what the constitution is (1278b8-11). Combined with his claim that "a constitution is a sort of life of a polis" (*Pol.* IV.11, 1295a40-b1), this suggests that rulers don't merely administer collective affairs but give form to the community's way of living together. Similarly, he claims that rulers' character "safeguards and establishes" the constitution initially (*Pol.* VIII.1, 1337a14-17), and that persons of outstanding virtue "are law themselves" (*Pol.* III.13, 1284a13-14)—they don't merely enforce the normative order but personify it. Further, Aristotle notes that rulers seek to distinguish themselves "in demeanor, title, or rank" from the ruled (*Pol.* I.12, 1259b7-8), suggesting that officeholders don't merely perform functions but bear visible

markers of their distinctive status. Indeed, as Nieuwenburg observes, Aristotle treats claiming virtue and believing oneself capable of office as two sides of the same coin (*Pol.* 1291b5-6), suggesting that holding office carries with it an implicit claim to embody the excellences relevant to leadership (Nieuwenburg 2010, p. 537).

Perhaps most significantly, in *NE* V.1 he observes that "ruling will reveal the man, for a ruler is already related to another, and in a community" (*NE* V.1, 1129b30-30a2). Holding office tests one's character in ways that private life does not. Among other things, officeholders must exercise virtue in relation to others under conditions of public scrutiny. But Aristotle's point is not just that officeholders are subject to public scrutiny in ways that other citizens are not. Rather, their conduct reflects on the positions they occupy and the communities they serve. This helps explain why Aristotle insists that the magnanimous man must possess all the virtues, not merely the virtue of responding well to honor, and why good rulers must also possess complete virtue (Pol. I.13, 1260a17-18). When leaders display serious vice in any domain, they compromise their fitness for leadership—not merely because scandals create bad publicity or undermine our confidence in their abilities – but because a leader's character reflects on the community itself.

When a community bestows the honor of office on someone – regardless of how they may have been selected – the community implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) affirms that the office-holder embodies the values the community aspires to realizes. The appropriate response to this kind of honor thus involves understanding it in these terms—as an affirmation of their representative capacity, not merely as reflection of their personal virtue. This, as much as anything else, is why it makes sense to associate statesmanship with a virtue like magnanimity. It also explains why Aristotle would have distinguished magnanimity from a virtue like proper pride that is concerned merely with the attitude one takes towards one's own virtue. While possessing proper pride and having experience accepting various small honors could give someone some of the skills needed to respond appropriately to large honors, accepting honors from the public (from one's fellow citizens as a collective body) is a very different task. And accepting honors *on behalf of* a public—standing as the visible representative of collective achievement—is different still. Indeed, the representative aspect of offices helps explain why offices themselves would have been

thought of as honors.[16]

On a more granular level, this framing also helps make sense of several features of Aristotle's discussion that might otherwise seem troubling. Consider first Aristotle's claim that the magnanimous man "despises honors conferred by ordinary people or for unimportant things" (1124a9). As we've already discussed, this claim suggests a troubling elitism. But understood in light of our view of officeholders as representatives we can see why it might be appropriate for someone in a representative capacity to decline certain honors. When one represents a public it might be inappropriate to accept an honor for an unimportant reason, for doing so could denigrate the community one represents by suggesting that it lacks grand or noble aspirations. Similarly, when someone has been honored by the public as a collective, it might be inappropriate to accept in a similar context an honor bestowed by an individual citizen—for doing so risks suggesting that the individual has standing to bestow honors on behalf of the public.

Consider too Aristotle's claim that the magnanimous man "looks down on others with justification" (1124b6). Although also disconcerting, this claim is best understood as describing how it is appropriate for such a person to act *given his position in the community*. Russell's example of a university president is again illustrative. Social distinctions and divisions of labor serve—or at least can serve—valuable purposes, but in order to serve these purposes, an appropriate degree of deference to rank or position is sometimes required. The magnanimous person maintains appropriate dignity not out of personal vanity but because doing so serves the public character of the position he occupies.[17]

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[16] Jacob Howland has argued that Aristotle presents the great-souled man as someone who "sees himself through the eye of the city"—whose self-understanding is mediated by conventional opinion about virtue (Howland 2002, pp. 31, 42). On Howland's reading, this constitutes a defect: the *megalopsychos* lacks genuine self-knowledge. The representative account suggests a different interpretation. Seeing oneself through the eye of the community is not a defect but is instead (partly) constitutive of the virtue, since the magnanimous leader's role just is to embody the values the community prizes.

[17] Note, too, how this reading makes Aristotle's over-bearing portrait of the *megalopsychos* as someone who acts deliberately and speaks slowly and with a deep voice more palatable. The high officeholder Aristotle was describing would have had to compete with other prominent citizens for recognition by doing things

This framing also suggests an answer to the puzzle of why Aristotle claims that magnanimity is a "crowning ornament" of the virtues (1124a1-2) and that "greatness in every virtue would seem to be a characteristic of a great-souled person" (1123b30). Some commentators have taken these claims as evidence that magnanimity is primarily about being virtuous rather than about responding to honor. But the representative account provides a different explanation. As we saw above, when leaders display serious vice in any domain, even those unrelated to their official duties, they compromise their standing to embody collective excellence. On the other hand, when someone displays virtue in the context of fulfilling representative responsibilities — that is, when courage, justice, and temperance are exercised not merely for personal benefit but in the service of collective goods — these virtues take on added significance. The magnanimous person's courage is not merely personal bravery but the courage to defend an institution's mission under pressure; her justice is not merely fair dealing but commitment to standards that the institution represents; her temperance is not merely self-control but modeling the moderation that sustains institutional health.[18] Further, as Andrew Corsa notes, Aristotle's term for magnanimity as an "adornment" (*kosmos*) of the other virtues suggests that an aesthetic dimension: the magnanimous person's virtues do not merely exist but are displayed in a way that "dazzles" (Corsa 2015, p. 30).[19] On the representative account, this aesthetic quality is not incidental but essential: the leader's virtues must be *visible* to serve their exemplary function.

V. Contemporary Relevance: Democratic Leadership and Public Representation

Having argued that magnanimity is best understood as a virtue associated with the honor of holding office, the question remains whether this account speaks only to ancient contexts or

like delivering speeches in front of his fellow citizens during a time when mechanisms for amplifying or projecting one's voice were limited.

[18] In my opinion this also provides the most compelling case for where (and why) "greatness of soul" is sometimes a more fitting translation of *megalopsychia*. This is because the greatness of the virtue that the magnanimous leader claims to possess is not just a matter of the extent of their personal virtue, but the virtue of the *polis*.

[19] See also Benardete 2014, p. 29.

retains contemporary relevance. The answer, I contend, is that it addresses a persistent feature of political life: the need for some individuals to act and speak on behalf of others. For all the differences between ancient Athens and contemporary society, we still have individuals who represent collectives—whether as elected officials, organizational leaders, or public figures—and we still expect those individuals to maintain appropriate attitudes toward the recognition they receive and bestow in their capacity as representatives.

Before proceeding, it may be helpful to distinguish the various forms of honor associated with office that are at stake in this account. These can be organized into three broad categories. First, there are honors concerning *selection and standing*: being recognized as worthy of office; being actually selected or entrusted with office (which is itself a distinct conferral, not merely an acknowledgment of worthiness); holding a position of public trust; and the dignity that attaches to the office itself independent of its current occupant. Second, there are honors concerning *achievement*: accomplishing great things for the benefit of the public, whether in virtue of holding office (as when a general wins a war or a legislator crafts wise laws) or as a public-spirited benefactor without official position (the liturgical context Russell emphasizes for magnificence). Third, there are honors concerning *representation*: embodying or personifying the community as its visible symbol; exemplifying the values and excellences the community aspires to realize; bringing honor to the community through one's conduct (the reflexive counterpart to the previous); accepting honors on behalf of the community; and receiving honors from a public or corporate body rather than from particular individuals. Magnanimity, as I have characterized it, involves the practical wisdom needed to navigate all of this.[20]

[20] Cordner (1994) and Crisp (2006) offer competing interpretations of magnanimity that have shaped much of the subsequent literature. Cordner emphasizes that for Aristotle, "appropriate worldly self-assertion" is internal to virtue itself—the magnanimous person actively seeks and claims honors as his due, not merely taking pleasure when they happen upon him (Cordner 1994, pp. 296-299). Crisp, by contrast, emphasizes magnanimity's connection to proper self-assessment and the relationship between honor and the other virtues (Crisp 2006, pp. 165-167). As Sarch (2008) argues, these readings need not be incompatible, but neither fully captures what is distinctive about magnanimity. A virtue of the representative-offices reading developed here is that it explains why magnanimity involves *both* deliberative skills (knowing which honors to pursue and how to respond to them appropriately) *and* a kind of character that makes one a fitting embodiment of collective values. On the account I have offered, these are not separate aspects of the

Consider, for instance, the importance of how politicians handle matters of diplomatic protocol. While who meets with whom, at what level, and under what circumstances might seem merely like questions of etiquette, they can have significant ramifications. When a head of state agrees to meet with another nation's leader, she does so not merely as an individual but as the representative of her country. The honor and respect shown in such meetings reflects the standing of nations and their peoples, not merely of particular officeholders. A magnanimous political leader understands these distinctions and conducts herself accordingly, recognizing that some meetings would be inappropriate precisely because they would signal false equivalences or confer unwarranted legitimacy.

The magnanimous character traits required for representative leadership extend beyond questions of diplomatic protocol to matters of how leaders present themselves more generally. Consider the expectation that political leaders project a certain gravitas, maintain composure under pressure, and avoid petty disputes with critics. These expectations reflect an understanding that leaders must conduct themselves in ways befitting their stations. When leaders engage in personal feuds, make impulsive statements, or display emotional volatility, they fail to bear themselves appropriately given the honors their offices command. This is not about demanding that leaders be superhuman or suppress all emotion. Again, it is about recognizing that certain modes of conduct simply do not befit those who claim to represent larger communities.

The recent literature on democratic backsliding and norm erosion makes the stakes of these issues clear. When political leaders treat public honors and offices as personal achievements rather than public trusts, when they conflate the dignity of office with personal aggrandizement, or when they fail to maintain appropriate boundaries between personal interests and public duties, they exhibit failures of magnanimity. Elected representatives also face the challenge of representing an entire political community, including those who vehemently oppose their policies. The magnanimous political leader must therefore exhibit certain character traits that allow her to

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virtue but are unified by the demands of representative leadership: the magnanimous person must know how to navigate honors precisely because her conduct as an officeholder reflects on the community she represents.

claim to speak for all citizens, even amid deep disagreement. Consider the democratic norm that requires leaders to accept electoral defeats gracefully and to acknowledge the legitimacy of their opponents. This norm serves crucial purposes: it signals that political offices exist independent of their current occupants, that the honor belongs to the office rather than merely to the individual, and that democratic contestation occurs within a framework of mutual respect among citizens. When political leaders violate these norms - refusing to concede elections, describing opponents as enemies of the people, or questioning the legitimacy of democratic institutions - they betray a fundamental misunderstanding of what it means to occupy high office in a democracy. Such leaders treat the honors of office as personal possessions rather than recognizing them as held in trust for the entire political community. In Aristotelian terms, they fail to grasp that the great honors of political office are great precisely because they are conferred by the public and must be accepted on the public's behalf. But, on the other hand, in democratic politics, leaders may also have a responsibility to the voters whose elect them to pursue the partisan agendas that they ran on.

Of course, the demands of offices extend well beyond politics. The university president Russell draws our attention provides a nice example of this. But it’s worth taking a broader view of the challenges she faces. It is certainly true, as Russell notes, that a university president should not compete with faculty members for departmental teaching awards or research honors (Russell 2012, p. 136). But university presidents must also navigate complex questions about when to speak on behalf of their institutions and when to remain silent - questions that require precisely the sort of practical wisdom associated with magnanimity. A contemporary university president faces constant pressure from various constituencies to make public statements about current events, political controversies, and social issues. Faculty members, students, and alumni often want their president to express outrage, take moral stands, or signal institutional values in response to breaking news. Yet acceding to all such demands risks compromising the university's core mission. Academic freedom requires that universities maintain a certain neutrality on many contested questions, creating space for scholars and students to pursue controversial ideas without fear that the institution's leadership has prejudged the matter. When a president speaks,

she speaks not merely as an individual but as the representative of an entire academic community - a community whose members hold diverse views on nearly every significant question. The magnanimous university president must therefore develop practical wisdom about when institutional silence better serves the university's mission than public pronouncement, even when such silence proves unpopular. She must understand that the honor and respect accorded to her office depends partly on exercising restraint in leveraging the institution's symbolic authority. This is not cowardice or moral abdication. Rather, it reflects understanding that her role as representative imposes obligations that differ from those she would face as a private citizen. Just as Aristotle's *megalopsychos* must know which honors befit his station and which do not, the contemporary university president must discern which causes merit institutional support and which should remain matters of individual conscience. And what is demanded of the university president is also demanded of the leaders of countless other organizations, although these demands often manifest themselves in very different ways. Moreover, these kinds of representative demands often extend to officeholders whose positions don't require leadership, and even to persons who represent communities in unofficial capacities (for instance in virtue of being a wealthy or prominent citizen).

These contemporary examples illustrate a persistent challenge of political life: the need to structure appropriate relationships between individual leaders and the collectives they represent. This challenge is not unique to our moment. Indeed, the recent literature on democratic backsliding and norm erosion makes vivid what political theorists have long understood: that well-designed institutions depend for their effective operation on individuals who possess the character traits needed to sustain them. As Holloway observes, echoing Hamilton's *Federalist* 71, democratic governance sometimes requires leaders with "magnanimity enough to serve [the people] at the peril of their displeasure"---the capacity to exercise independent judgment even when it conflicts with immediate public sentiment (Holloway 2008, p. 270). This is not an anti-democratic sentiment. Rather, it recognizes that representation involves a complex relationship between leaders and constituents in which appropriate deference to public judgment must be balanced against independent deliberation and the requirements of office.

This observation points to a broader lesson about the relationship between institutions and character. Modern liberalism has characteristically sought to minimize the need for heroic virtue through institutional design---constructing systems of checks, balances, and procedures that constrain self-interested actors and channel their ambitions toward public benefit. Yet as Steven Smith has argued, this strategy has significant limits. The belief that we can replace virtue with procedure reflects a form of utopianism that "ignores that love of self which Aristotle says is the psychological basis for all action and because it presupposes a society where there is perfect congruence between personal integrity and positions of public trust and confidence" (Smith 1986, p. 26). Even well-designed institutions require individuals of good character to operate them effectively. Constitutional constraints matter enormously, but they depend for their efficacy on leaders who internalize the norms they embody rather than treating them as obstacles to be circumvented.[21]

The American founding provides a particularly instructive case study of how a political community might preserve magnanimity's civic functions while adapting it to democratic conditions. As Larry Arnhart documents, the Founders were deeply influenced by classical accounts of magnanimity, even as they sought to transform these accounts in light of republican principles (Arnhart 1983, pp. 275-280). Their solution was neither to embrace classical magnanimity uncritically nor to abandon it entirely, but to channel the desire for distinction toward public service. Hamilton's celebration of "love of fame" as "the ruling passion of the noblest minds" (*Federalist* 72) reflects this strategy: rather than suppressing ambition, the Founders sought to harness it by designing institutions that would reward those who served the public well.

George Washington exemplifies one paradigm of magnanimity so understood. As Carson Holloway has argued, Washington's voluntary relinquishment of military command and later of the presidency demonstrated a distinctly republican form of greatness---one that proved its worthiness precisely by declining to grasp at honors beyond what the moment required

[21] See also Collins 2006, especially pp. 47-49.

(Holloway 2008b, pp. 271-274). Washington understood that the office transcended its occupant, and his willingness to surrender power confirmed his fitness for honors that no one else could claim. His magnanimity lay not in self-aggrandizement but in modeling the proper relationship between individual ambition and public trust.

This historical perspective suggests that magnanimity, properly understood, is not incompatible with democratic values but addresses a perennial challenge they face. Democratic equality requires that all citizens have equal standing as members of the political community and that their interests be given equal weight in political deliberation. But it does not require denying that some individuals, by virtue of their roles and responsibilities, have legitimate claims to forms of recognition that others lack---nor does it require pretending that leadership can be exercised without the character traits that make it effective. Here it's also worth noting that the honors attached to offices don't just impose responsibilities on officeholders. Rather, individuals often incur significant personal costs in virtue of holding office. Consider, for example, the fact that relationships which would be perfectly acceptable for one to maintain in their capacity as a private citizen often become problematic when one occupies a position of public trust. Similarly, opinions that one would be perfectly warranted in expressing to their friends and family can often not be shared publicly when one represents others. It should come as no surprise then the life of a public figure is often characterized as lonely.[22]

[22] Note that this observation about the costs of leading a life of public service sheds light on another aspect of Aristotle's account of magnanimity that has puzzled commentators. As we've seen, in NE IV.3 Aristotle suggests that magnanimity is concerned with honor because honor is the greatest of the external goods. But as Roger Crisp has pointed out, in NE X Aristotle suggests that friendship is greatest external good, and Crisp suggests that it is friendship and not honor that really warrants this status, since honor depends on the judgment of others while friendship involves genuine mutual benefit (Crisp 2006, pp. 171-173). It's beyond the scope of this paper to take a stand on this issue but note that the account developed here suggests that a different resolution to the puzzle may be available if we lean on the fact that honor and friendship operate in somewhat different domains. Friendship is the highest external good for *private* life—what we seek in relationships where we engage as individuals rather than representatives. Honor, by contrast, is the highest external good for *political* life, where our actions carry meaning for larger communities. For a fuller defense of something like this view see Yack 1993, especially pp. 107-132. As Yack emphasizes, political life is characterized by distinctive forms of conflict and cooperation that require their own excellence and the recognition that comes from serving one's community well differs in kind from the intimacy of friendship.

VI. Aspiration, Leadership, and Elitism

Sections IV and V have helped us to see why the representative character of offices has implications for our understanding of magnanimity, and why failures of virtue in seemingly unrelated domains can undermine a leader's representative standing. The magnanimous leader's comprehensive virtue is not merely a personal achievement but a necessary condition of her representative authority. Officeholders ought to embody the values of the communities they serve. But the worry lingers that the account of magnanimity sketched here is objectionably elitist insofar as it seems to reserve high office and the honor associated with it for the best among us. I want to conclude, then, by saying a few things about why this worry is misguided for two reasons. First, the idea that some members of a community will be better suited to lead than others is not necessarily incompatible with the idea that all members of the community have equal moral standing, or with broader ideals of democratic equality. Indeed, as Steven Skultety has argued, the very process by which prominent citizens compete for the honor of holding office provides a form of democratic accountability. On Aristotle's view, offices are themselves positions of honor that virtuous citizens will seek, but the competition for these positions means that even those who claim to be worthy of great honors must submit their claims to the judgment of their fellow citizens (Skultety 2019, pp. 125-128). Moreover, I think those possessed by this worry tend to overlook the extent to which the public tends to embrace the idea that its leaders should be drawn from the best among them. Second, and more importantly, though, insofar as moral development requires the presence of moral exemplars that we individually (and collectively) aspire to be more like, it might be the case that we need leaders who better than the rest of us.

This connection between magnanimity and moral development has been illuminated by recent work on aspiration and moral exemplarity. Agnes Callard's account of aspiration as a distinctive form of rational agency helps explain why we want our leaders to exemplify the values we collectively aspire to realize. According to Callard, an aspirant is someone engaged in the process of acquiring a new value---she is drawn toward something she does not yet fully understand or appreciate, guided by what Callard calls "proleptic reasons" that anticipate the value she is

coming to possess (Callard 2018, pp. 31-45). Crucially, aspirants cannot simply reason their way to new values from their current evaluative standpoint. They require exemplars---individuals who already embody the excellence toward which they are striving---to make the value they seek intelligible and attractive.

Linda Zagzebski's exemplarist moral theory provides complementary resources for understanding this process. On Zagzebski's account, our moral concepts are not defined abstractly and then applied to people but are rather grounded in the admiration directed at exemplary individuals (Zagzebski 2017, pp. 15-29). We do not first define "courage" and then identify courageous people, we identify persons we admire as courageous and derive our understanding of courage from observing them. Exemplars thus serve an irreducibly epistemic function in moral life: they make virtues visible and intelligible in ways that abstract definitions cannot. This is why, as Zagzebski emphasizes, narratives and biographies of exemplary figures have always played a central role in moral education.

These insights bear directly on our understanding of magnanimity and political leadership. The magnanimous leader serves precisely this exemplary function for the communities she represents. When citizens honor their leaders, they are not merely rewarding past achievement but holding up a model of the excellence to which the community aspires. The public recognition accorded to magnanimous leaders is not simply payment for services rendered; it is also a collective affirmation of what the community values and hopes to become. In honoring Washington's selflessness or Churchill's generosity of spirit, citizens articulate and reinforce ideals that shape their own aspirations.

This exemplary dimension helps explain why failures of virtue in leaders prove so demoralizing---and why we hold leaders to higher standards than we might demand of private citizens. When a leader's conduct falls dramatically short of the values she is supposed to embody, the damage extends beyond her personal reputation. Such failures call into question the very possibility of achieving the excellence the community seeks. If those we have elevated as exemplars prove unworthy, what does this suggest about our collective aspirations? The cynicism that follows

political scandal often reflects not merely disappointment with particular individuals but a deeper loss of faith in the ideals they were meant to represent. As Zagzebski's framework suggests, when our exemplars fail, they deprive us of the epistemic resources on which moral understanding depends.

The magnanimous leader must therefore bear in mind that her conduct shapes not only her own reputation but also her community's moral horizons. Her virtues, exercised in representative capacity, become visible tokens of what collective excellence looks like. This is not to say that leaders must be morally perfect---an impossible standard that would exclude everyone from leadership. Rather, it is to recognize that those who accept the honor of representing larger communities thereby accept responsibility for modeling the values those communities prize. The magnanimous leader understands this responsibility and conducts herself accordingly, recognizing that how she bears herself under pressure, responds to criticism, treats subordinates and rivals alike, and navigates the temptations of office all contribute to shaping her community's sense of what virtue in public life looks like.

Yet we must acknowledge an important qualification. The claim that magnanimity requires comprehensive virtue might be thought to set an impossibly high standard for leaders. If we demand that those in representative positions exhibit complete virtue across all domains of life, we might effectively exclude everyone from leadership, since no one is perfectly virtuous. This objection has force, but it does not undermine the core insight. The point is not that leaders must be morally perfect, but rather that we reasonably expect those who represent larger communities to meet higher standards of virtue than we might demand of private citizens in similar circumstances. Note, too, that this observation draws out an important asymmetry. While we might reasonably expect magnanimous leaders to possess all the virtues, we need not demand that all virtuous persons be magnanimous. Someone can be genuinely courageous, just, and temperate without possessing magnanimity, since these virtues can be exercised without occupying representative positions or accepting great public honors. That said, one can’t always choose or even foresee when in their lives they may be called upon to lead, so there is something to the idea that every agent is more virtuous to the extent that they are magnanimous.

Perhaps most important though – at least given how much debates about magnanimity have been shaped by concerns about elitism – is the fact that this account provides additional resources for rebutting the worry that magnanimity, especially in its Aristotelian guise, is problematically elitist. Although one might worry that Aristotle's account reserves magnanimity for the select few who are called upon to lead, *and who have the character needed to lead well*, the idea that we expect our leaders to "be the best among us" is broadly shared and there is nothing obviously inegalitarian or undemocratic about it. In other words, it's one thing to worry that our social and political institutions are elitist or inegalitarian, it's quite another to worry that more shouldn't be expected of those who are called upon to lead. Furthermore, even if opportunities to develop magnanimity tend to be reserved to for the select few – either as a matter of nature or of contingent historical circumstance – one can never know when circumstances might conspire to call on any of us to lead, and when those circumstances come calling it's reasonable to hope (if not necessarily to expect) that we are all capable of displaying the magnanimity that good leadership demands.

Finally, let me conclude by reiterating that this paper has tried to develop three distinct theses. First, I have argued that the account of magnanimity centered on the honors associated with representative offices provides the best reading of Aristotle's treatment of *megalopsychia*. Second, I hope to have shown that, even if this reading does not capture what Aristotle himself intended, the account I have developed is plausibly Aristotelian and ties together his various commitments about virtue, honor, and political life in a way that resolves some of the tensions that have long troubled commentators. Third, and most importantly, magnanimity remains relevant today, and the account of it I defend has important implications for how we think about the demands placed on those who represent corporate bodies.

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