

Aristotle's Magnanimity and Nietzsche's Nobility

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I. Introduction

At first glance, a comparison between Nietzsche and Aristotle may seem improbable. If Nietzsche is indeed a moral relativist, as is often suggested, why is Nietzsche concerned with the development of human character? There are explicit instances of Nietzsche assessing the positive and negative, beneficial and injurious, traits of human character. In "What is Noble" of *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche analyzes the concept of nobility--no doubt a direct reference to Aristotle. Yet, perhaps a better question is why noble? As will be argued, the concept of nobility must be analyzed in light of Nietzsche's discussion of the will to power, precisely because both of these ideas are inextricably linked. Aristotle's account of virtue and human character, the *Nicomachean Ethics*, differs both stylistically and methodologically from Nietzsche's analysis.

This paper examines the similarities and differences between both thinkers' account of human virtue by comparing and contrasting two similar concepts: Nietzsche's Nobility and Aristotle's Magnanimity. Considering that what is noble, according to Nietzsche, is a certain greatness of soul¹, Aristotle's discussion of magnanimity [*megalopsuchia*] and the magnanimous person [*megalopsuchos*] in *Nicomachean Ethics* IV 3 will provide an adequate comparison to Nietzsche's idea of nobility. The central question this paper asks is whether or not Nietzsche and Aristotle share a similar view concerning greatness of soul. Does Nietzsche's moral philosophy provide room for a sound ethics of virtue? If not, then the parallels between Aristotle's magnanimity and Nietzsche's nobility may be coincidental or superficial.

II. Magnanimity

Aristotle introduces Magnanimity [*megalopsuchia*] in book IV of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, after a discussion of generosity and magnificence. Curiously, both of these virtues concern matters of wealth. Magnanimity, on the other hand, is said to function as an "adornment of the virtues" (1124a1). That is, the magnanimous person already has every virtue, but it is the perfection of each that adds the magnanimous characteristic. Furthermore, the magnanimous person is, as Jacob Howland stated, indifferent to wealth². Rather, what is absolutely required of the magnanimous person, the *megalopsuchos*, is that they think of themselves in direct accordance with their worth--the fact that they are capable of great things (1123b1-3). Thus, magnanimity requires self-knowledge. As Aristotle notes, it is extremely rare for a person to have every virtue in the first place.

Precisely because magnanimity entails the perfection of each virtue, and that the magnanimous person must recognize and act in accordance with their worth, the *megalopsuchos* is mistakenly seen as arrogant (1124b19). However, according to Aristotle, the great-souled person must also necessarily be nobly-good (1124a37), which is to say that such a person must possess a magnitude of goodness. If a person is not truly good, yet appears to be great-souled, that person is either conceited or silly; both, however, involve an excess (exaggeration) in the proportion between their self-designated worth and actual worth (1124a10-15). Thus, in order to fully understand magnanimity, one must understand what the Aristotelian conception of goodness is. Herein lies a major point of departure between Aristotle's magnanimity and Nietzsche's nobility: Aristotle's conception and explication of magnanimity fundamentally rests upon a notion of goodness that, as we will see, Nietzsche both implicitly and explicitly rejects.

III. The Good

Aristotle begins the *Nicomachean Ethics* by inquiring directly into the nature of the human good. Ultimately, the good is advanced as a politically-conscious life "in accord with the best and most complete [virtue]"³ (1097b10, 1098a15). As such, the life in accord with virtue flourishes. The life of virtue is said to entail happiness, for "it is activities in accord with virtue that control happiness and the contrary ones its contrary" (1100b10). The good on the whole, then, is human happiness. However, it is not enough for a person to simply have virtue; as Aristotle says of politics, the end is always a type of action.⁴ In other words, to be virtuous, one must act.

With respect to goodness doable in action, Aristotle argues in *Nicomachean Ethics* VI that good (morally just) actions are revealed to us if we have *phronēsis*--the excellence of practical reasoning. However, Aristotle goes further to state that *phronēsis* additionally reveals what is good or bad for humans in general and, in this respect, it appears that *phronēsis* is pre-requisite for all character virtues. (1140b5). However, it is virtue of character that provides a person with the correct rational starting point, the major premise

of the practical syllogism, "[f]or virtue makes the target correct, and practical wisdom what furthers it" (1144a7). Thus, the function of reason is to work out the correct goal supplied by character towards a particular action (end). Conversely, Aristotle argues that vice distorts our ability to provide the major premise⁵ (1144b35). At this point, there appears to be a circularity of reasoning: to be virtuous one must have *phronēsis*, but in order to have *phronēsis* one must first have virtue of character. In an attempt to resolve this issue, Aristotle writes:

That is indeed why some people say the virtues are types of practical wisdom and why, in one sense, Socrates used to inquire correctly but, in another sense, erroneously. For in thinking that all the virtues were types of practical wisdom, he was in error, but in saying that they did not exist without practical wisdom, he spoke correctly⁶.

Whether or not Aristotle successfully resolved this problem, it is clear that all virtues necessarily involve practical wisdom, but are not merely instances of *phronēsis* themselves.

I've just shown that, for Aristotle, the good involves virtue in accordance with reason. As such, the virtuous person is one who, through reason, is able to reach the proper end (action) from the universal maxim that is supplied by character. The *megalopsuchos* then, inasmuch as s/he is the embodiment of the perfection of each virtue, must also be the embodiment of the perfection of reasoning.

Does Nietzsche's nobility require reason to such an extent? If not, what is the foundation of nobility? In *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche claims that reason, when followed strictly, leads to a distinction between the "true world" and the world of appearances. Likewise, reasoning systems, e.g. logic, mathematics, metaphysics, do not encounter reality. Rather, such systems tend to reify reason, which has been injected into the world.⁷ Nietzsche states this mentality plainly, "[. . .] physics, too, is only an interpretation and exegesis of the world [. . .] and not a world explanation" (*Beyond Good and Evil*, 14). Clearly, Nietzsche does not put reason on a pedestal. Thus, one must look elsewhere for the basis of nobility. Let us now analyze what Nietzsche says of nobility, of the noble person.

IV. Nobility

According to Nietzsche, the noble soul is self-assuredly egoistic.⁸ It understands itself to be above morality; indeed, "[t]he noble type of man experiences itself as determining values" (*Beyond Good and Evil*, 260). The creation of values is of first importance for Nietzsche's nobility precisely because it is generative of the continual enhancement of the human being. Nietzsche's general argument concerning this is as follows: beneath every morality is a hierarchy of values that effectively determines what is perceived as good and bad.⁹ Because life is the will to power, groups naturally suppress one another, which leads to a division between master and slave moralities¹⁰. And, finally:

The dangerous and uncanny point has been reached where the greater, more manifold, more comprehensive life transcends and lives beyond the old morality; the "individual" appears, obliged to give himself laws and develop his own arts and wiles for self-preservation, self-enhancement, self-redemption.¹¹

Thus, we see that egoism aids the noble person in the process of rising above morality in order to create a new one. The new morality is created with the values held by the noble individual and, thus, individuality, too, is tantamount. As we will see shortly, Nietzsche's discussion of "herd mentality"¹² makes this quite clear. The noble soul is understood as dialectically opposed to the "herd man." One last word concerning egoism, however, for the sake of a brief comparison; the egoism of Nietzsche's noble soul is similar to that which is perceived to be the case in Aristotle's *megalopsuchia*. Likewise, to the extent that the noble person is egoistic, they have self-knowledge. Nietzsche writes:

It is not the works, it is the faith that is decisive here, that determines the order of rank . . . some fundamental certainty that a noble soul has about itself, something that cannot be sought nor found, nor perhaps lost.¹³

As expressed previously, the noble person is a value-creator. Whereas the creation of values leads to the enhancement of the human being, herd mentality is responsible for prolonging and even halting this process.¹⁴ Certain ways of thinking are universalized in the herd. According to Nietzsche, herd mentality necessarily engenders a bias towards self-placating beliefs that, on the whole, deny individuality. Of these sorts of beliefs, fairness and mildness are immediately striking.¹⁵ As democratic ideas, they are precisely the opposite values that are held by noble people - those who rise above the "herd." It is the capacity for pity, however, that Nietzsche believes most explicitly separates the noble person from that of the herd.

To this point, Nietzsche states "[n]oble and courageous human beings who think [they are not made for pity] are furthest removed from that morality which finds the distinction of morality precisely in pity" (*Beyond Good and Evil*, 260, context added). Thus, for Nietzsche, the egoism of the noble soul is propulsive: it allows a person to consider their own mechanisms for preservation, their own values, in order to believe in themselves and, finally, to overcome the "times." Pity, on the other hand, is described as a depressant. Inasmuch as pity is "suffering with others," it precludes one from transcending the herd.¹⁶

V. The Will to Power

Why exactly is egoism a decidedly positive character trait, whereas pity (suffering with others) is understood as negative? In section 259 of "What is Noble," Nietzsche makes a rather explicit argument against political equality by explaining that, at bottom, equality as a principle of society undermines the basic function and trajectory of life--the will to power. Nietzsche writes:

Here we must beware of superficiality and get to the bottom of the matter, resisting all sentimental weakness: life itself is essentially appropriation, injury, overpowering of what is alien and weaker; suppression, hardness, imposition of one's own forms, incorporation and at least, at its mildest, exploitation [. . .]¹⁷

Inasmuch as this is Nietzsche's definition of the will to power, it is also a description of life-affirming values. Indeed, Nietzsche writes "[. . .] life simply is will to power" (*Beyond Good and Evil*, 259). Thus, as Aristotle's magnanimity was explained to rest upon a notion of the good, Nietzsche similarly requires the will to power in order to differentiate between life-affirming and life-denying values. Nobility, then, as it requires individuality and the creation of values, is life-affirming. On the other hand, herd mentality is symptomatic of life-denying values. Likewise, nobility bares most resemblance to master morality, while slave morality, that morality which finds its basis in pity, bares resemblance to herd mentality.

Yet, apart from the will to power's definition as a principle of life, Nietzsche utilizes the will to power as an exegetical device for the interpretation of history.¹⁸ As such, Nietzsche investigates the origin of the terms "good" and "evil" in *On the Genealogy of Morals*, whilst elaborating on the division between master and slave moralities. Here, Nietzsche's explanation of slave morality casts light upon how life-denying values "won" in his contemporary Europe; to be sure, it is precisely for this reason that Nietzsche is at all concerned with this division in morality.

Ressentiment – resentment – is explained to function in a similar manner to the egoism found in the noble soul, for it is a creative, propulsive force. *Ressentiment* is not concerned with the self, but is rather targeted externally. It is at this point that "evil" is created, which takes the form of the noble man: *Ressentiment* is a deep-seated contempt towards what is, in fact, alien. That is to say, what is classified as "other." Afterwards, now that the "other" is seen as "evil," the self takes on the opposite characteristic: "good."¹⁹ Historically speaking, Nietzsche understands slave morality to be in a consistent struggle with master morality in this exact manner. Nietzsche provides as an example the opposition that occurred between Rome (master morality) and Judea (slave morality).²⁰ *Ressentiment* provided, according to Nietzsche, "an unequaled popular-moral genius" (*On the Genealogy of Morals*, 11) that allowed Judea to "win" at separate points in history. Nevertheless, it remains ambiguous as to precisely how a morality founded upon life-denying (and thus, will to power-denying) values can effectively triumph over a morality founded upon life-affirming values--and suppress it. In other words, how can something that intrinsically denies the will to power end up actualizing the will to power? This appears to be a contradiction of some magnitude.

VI. Magnanimity and Nobility

Both Nietzsche and Aristotle recognize the role that good luck plays in their respective ideas of nobility and magnanimity. Of good luck, Aristotle claims that it adds to magnanimity (1124b-20). However, it is the honor that positions of power and wealth confer that ultimately makes the greatest contribution. Thus, good luck is not necessarily a determining factor for magnanimity, as I've explained virtue and practical wisdom to be. Good luck only serves to make the person of virtue, the happy person, more blessed (1101a-25). After all, Aristotle says in book I, "[t]o entrust what is greatest and noblest to luck would strike a very false note" (1100a-23). Nietzsche's explanation of good luck, on the other hand, is quite different. According to Nietzsche, noble states may lie dormant in "the waiting person."²¹ Nietzsche references the phrase "Raphael without hands,"²² which forces us out of a black-and-white reading of nobility altogether. The phrase, taken from Lessing's *Emilia Galotti*, asks us whether or not Raphael would have been a great painter had he been born without hands. As such, luck may play a crucial role in a person's ability to actualize their nobility in the first place, not simply add to it.

Another parallel between Aristotle's magnanimity and Nietzsche's nobility concerns honor. Aristotle considers honor to be one of the most valuable external goods because it is sought for itself. In other words, honor is intrinsically choiceworthy (1097b2, 1097b-30).²³ While the magnanimous person is most concerned with honor, it is conditional: the magnanimous person will feel contempt if the one who bestows the honor is not worthy of doing so (1124b-10). Aristotle also previously explains why this is the case in *Nicomachean Ethics* I, for honor appears to be more abundant in the person who bestows honor than in the honoree (1095b-20). The magnanimous person, as they are the embodiment of the perfection of each virtue, will accept honor only on account of the fact that there is no other, higher external good available. For Nietzsche, the idea of honor is given an egoistic spin:

The noble human being honors himself as one who is powerful, also as one who has power over himself, who knows how to speak and be silent, who delights in being severe and hard with himself and respects all severity and hardness.²⁴

In many respects, the noble person is not so much concerned with being honored, but rather bestowing it to that which is deemed worthy. "Everything it knows as part of itself it honors: such a morality is self-glorification" (*Beyond Good and Evil*, 260). Nietzsche has phrased this more mildly as a morality of self-reverence.

In light of our discussion concerning Aristotle's magnanimity and Nietzsche's nobility thus far, I believe it is safe to say that there are as many parallels between the two concepts as there are differences. According to Nietzsche, moralities that analyze the action of agents are derivative of character-based moralities.²⁵ However, Nietzsche does not have a static conception of goodness that underlies human character; rather, the conceptual framework--the scaffolding required for nobility--is the will to power. By comparison, Aristotle appears, perhaps rightly so, quite rationalistic. The human being is able to achieve greatness through having virtue of character and continually engaging in correct reasoning. There is another difference between Aristotle and Nietzsche on this point: first introduced in *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche offers *amor fati* - love of fate - as a formula for human greatness.²⁶ Of *amor fati*, Nietzsche writes:

My formula for greatness in a human being is *amor fati*: that one wants nothing to be different, not forward, not backward, not in all eternity. Not merely bear what is necessary, still less conceal it - all idealism is mendaciousness in the face of what is necessary - but love it.²⁷

Understood in this fashion, *amor fati* may serve as an alternative starting point for an investigation of Nietzsche's ethics of virtue. Whereas Aristotle claims one should always occupy the medial position between excess and deficiency, Nietzsche claims one should simply face reality with an attitude of acceptance - and come to love it.

By now, it is glaringly obvious that Nietzsche is engaging in a type of virtue ethics. However, it is markedly different from Aristotelian virtue ethics: there is a different conceptual framework employed, a difference in intention, and, at bottom, a difference in what is valued. As suggested by the title, Thomas H. Brobjer's article, "Nietzsche's Affirmative Morality: An Ethics of Virtue," poses Nietzsche's moral philosophy as virtue ethics. According to Brobjer, Nietzsche's critique of morality (apart from Nietzsche's flat-out rejection of morality altogether) centers around a critique of philosophical systems, of "truth," and of act/intention-based moralities--and this much is acceptable. Yet, there is no mention of Nietzsche's will to power in the article. As I've explained, it is the will to power that provides Nietzsche with the gusto and justification for his critique of morality in the first place.

There are two major reasons why this is the case. First, Nietzsche recognized what he termed "life-denying values" in his contemporary Europe: most notably of which are pity and *Ressentiment*, the basis of "slave morality."²⁸ Nietzsche explains that slave morality is created out of opposition to an oppressive regime: "The slave's eye is not favorable to the virtues of the powerful: he is skeptical and suspicious, subtly suspicious, of all the "good" that is honored there" (*Beyond Good and Evil*, 260). Secondly, the moral terms "good" and "evil" are fluid and transitory: essentially, if x-regime is in power, what is seen as "good" is a consequence of the values held by x-regime. Through a process of suppression (the will to power), x-regime effectively creates an opposite, y-regime. At another time, when y-regime is in power, the previous "good" is understood as "evil." As such, the morality that Nietzsche rejects is precisely that morality which finds its primary distinction, its basis, in good and evil.

While Brobjer provides sufficient evidence for Nietzsche's rejection of opposites, it is clear that the will to power relies on the notion of opposites. However, the contradictions apparent in Nietzsche's philosophy are frequently noted and, at times, they appear within the same book.²⁹ Despite all of this, to ignore the will to power's presence within Nietzsche's philosophy is to ignore an integral part of Nietzsche's philosophy on the whole.

Notes

¹ See, for example, "What is Noble" in *Beyond Good and Evil*.

² See: Jacob Howland, "Aristotle's Great-Souled Man". This article contains a political interpretation of Aristotle's magnanimous person.

³ This reads like a definition of the magnanimous person.

⁴ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 11095a5.

⁵ *Ibid*, 1144B-35.

⁶ *Ibid*, VI 13 1144b-16-20

⁷ See: *Twilight of the Idols*, "Reason in Philosophy," sec. 3.

⁸ See: *Beyond Good and Evil*, sec. 265 "egoism belongs to the nature of a noble soul".

⁹ *Ibid*, sec. 268, "Which group of sensations is aroused [...]".

¹⁰ *Ibid*, sec. 259 and sec 260.

¹¹ *Ibid*, sec. 262.

¹² *Ibid*, sec. 199.

¹³ *Ibid*, sec. 287, emphasis added.

¹⁴ See: *Ibid*, sec. 199, "Natural History of Morals".

¹⁵ *Ibid*, sec. 201.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, sec. 222, also: Nietzsche defines pity as "suffering with others," this is made clear in *Ecce Homo* "Why I am a Destiny".

¹⁷ *Ibid*, sec. 259, Nietzsche goes further to say "...but why should one always use those words in which a slanderous intent has been imprinted for ages?"

¹⁸ *On the Genealogy of Morals* is a more in-depth explanation of the will to power understood in this sense. That is, as an exegetical tool.

¹⁹ *On the Genealogy of Morals*, sec. 11.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, sec. 16

²¹ *Beyond Good and Evil*, sec. 274

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Though, not quite. Honor is actually also sought for the sake of happiness.

²⁴ *Beyond Good and Evil*, sec. 260 emphasis added.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, sec. 260.

²⁶ See: *Ecce Homo* sec. 10 of "Why I Am So Clever".

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ See: master/slave dialectic

²⁹ See: Karl Jaspers' *Nietzsche: An Introduction to the Understanding of His Philosophical Activity*. Here I am specifically referring to the contradiction concerning Nietzsche's argument against dialectics in part 1 of *Beyond Good and Evil*, but explaining the will to power as a dialectical process in "What is Noble".

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