Greatness of Spirit: A New Virtue for Our Taxonomies?

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ABSTRACT: In this paper, my aim is to present an unexplored aspect of the Arabic ethical tradition—greatness of spirit—and to assess its philosophical merit. As philosophers in this tradition approach it, greatness of spirit is essentially a virtue of moral aspiration. I consider two construals of the virtue, one as a second-order virtue, another as a virtue whose closest cousin is neo-Aristotelian emulousness. It is the latter that enables us to pick out the substantive commitments the virtue incorporates. These include its emphasis on open-ended aspiration and its self-referential elements. Having isolated these controversial features, I outline some possible defences.

RÉSUMÉ : Cet article vise à présenter un aspect peu exploré de la tradition éthique arabe — la grandeur d'esprit — et à évaluer ses mérites philosophiques. Selon les philosophes de cette tradition, la grandeur d'esprit est fondamentalement une vertu d'aspiration morale. J'examine deux interprétations de la vertu, l'une comme vertu de deuxième ordre et l'autre comme vertu apparentée à la vertu néo-aristotélicienne de l'émulation. C'est la seconde interprétation qui nous permet de distinguer les engagements essentiels incorporés dans cette vertu, y compris l'accent mis sur l'aspiration ouverte et les éléments auto-référentiels. Ayant identifié ces caractéristiques discutables, j'esquisse quelques pistes de réponse.

Keywords: greatness of soul, greatness of spirit, Yahya ibn 'Adi, Arabic tradition, Aristotle, virtue ethics

> The deepest difference, practically, in the moral life of man is the difference between the easy-going and the strenuous mood.
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> —William James

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Introduction

The history of the virtues is strewn with many unturned stones which, probed more closely, have the potential not only to reshape our understanding of the past but also to reorient our thinking in the present. My aim in this paper is to turn over one of these stones and to consider an episode in the history of philosophical engagement with the virtues that has often lain particularly far from the spotlight, and that is the engagement that took place within the Arabic philosophical tradition. My more specific concern will be with the Arabic[1] articulation of a character trait that can be ranged with what I heuristically call the 'virtues of greatness,' namely 'greatness of spirit.' As this virtue was approached by prominent writers in the Arabic tradition, it registered primarily as a virtue of aspiration, and more specifically of moral aspiration.

Drawing on a representative philosophical account of this virtue, I will first offer an anatomy of its identity, and then consider what, beyond its significance as a historical relic, might be its philosophical significance and the claim it makes on our understanding of the virtues. What would it mean to take this virtue seriously? Is it a virtue to which we could envisage giving a central place in our conception of good character—a virtue we could entertain incorporating into our classification of the virtues and the vices? Answering this question, I will show, involves contending with two distinct ways of conceiving the nature of this virtue, one as a virtue of a second-order and another of a first-order kind. These construals carry different consequences and raise different types of difficulties. It is the second, however, that foregrounds most sharply the substantive ethical commitments this virtue carries, in ways that bring out its potential for antagonising recent philosophical perspectives. My next step will be to adumbrate a partial defence of the virtue in the face of such challenges. Yet as I will suggest, the importance of this ideal—and thus the importance of the exercise of cultivating a philosophical conversation with it—lies in the very antagonism it ignites and the space it opens for engaging our competing commitments in debate. Without fully settling this debate, my aim is to indicate the shape it might take, and even more broadly, to model what it might look like to fruitfully engage unplumbed historical texts on the virtues in a philosophical conversation.

Yahya ibn 'Adi on Greatness of Spirit

Looking back at philosophical history, the exemplar of the 'virtues of greatness' we know best is Aristotle's, whose account of greatness of soul or *megalopsychia* has often been seen as one of the most distinctive though also the least digestible elements of his ethical scheme. This account enjoyed a long if saltatory afterlife

[1] Throughout this paper, I refer to the 'Arabic'—rather than, for example, the 'Islamic'—tradition in consideration of the plural religious identities of the thinkers who approached the topic, and who were otherwise united by the linguistic medium in which they wrote.

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in both philosophical and theological circles, where it was re-worked and appropriated in different forms. The afterlife it led in the Arabic tradition is more uncertain. For while it certainly made it into the bloodstream of Arabic philosophical ethics, translated through the calque *kibar al-nafs*, it doesn't seem to have been meaningfully integrated into it.[2] Instead, it was another virtue of greatness that took the stage within the Arabic tradition. Notwithstanding the long shadow left by Aristotle on works of philosophical ethics in the Islamic world, this was a virtue that boasted a more complex intellectual lineage, in which the influence of ancient Greek ethics vied with that of Persian culture and pre-Islamic Arab values.

Reserving the documentation of this lineage for another occasion, here I will only focus on its conceptual product, which I will present with relative parsimony and in the degree of detail required for the exercise that interests me.[3] Readers coming from Aristotle will find this conceptual product familiar in some respects and unfamiliar in others. It will seem familiar in thematising the agent's self-worth; it will seem unfamiliar in thematising the concept of aspiration rather more strongly than Aristotle is generally held to have done. This differential accent is reflected in the linguistic identity of the relevant virtue term. The Arabic term for this virtue is '*izam al-himma*, which, like Aristotle's *megalopsychia*, is a compound formed out of two building blocks, one of them being the term 'magnitude.' Yet, unlike Aristotle's *psyche*, the other building block, *himma*, has a strong desiderative dimension. It derives from a root verb (*hamma*) that at its most basic means 'to purpose,' 'to intend,' 'to desire,' 'to determine to do.' The noun *himma* denotes an intensified form of desire, as reflected in its occasional translation as 'ambition' or 'aspiration.'[4] Absorbing these meanings and unifying the different functions of this vocabulary, my adoptive translation of the virtue term is 'greatness of spirit.'

For a stone that has remained so long unturned, it is one that can be found studded in a remarkably wide array of ethical texts within the Arabic tradition. These include not only prominent works of philosophical ethics—on which my focus will fall—but also a number of ethical texts with stronger theological commitments, as well as popular works of advice literature, such as the so-called 'mirrors for princes' intended for the instruction of the ruling classes. Among the

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2 See Vasalou, "An Ancient Virtue and its Heirs," for discussion.

3 For a more in-depth treatment, see my "Greatness of Spirit in the Arabic Tradition." I will address its lineage in detail in a book currently in preparation under the provisional title *Virtues of Greatness in the Arabic Tradition*. There is virtually no other scholarship on the topic, but interested readers might glean some pointers from the brief treatment of the virtue in Fouchécour, *Moralia*, 406-408 (focusing on its appearance in mirrors for princes) and Shuraydi, *The Raven and the Falcon*, 185-193 (focusing on its appearance in works of etiquette or *adab*).

4 Griffith translates "ambition" in *The Reformation of Morals*, 45; Boullata as "aspiration" in *The Unique Necklace*, Vol. 2, 52.

multiple appearances of the virtue in philosophical writings, one of the earliest and most suggestive is the appearance it makes in the work of the Christian philosopher and theologian Yahya Ibn ʻAdi (d. 974), who will here serve as my principal informant. A student of the prominent philosopher Abu Nasr al-Farabi (d. 950/51) and a member of the Baghdad school of Aristotelian philosophy, Yahya was the author of one of the earliest treatises on the virtues in the Islamic world, *The Refinement of Character*. This short yet meaty ethical handbook achieved wide diffusion after his lifetime and launched a longer tradition of philosophical reflection on character, whose standardbearer is often taken to be the philosopher and historian Abu ʻAli Miskawayh (d. 1030) one generation later.

Like many other works of Arabic philosophical ethics, Yahya's treatise is written with a distinctly practical aim, setting out the highest ideal of character with the purpose of steering the audience to the ethical transformation or "refinement" of which its title speaks. To this end, Yahya offers an extensive taxonomy of the virtues and the vices. This taxonomy has much in common with tables familiar from the ancient tradition, incorporating core virtues such as temperance, generosity, and courage, as well as some less well-thumbed ones, such as fidelity, humility, and discretion. The treatment given to each of these virtues varies in length, though it nowhere matches the analytical attention found in more familiar philosophical works in the tradition, such as Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. In this respect, Yahya's approach bears closer comparison to other ancient writers, notably the Stoics, from whom Yahya and his fellow writers are sometimes said to have derived key features of their models.[5] In approaching the virtues, Yahya's programmatic concern is to catalogue and define them, a programme reflecting the deeper conviction that to define is to know.

Bracketing larger questions about the nature of this programme, here we may simply focus our attention on the virtue that concerns us. We find greatness of spirit toward the end of Yahya's catalogue, wedged between fortitude and justice, and there it is defined pithily as follows. Greatness of spirit is a character trait that involves "belittling what falls short of the utmost limit among exalted things and seeking lofty stations … disdaining middling levels and seeking the farthermost degrees."[6] On a first hearing, this statement will seem so broad as to be almost inscrutable. What kinds of lofty stations? Levels and degrees of

[5] See, e.g., Walzer, *Greek Into Arabic*, 222-223, referring to Miskawayh, to whom these remarks apply more directly, given the hierarchical scheme of cardinal and subordinate virtues he employs. One of the important influences in the Arabic context was the pseudo-Aristotelian treatise *On the Virtues and the Vices*.

[6] Translations are my own and are based on Yahya ibn ʻAdi, *Tahdhib al-akhlaq*, ed. al-Takriti. References are to this edition and to the English pages of Griffith's facing English-Arabic translation, *The Reformation of Morals*, though I have substantial disagreements with Griffith's translation at several points. For the above remarks, see *Tahdhib*, 91/*Reformation,* 45.

what exactly? Any ambiguity is dispelled in the ensuing discussion. The stations and degrees in question, Yahya makes plain, concern the virtues more specifically. The great-spirited person is one who "does not think much of the virtues he acquires." His vicious contrary, the small-spirited person, is the one who is characterised by "lack of hope in the possibility of attaining the farthermost degrees" and by "thinking much of paltry levels of the virtues."[7]

Yahya's programmatic concern, as I have said, is to catalogue and define. Yet, in taking stock of this trait, it will be important to note that this is one virtue whose significance oversteps the narrow boundaries of his method. For what is stated baldly here as a definition turns out upon inspection to exercise a far-reaching role in shaping the tenor of his ethical handbook as a whole. The characteristic vocabulary of this virtue shapes the book's *mise en scène*, where Yahya describes his aim as that of guiding "those whose spirit (*himma*) is so lofty as to make them vie with the people of excellence," placing the image of the perfect human being before them so as to arouse their longing for that beautiful form. Later in the book, it shapes Yahya's core admonitions about what the cultivation of character entails. "The person who desires to govern his ethical character must take aim at the utmost limit and farthermost degree of each virtue, and must not content himself with anything less than that degree."[8] The invitation to perfect one's character is in one respect nothing more and nothing less than an invitation to be great-spirited.

In the ensuing appearances of the virtue, the skeletal profile presented in the definition receives a number of additional touches that flesh it out and develop its emphases more fully. The aesthetic accent of Yahya's proposal to conjure the image of the perfect human person—thereby making his spirited readers long for it—registers more openly in another statement that stakes out the function of the virtue. What greatness of spirit does is "belittle every vice in [one's] sight and beautify every virtue." It makes us see the vices as contemptible, and the virtues as alluring. This visionary effect is coupled with another, this time directed to the beholder's own soul and to the status of goods lying outside it, both of which are perceived in a new light. Greatness of spirit makes a person "see his soul and his spirit as having such great value that he does not think much of" even superlative external goods, including august political stations such as kingship. This sense of worth, as Yahya presents it, has a forward-looking or motivating aspect. It involves a recognition, not so much of the greatness one possesses, as of the greatness one is capable of possessing: it is a sense of entitlement to *become* great. And since "the soul only becomes great through the virtues," what it in fact impels us to is the acquisition of the virtues.[9]

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7 Ibid., 123 (speaking of the perfect person), 100/95, 59.

8 Ibid., 69, 121/7, 89.

9 For all the above, see ibid., 140/115. The ruling classes form an important if not exclusive part of Yahya's audience, hence the reference to kingship.

There are interesting comparisons to be drawn between this account and other virtues of greatness, such as Aristotle's, but I will not pause over these here.[10] Even from this quick cross-section, it will already be clear that this virtue, as Yahya conceives it, is a virtue of a very special kind, one that bears an unusual relationship to the project of ethical self-cultivation. Yahya signals this relationship with a clarity that leaves nothing to be desired when he instructs his reader that greatness of spirit is "the *first* thing he must habituate himself to."[11] From within this view, the reasons for this claim are plain. By making us "see" the virtues as beautiful and "see" our soul in prospect as made great through them, greatness of spirit provides us with crucial motivation for the pursuit of virtue. Taken as a virtue that calibrates our perception of what matters and sensitises us to the right values, it thus plays the foundational role of leading us into the ethical life.

Yet this picture of the virtue's relationship to the ethical life is still a partial one. Because greatness of spirit, as Yahya's discussion makes clear, is not simply a virtue of the moral beginner, whose function is confined to providing an actuating first stimulus. It is also a virtue that remains active throughout the ethical life to the extent that it involves a desire not simply for the virtues but for their highest degrees, and these degrees are either impossible or extremely arduous to attain. Touching on the latter question in the context of his discussion of arrogance, Yahya vacillates as to whether to call this a 'never' or a 'rarely.'[12] One of his successors, Miskawayh, is less hesitant: "The great-spirited person belittles the virtues he possesses because he aspires to what surpasses them; for however high the level of excellence a person acquires, it is negligible compared with what surpasses it"; and "the limitations vested in human nature prevent one from grasping it fully and attaining its utmost degree."[13] Miskawayh is also more explicit on something else, which is that the ultimate object of ethical striving is precisely to surpass human limitations and lead a "divine life" which constitutes an imitation of God.[14]

Greatness of spirit is thus no ordinary virtue, a mere virtue among others. It is a virtue that has the superordinate role of making us aspire to the possession and enhancement of virtue both at the curtain-rising moments and in the continued dramatic progress of the ethical life. This conception, so crisply delineated in Yahya's work for one of the very first times in the Arabic philosophical

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10 I will have more to say about this elsewhere, but see also below.

11 Ibid.; emphasis added.

12 Ibid., 97/53; Griffith's translation here is misleading in important respects.

13 Miskawayh and al-Tawhidi, *Al-Hawamil wa'l-shawamil*, 308.

14 See Miskawayh, *Tahdhib al-akhlaq*, 171 (*Refinement,* trans. Zurayk, 152), echoing *Nicomachean Ethics* 1177b33; cf. the references to *himma* that appear on pp. 77-90 (trans. Zurayk, 70-81) in a related context.

tradition, is echoed by many of his philosophical successors.[15] These include not only Miskawayh (as just briefly documented) but also Avicenna (d. 1037), who, in his short treatise on the virtues, the "Epistle on Ethics," uses similar concepts in tying greatness of spirit to the enhancement of virtue and the aspiration to ever-loftier states of excellence.[16] This view is also reprised by thinkers of a more theological cast of mind, such as Avicenna's near-contemporary al-Raghib al-Isfahani, who connects greatness of spirit to the pursuit of the virtues construed as religiously commended traits and to the pursuit of eternal happiness.[17] In all cases, this virtue is thus instated not merely as one virtue among many but as a virtue foundational to the ethical (and, for some, the religious) life—arguably, its very lifeblood.

Situating Greatness of Spirit: A Second-Order Virtue?

Confronting works on the virtues from different cultures and historical periods— particularly outlying works with which our own philosophical culture has no established relationship as founding sources or conversation partners—philosophical readers will often be compelled to ask what it would be to meaningfully engage them. Approached with the more exacting standards of analysis we have learnt to demand from philosophical texts, such works can often seem pocked with moments where intellectual rigor fails. Looking at Yahya's account of the virtues, for example, we see that he treats an apparent action, "the divulgence of secrets," as a vice of character. He also identifies "deceitfulness" and "betrayal" as two separate vices, the only distinction between which would appear to be that the latter relates to the handling of entrusted goods, whereas the former doesn't. Many would baulk at the thought of taking such proposals seriously. Among other things, they reflect, we might want to say, a rather casual approach to the task of identifying and differentiating the virtues—a higher-level question that writers in the Arabic tradition, including Yahya, simply do not broach. Such moves might tempt us to dismiss these works as historical curiosities root and branch, and to bracket them as inaccessible to serious philosophical interest.

The questions are large, and here I will not be seeking to tackle them on general terms, as much as to hold up one concrete model of what it might mean to engage these kinds of texts in a philosophical conversation. It is worth recalling, for one, that the high-level questions just mentioned have been passed over in silence by many of the major contributors to the historical tradition of the virtues. And such silence has not been an argument against scrutinising

[15] The accent is on 'philosophical,' because as I will show elsewhere, this virtue had a longer history of appearances in other genres, notably works of literature or etiquette (*adab*).

[16] Avicenna, "Fi 'ilm al-akhlaq," 372.

[17] Al-Raghib al-Isfahani, *Kitab al-Dhari'a*, 209.

their ideas more closely where these ideas otherwise seem sufficiently interesting or important. The above anatomy of greatness of spirit will have indicated its conceptual importance within the architecture of the moral life on the terms of the thinkers surveyed. Yet, in engaging this virtue more deeply, part of the impetus must be provided not by their terms but by ours—by a sense that this ideal of character is sufficiently attractive that it is worthwhile placing it under a sharper philosophical lens and reflecting on its intellectual credentials. Does this conception, one might then ask, truly merit our interest? What would it mean to take it seriously? Answering these questions in fact involves confronting a rather more basic one: Just what kind of virtue *is* this?

One of the ways of getting to this is by hearing the question 'What would it mean to take it seriously?' in the most obvious way it invites, and this is as a way of asking: Could we take it seriously as a contender for inclusion in our taxonomies of the virtues? To some, this question might seem idle—a question, certainly, that need not be asked with any degree of seriousness. Not only do we have no firm taxonomies, but our lists of the virtues, such as they are, have no fixed boundaries and are in a process of ceaseless expansion. Every new day brings yet another field to which virtue-ethicists can ply their tools—medicine, law, business, politics, sports, journalism: the list goes on—and with it, a fresh extension of the relevant virtues and vices.[18] One more virtue would hardly break the camel's back. The answer to 'Why incorporate this virtue into our tables?' is simply 'Why not?'.

Such a cavalier attitude and open-door policy, as Daniel Russell has argued, is a mistake, posing a little-acknowledged threat to the integrity and adequacy of a virtue-ethical theory. The admission of an endless number of virtues jeopardises the concept of what is "virtuous overall" which such a theory needs in evaluating actions and persons. "One should not," he thus cautions, "introduce new virtues lightly."[19] Russell isolates two kinds of questions one might ask in this context, one of which concerns the identification of the virtues, the other their individuation. The former is the question: What makes a particular character trait a virtue? The second is the question: What makes a particular virtue distinct from other virtues? The first question is the one that has engaged philosophical energies most directly in recent times, attracting a variety of competing responses. A virtue is a character trait that benefits its possessor and

[18] See, indicatively, the discussion in Upton, "What Virtues Are There?," including the remarks on 174-175, which both embrace this field-specific cataloguing of innumerable virtues but also bring into view some of the problems that attach to it.

[19] Russell, *Practical Intelligence and the Virtues*, 152, and see generally the discussion in Chapters 5-6. Russell's distinction between enumerating and individuating the virtues is not cleanly drawn by many of those who approach the topic, who sometimes use the term 'individuation' to talk about what Russell would describe as enumeration.

makes her a good human being (Hursthouse); that enables us to handle well certain universal and inescapable spheres of human experience (Nussbaum, expounding Aristotle); that we find admirable (Slote); that enables us to acknowledge and respond well to items within its field (Swanton). Russell's own focus is on the second question, which he suggests is where the danger he identifies needs to be met. His specific proposal for resolving it is by taking the virtues' "characteristic reasons" as the basis for individuating them.

Bracketing Russell's own focus for the moment, it is illuminating in approaching the Arabic articulation of greatness of spirit to consider how it would fare relative to the first concern and to the competing accounts of how the virtues are identified. For even the lightest reflection will reveal that a virtue drawn up in these terms would meet no theoretical objection from any of these accounts, regardless of their internal differences. In fact, it would appear to be guaranteed automatic acceptance by all of them without exception. If we take greatness of spirit to be a virtue which regulates the aspiration to virtue, it will be irrelevant whether we understand the latter as traits that benefit the possessor, that help us handle universal spheres of human experience well, or that we find admirable. Our understanding of greatness of spirit will be parasitic on these theoretical accounts and on the substantive lists of the virtues they produce. Greatness of spirit will be the virtue that helps us achieve whatever character traits we identify as virtues through other means.

Yet this brings out more distinctly something that will already have suggested itself. And this is that greatness of spirit, as articulated by Yahya and his fellow writers, has the aspect less of a substantive virtue than of a second-order one, to the extent that the concept of virtue shows up within the content of its distinctive concern. If we were to try to identify a distinctive 'sphere' or context that this virtue regulates, in Martha Nussbaum's manner, we might come up with something like 'actions and attitudes with regard to the pursuit of virtue.' This higher-order, virtue-thematising aspect also emerges when one tries to reflect on what the "characteristic reasons" of this virtue might look like, particularly those lower-level and more everyday reasons which Bernard Williams and Rosalind Hursthouse call "V-reasons." To look for these kinds of reasons is partly to try to imagine the ordinary agent who practises these virtues, to gain a concrete grip on such agents by envisaging their patterns of ordinary speech. For justice: "I owe it to her," "It's his," "I promised." For courage: "Someone had to volunteer," "One can't give in to tyrants," "It's worth the risk." For generosity: "He needed help," "He asked me for it."[20] What about greatness of spirit? Here are some possibilities: "One can never be generous enough," "That's nothing compared with the greatest virtue," "If only I could have a kinder heart!"

Apart from any other difficulties such expressions might raise, one difficulty will be the concern with psychological plausibility that has stimulated such

[20] See Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, Chapter 6, especially the examples on 128.

'lower-level' accounts of the ordinary virtuous agent's reason-giving. Stipulating that the terms of the virtues and vices should show up in the motivation of the ordinary person ("It was the courageous or generous or virtuous thing to do") seems to demand an unrealistic degree of sophistication and articulacy that is hardly imaginable except among philosophers and people with unusual degrees of reflectiveness. Certain virtues of greatness, such as Aristotle's account of greatness of soul, have often been understood as (and indeed disparaged for) being the virtues of an extraordinary elite, of whom such unusual expectations might not be out of place. Yet, if such virtues are to be more universally accessible—as many writers in the Arabic tradition, despite an elitist tincture in some works, suggest about greatness of spirit—then such demands appear problematic.

I will return to this point from another direction later. But if we put it aside for the moment, the question whether we can take greatness of spirit seriously as a virtue would partly seem to hinge on whether we can make sense of its higher-order status. This would not be the first time a higher-order virtue or meta-virtue has come up for defence. The most natural comparison, in fact, is with the Aristotelian understanding of greatness of soul, which more than one commentator has proposed to analyse as a meta-virtue of some kind. In the view of Michael Pakaluk, for example, greatness of soul is best seen as a virtue with a regulative role. It is a virtue that involves "a settled attitude of conversion to virtue" which keeps our attention trained on the "moral point of view" and whose function would "naturally be described as overseeing and encouraging the development of the other virtues."[21] Rather closer to mainstream opinion, a higher-order regulating role has also been assigned to practical wisdom or *phronesis*, which has the crucial function of integrating the concerns of the particular virtues and which in Aristotle's view entails all the virtues.

The comparison with Pakaluk's analysis of greatness of soul is not exact, given that Yahya and his fellow philosophers' emphasis falls not simply on the commitment to virtue, but on the commitment to achieving *great degrees* of it.[22] Yet his analysis provides a good indication of the challenges to which analyses of second-order virtues are generally vulnerable. Pakaluk himself confronts some of these challenges squarely when he anticipates the objection that any aspect of virtuous activity could potentially be said to constitute a special "point of view" which requires a corresponding separate trait or habit enabling us to be

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21 Pakaluk, "The Meaning of Aristotelian Magnanimity," 260 and 274. Aristotle's discussion of greatness of soul in the *Eudemian Ethics* (esp. III.5.3-7) would seem to encourage such interpretations even more strongly than that of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

22 In this respect, Bae's account of greatness of soul offers a more natural comparison insofar as she takes greatness of soul to be the virtue that accounts for "the crucial difference in degree" in which any one particular virtue is displayed. See Bae, "An Ornament of the Virtues."

stably attuned to it. "The difficulty is that once we allow that there can be one second-order virtue … it seems arbitrary not to postulate a host of them." Similarly, this account would appear to render the first-order virtues otiose.[23] The first point echoes Russell's concern, though with a different twist. The more specific danger here is not that we get stuck with an infinity of virtues, but that we get stuck with pieces of philosophical fiction—with figments of an overworked philosophical imagination that multiplies theoretical entities through analysis and then proceeds to reify them. This danger would also seem to haunt Yahya's specific parsing of the virtue. Should we say that the person who desires to be *greatly* courageous has an extra virtue over the person who desires to be just plain courageous, or is this merely an act of conceptual prestidigitation? Even those who do not share Russell's system-building concerns—or indeed his notion of human psychology as a real constraint on the number of virtues human individuals can objectively host[24]—will agree that this is something to be avoided at all costs because of its potential for trivialising the project of the virtues as a whole.

Emulation, Aspiration, Self-Reference

Yet is it possible that the notion of a 'second-order virtue' might be leading us astray here? Because in fact both comparisons—with greatness of soul, and with *phronesis*—call attention to a distinctive feature of the Arabic understanding of greatness of spirit that seems rather less formal and more substantive; and this is the emphasis on aspiration.

It is instructive to approach the point through another comparison with Aristotle. It has been a matter of some debate whether Aristotle's account of greatness of soul in the *Nicomachean Ethics* makes room for such an emphasis, given Aristotle's apparent accent on the closure and completeness of the great-souled person's character.[25] Yet, even if this accent is lacking in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, it is certainly present in another work, the *Rhetoric*, where Aristotle brings up greatness of soul in the context of discussing the character of the young and the old. Greatness of soul is in fact attributed to the young as one of their distinctive qualities, and it is linked with their capacity to have great hopes and expectations and to be moved by an idealistic aspiration for the fine. It is linked with the notion of emulation, which Aristotle defines as a "kind of distress at the apparent presence among others like him by nature of things honored and possible for a person to acquire" (2.11.1) which the

23 Pakaluk, "The Meaning of Aristotelian Magnanimity," 274.

24 I have in mind the remarks in Russell, *Practical Intelligence and the Virtues*, 172-173.

25 Pakaluk is one of few commentators to accentuate this aspirational dimension. See "The Meaning of Aristotelian Magnanimity," 245, and see the discussion in Vasalou, *Schopenhauer and the Aesthetic Standpoint*, 184-186.

emulator lacks and thus strives to acquire.[26] The word for 'emulation' is *zelos*, which gives us our modern 'zeal.'

It is questionable, given the compositional aims and context of the *Rhetoric*, whether Aristotle meant to ascribe the full virtue of greatness of soul to the young, as against a natural virtue requiring further development.[27] If greatness of soul, as the *Nicomachean Ethics* instructs us, forms the apanage of the morally perfected, its full attribution to those still on the pathway of moral formation would be hard to account for. Yet the readiness of recent philosophers to acknowledge the possibility that certain virtues may be specific not only to different roles but also to different stages of life—so that certain qualities, such as obedience, might be virtues in certain religious communities or among children while being vices in other contexts—would appear to have loosened Aristotle's sharp distinction between full and natural virtue. It is in this spirit that Kristján Kristjánsson recently proposed to give a closer hearing to the quality picked out in this part of the *Rhetoric* and mounted a defence of its status as a virtue in the young.

Kristjánsson's focal term is in fact not greatness of soul, but emulation and emulousness, with the first taken to signify the episodic emotion and the second the virtue. He characterises the virtue by identifying four elements it comprises: affective, conative, cognitive, and behavioural. On the affective level, it involves an experience of distress at perceiving that one does not possess certain desired, honoured goods that another possesses. On the conative level, it involves the motivation (the sense of zeal) to acquire these goods or qualities.[28] On the cognitive level, it involves a rational understanding of why these goods or qualities are valuable and how one might be able to acquire them. On the behavioural level, it involves actually striving to acquire them. He suggests this character trait passes the rudimentary test for admission as a virtue, which involves reference to the two main criteria of whether it "(1) contributes to *eudaimonia* in some relevant sphere of human activity, and (2) admits of the extremes of excess and deficiency." The relevant sphere, according to him, is "our perceived inferiority compared to someone else." Kristjánsson follows Aristotle in taking emulation to constitute not "a virtue of the fully virtuous, who have nothing morally worthy left to strive for," but instead, rather like shame, "a virtue of those on the way to virtue," and as such a paradigmatic virtue of the young.[29] One important thing to note is that, if we accept Kristjánsson's view,

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26 I draw on the translation by Kennedy, *On Rhetoric*.

27 See Gauthier's remarks on this point in *Magnanimité*, 30-35.

28 Goods *or* qualities? Aristotle allows for both interpretations in the *Rhetoric*, though in several respects his discussion calls stronger attention to the former. Kristjánsson follows this emphasis in places, but he seems to be thinking in terms of the latter when offering his defence of the virtue. See Kristjánsson, *Aristotle, Emotions, and Education*, Chapter 7, for his full discussion.

29 Ibid., 106.

including his characterisation of the sphere of this virtue, we will be able to see how it is possible for a virtue to 'thematise' the virtues—for the virtues to 'show up' in the description of the agent's motivation—without thereby being transformed into a merely formal virtue of a second-order kind. There is nothing formal about a young person appreciating the beauty or greatness of another's character and wanting to appropriate it as his own.[30]

Whichever virtue term one chooses to focus on—whether greatness of soul, or emulation—it will be clear that this is a quality to which the Arabic understanding of greatness of spirit bears a special affinity. Yahya's characterisation of greatness of spirit as the "first of the virtues" signals this affinity particularly strongly. Although underrepresented in the statements I quoted, the elements of self-other comparison and underpinning sense of worth are also present in his work and the work of other writers in the tradition.[31] Yet there are also notable differences that separate Yahya's account of greatness of spirit from the virtue Kristjánsson outlines. On the one hand, the focus on self-other comparison is overall less pronounced in the different Arabic accounts of this concept than the element of comparison with virtue itself. The focus is more on excelling relative to the scale of virtue than on excelling relative to other virtuous persons. Where Kristjánsson's emulous young person is concerned with acquiring a desirable quality (a quality perceived in another), Yahya's great-spirited person is concerned with acquiring great degrees of it. But the most important difference lies elsewhere. For if emulation, in Kristjánsson's account, is a formative virtue for young people "on the way to virtue" whose usefulness is outlived when this formative process comes to an end, greatness of spirit is a virtue that is never outlived. It remains operative throughout the ethical life. The implicit claim is that we are always on the way to virtue; the formative process never ends.

It is here, I would suggest, that we can recognise the substantive evaluative commitments this virtue carries in a way that points to a more meaningful response to my starting questions—'What would it mean to take this virtue seriously?' 'What can the account of a particular virtue in a historical work offer us?'—than the one we are likely to be drawn into if we take our cue exclusively from Russell's austere gatekeeping perspective. Taken openly, the question 'What can it offer us?' could be read in a number of ways. Does it offer us a new language for approaching moral phenomena, for example, letting us

[30] There is more to say, of course, about the precise way the virtues 'show up' in this case. See below for a brief comment.

[31] Albeit in varying degrees and with differing inflections, especially as regards the description to which this sense of worth is pegged—one's basic humanity in some works (such as al-Raghib al-Isfahani's), one's social and political status in others, notably those addressed to the ruling classes (such as Pseudo-Mawardi's *Counsel for Kings* and other mirrors for princes).

say things we couldn't? Does it make a value salient that we were disposed to dismiss or overlook, providing a new focus for ethical reflection and debate?

Focusing on the second question, we can say that the substantive value foregrounded in the Arabic ideal of greatness of spirit is the value of sustained aspiration for beauty or excellence of character. The substantive ethical posture to which it would be most opposed, in this light, is the one that has been frequently associated with that other virtue of greatness to which the Arabic ideal is only in part genetically related: the Aristotelian *megalopsychos'* sense of ethical closure and pleasured awareness of his character as a perfected sum.

Now, taken generally, many recent philosophers of the virtues have been keen to acknowledge the importance of continued aspiration in the moral life in a way that breaks with (at least the surface reading of) Aristotle's ideal. An emphasis on the 'drive to aspire,' for example, is a central feature of Julia Annas' account of virtue in *Intelligent Virtue*. "The virtues are not just admirable but inspire us as an ideal," she writes, and this ideal aspect "leads us to aspire continually, not to get the prize and then retire."[32] The notion of continued development also plays an important role in Russell's understanding. Being virtuous, he points out, "is not the sort of achievement that reaching the peak of a mountain is—once it is done, it is done forever—but the sort that involves keeping sharp, learning, and improving."[33]

Yet, to begin from the most evident point, the acknowledgement of this drive or continued process has not involved theorising it as a separate virtue, and it has rather been taken to form an integral feature of virtue as such.[34] More relevant, however, is a more substantive point of conflict between the approach to aspiration taken by these philosophers and the approach implicit in the Arabic understanding of greatness of spirit. This point becomes especially visible set against Russell's account and his analysis of the role of ideals in the moral life in particular. The "virtuous person," in his view, is an ideal model, to accept which is to accept certain principles as one's own and to give oneself a standard for assessing one's development and for improving further. "To accept an ideal of virtue" is thus "to accept the project of improving." Yet that, Russell points out, still "leaves the question how far each of us ought to take that

32 Annas, *Intelligent Virtue*, 116.

33 Russell, "Aristotle on Cultivating Virtue," 17.

34 As an anonymous reviewer pointed out to me, the above examples could be expanded to include a number other accounts, such as the "model of challenge" spelled out by Ronald Dworkin in his *Sovereign Virtue*. One of the few writers I am aware of who comes close to the approach found in the Arabic tradition is Swanton, who proposes a "virtue of self-improvement" whose distinctive field or domain is aspiration. See Swanton, "Cultivating Virtue." Both these perspectives could repay a more direct engagement than I am able to offer here.

project."[35] And his substantive claim is that acceptance of such an ideal does not impose the open-ended duty of trying to push that project as far as it will go and to become as close to that ideal as possible. This open-ended idealistic aspiration needs to be balanced by a realistic acceptance of one's limitations. In certain cases, one may legitimately recognise that further effort and improvement is not "possible" or not "reasonable." Acceptance of ideals is compatible with being able to say: for me, this is the place to stop; my aspiration should go no further. Insofar as I accept these ideals, I will of course continue to recognise my stopping place *as* a stopping place and a limitation.

This view, marked as it is by a concern to calibrate an idealistic orientation with soberer realistic elements, reflects a broader preoccupation with the issue of realism that has been given teeth by recent encounters between philosophical ethics and empirical psychology. The conflict with the evaluative perspective implicit in the Arabic understanding of greatness of spirit will be plain. The distinctive values that constitute greatness of spirit as a virtue are precisely a commitment to pulling all the stops and rejecting stopping places, ruling out even the balancing act of fragile closure that Russell outlines. They are about "belittling what falls short of the utmost limit" and "disdaining middling levels and seeking the farthermost degrees," in Yahya's formulation. The utmost limit, as Miskawayh suggests, is where human life transcends its limit and enters the domain of the divine. This theological diction merely crystallises a conflict that is already evident, and no doubt points to some of its sources.

There are other substantive commitments and conflicts-in-waiting. These are perhaps best approached by returning to the notion of virtue 'showing up' in the content of motivation that I raised earlier. That virtue should show up in this way, I suggested, need not be taken to mark out the presence of a second-order virtue (which we may or may not be able to give plausible theoretical accounts of) or presuppose unrealistic levels of linguistic and conceptual sophistication. Virtue shows up in the content of desire or motivation whenever we encounter moral beauty or excellence and desire to make it our own. The notion of 'showing up,' of course, invites more careful distinctions. The *wow* of admiration or love provoked by the experience of moral beauty may often be as inarticulate as the sense of wonder or awe provoked by the encounter with other kinds of beauty—a piece of music, a work of visual art, a natural landscape—and it will often be an achievement to articulate its grounds and explicitly identify the qualities that provoke it. Kristjánsson, on his side, suggests that this identification is essential if the admiration of persons is not to degenerate to hero worship.[36] Yet, at the very least, this means that we need not

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[35] Russell, *Practical Intelligence and the Virtues*, 128; and see generally the discussion 123-130.

[36] *Aristotle, Emotions, and Education,* 102-103.

take the sense of admiration to be immediately or initially organised by explicit concepts of the virtues in the ways that Hursthouse and others worry about.

Yet even if these concerns with the notion of virtue 'showing up' are set aside, there is another troubling element carried by this picture that would not be removed so easily and that is flagged by the notion of beauty just invoked. I mentioned earlier the aesthetic emphasis of Yahya's discussion, which emerges both in his account of greatness of spirit and in his description (laced with the vocabulary of that virtue) of his own task. Greatness of spirit "beautifies every virtue"; it makes us see the virtues as beautiful. The way Yahya sees his own task, in turn, is as that of placing before his spirited reader an image of moral beauty and arousing his longing for it—that is to say, his longing to *possess* that beauty. Part of the way his readers' greatness of spirit is to be manifested is through their readiness to be roused to such longing. But this longing, it seems clear, has a distinct self-referential element that is bound up with the aesthetic character of this moment. It's not simply that we perceive a certain kind of character as beautiful. It's that we want to *be* beautiful in that way ourselves.

The relevance of this analysis, it may be noted, would not be confined to the understanding of aspiration incorporated in the virtue of greatness of spirit, as construed by writers in the Arabic tradition. It could be taken to make a more general claim as a description of the kind of aspiration—or at least *one* kind of aspiration—that might drive moral change. Such a claim would not be entirely new, though it seems to me under-explored in recent literature.[37] Among the difficulties it raises, the most obvious relates to the self-referential element I just isolated, which pits itself against a familiar way of thinking about the practice of virtue. As Nussbaum put it in one place, in the Aristotelian view, the virtuous person's desire is "quite simply, to do those actions and to do them because of their value, not because of what one is oneself in doing them."[38] It is not irrelevant in this respect that one of the great-souled man's greatest flaws has been held to be the way his representation of his own character enters into the reasons for which he acts.[39] Virtuous motives should be transparent, as it were, outward-looking—reaching straight to the act itself untainted by any inward regard for the self. They should be responsive to what Christine Swanton would call the

37 The recent emphasis on admiration as a moral emotion might reverse this trend. See, e.g., Zagzebski, "Exemplarism and Admiration." The role of such aesthetic responses, and the possessive element of these responses, is arguably thematised in the notion of *mimesis* which some readers of Aristotle's have invoked to explain the process of moral formation. See Fossheim, "Habituation as *Mimesis*."

38 Nussbaum, "Comment on Paul Seabright," 333.

39 Or potentially enters his reasons; see, e.g., Herdt's remarks in *Putting on Virtue*, 38-43.

"demands of the world."[40] Nussbaum's point, significantly, was framed in response to the claim made by Paul Seabright that the project of seeking a certain kind of character may be self-subversive. "Character may be subverted by the desire to have or to form character" insofar as one's attention is focused inward rather than outward to the situations that require moral attention.[41]

Even if we conceded that such inward-looking attention may be expedient or inescapable in some cases, especially in later life when efforts of moral change are more self-directed and self-conscious, it would be a stage to be left behind as swiftly as possible. The Arabic ideal of greatness of spirit instead engraves it into the moral life across its entire length. Our own character 'shows up' perpetually as an object of concern. This is a function, on the one hand, of the emphasis it places on the role of aesthetic reactions in moral aspiration, combined with its view of moral development as an open-ended process, which demands making lasting room for such reactions. It is also a function of another emphasis, which is linked to but separate from the concept of beauty, namely the special concern with the attainment of *degrees* of virtue that distinguishes it. Because if we can take a genuine desire to be courageous, just, or generous to be oriented by a perception of the inherent value of these qualities and their constitutive commitments, it seems harder to conceive this in the case of a desire parsed as a matter of degrees. I might want to be courageous, just, or generous. But to want to be *greatly* courageous or *greatly* generous—to desire not just a quality, but a scale of it—appears to implicate me in a reflective and comparative viewpoint on my own character that is troubling. This may be partly linked to the stronger reference the concept of greatness makes to the way one is seen and received by others. It may also be linked to the implicit assumption that virtue is present, and only the higher degrees remain to be achieved. We would commend a desire to be good. But would we as easily commend a desire to be great?

Staking out a Defence

The above discussion has brought out some of the substantive commitments the Arabic account of greatness of spirit carries, and some of the ways these antagonise widespread views. The emphasis on open-ended aspiration conflicts with an important view of the need to acknowledge limitations and bring aspiration to a close. The self-concern embedded in the virtue conflicts with an important view of virtuous motivation, and of the need to focus attention outward to the act rather than inward to the acting self. This kind of antagonism signals that introducing this virtue into the bloodstream of our ethical thought would be no trivial act. The significance of this confrontation, one might then say, lies in the way the values it makes salient provide the traction for, if not questioning, at the very least clarifying, the values it antagonises.

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40 Swanton, *Virtue Ethics*.

41 Seabright, "The Pursuit of Unhappiness," 314 quoted.

But why not even questioning them? Couldn't this character ideal provide the impetus for taking a more critical view of these values? Consider first the question of aspiration. With the onslaught of the empirical sciences on the once-sacrosanct province of moral inquiry, it has become increasingly common to insist on the need to ensure that ethics remains realistic, and that it makes demands that are not experienced as impossible to fulfil. Advocates of an Aristotelian view of character, in Christian Miller's words, need to show how "realizing such a normative ideal is psychologically *realistic* for beings like us"—for beings, that is, who are as far from virtue as modern psychology and social science has revealed them to be.[42] Why is realism important? The main concern here appears to be the potential for demoralisation and despair. A morality that asks too much is a morality that demoralises.

Yet, on the one hand, it is hard to avoid the sense that one is detecting here the traces of a conception of morality that virtue ethicists have often seen themselves as programmatically striving to dislodge—the legalistic morality of duties and rules that makes hard-as-diamond demands of us that we simply *must* be capable of achieving, the 'ought' always implying a 'can.' One might dispute this association. Russell, notably, does not see the claims of the maximal ideal as being entirely liquidated upon the agent's recognition of his inability to realise this ideal. His limitation remains present in awareness *as* a limitation, though presumably free from any tragic tint (otherwise the problem of demoralisation would have remained unsolved). The balance between abandoning pursuit and abandoning the sense of significance, however—between ceasing to pursue a value and ceasing to register it as a value—is a fragile one. The question how forcefully the acceptance of limitations can be validated would then depend on how deeply we are convinced that this balance can indeed be struck without abandoning the second term altogether.

But there is another point to be made which concerns the notion of 'possibility' deployed in framing this stance of acceptance. "Where improving is not possible, or the striving not reasonable," Russell writes, "'the virtuous person' reveals what limitations one must learn to accept."[43] The decision to cap the sense of aspiration, on the part of a given individual, depends on his ability to arrive at some such conclusion: in *my* case, no further improvement is possible. Yet what kind of judgement is this? A factual one? How does one *discover* that fact? The difficulty here is that to treat this possibility as a matter of empirical fact involves what Kant might have described as exchanging a practical perspective on ourselves for a theoretical one, ceasing to view ourselves as practical agents and viewing ourselves as natural phenomena subject to laws that we cannot control. It's not simply that we *should* not do so. It's also that it is doubtful whether, at some level, even if we want to, we can. We are beings,

42 Miller, *Character and Moral Psychology*, 207.

43 Russell, *Practical Intelligence and the Virtues*, 128.

as Kant put it, who "cannot act except under the Idea of [our] own Freedom." As Moody-Adams restates the point, we "cannot act—or even conceive of ourselves as agents and persons—except when we believe that our characters do not contain our destinies" and are open to change.[44]

A genuine acceptance of one's limitations, this suggests, is not only not admirable, but also not entirely possible. This, of course, might seem to open the door to a more open-ended notion of aspiration only to close it again from a different direction. Because if the belief that change is possible is inescapable for us, the ability to hope in such change would hardly constitute an achievement—an achievement we might describe as excellent or virtuous. Worries about the danger of despair and demoralisation would also be *ipso facto* ungrounded. But my sense is that much of 20th-century philosophy, from Wittgenstein to Sartre and beyond, has been an effort to come to terms with the ways in which we are constitutionally prone to cede this practical perspective to an objectifying theoretical regard.[45] If this is correct, believing in the possibility of transformation retains its status as an achievement. The great-spirited person will be the one who pushes this belief and aspiration even further than most.

What about the question of self-concern? The issues are large, and all I can do is offer a number of observations. It is worth remembering, for one, that moral philosophers have not always taken such a purist view of the role of this type of concern within moral motivation, whether in its formative or in its perfected stage. Aristotle's ideal of greatness of soul is the strongest witness to this, as already mentioned, and he has been emulated by a number of more recent thinkers intent on purging moral philosophy from the demands for self-effacement which they identified as a relic of its theological past. Hume is the best example, with his reinstatement of legitimate pride and his claim that pride forms not only the legitimate harvest of virtue, but also its best motivator. A certain level of self-awareness—a certain "habit of surveying ourselves … in reflection"—begets a sense of "reverence" for ourselves which is the "surest guardian of every virtue."[46]

This ethical positioning, of course, remains contested. And even those who might accept the utility of such habits of mind in the stage of moral formation would be more inclined to reject their relevance once this stage has been left behind. Yet, on the one hand, if we agree that virtue has an inherently progressive character, this stage—and the moral habits that sustain it—will never be entirely transcended. In many ethical and religious traditions,

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44 Moody-Adams, "On the Old Saw that Character is Destiny," 130; Kant, *The Moral Law*, 109.

45 Moran's *Authority and Estrangement* is a helpful companion for thinking about this tendency.

46 Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding*, 276.

this insight receives tangible embodiment in a variety of moral practices that make self-examination a regular focus of moral energy and explicitly foster a form of self-concern as a valued habit of mind. I think of the ancient spiritual exercises documented by Pierre Hadot and others and their Christian sequels, and of practices of self-examination in the Islamic world, particularly within the Sufi tradition. Such practices, in fact, are interesting not only for the way they enshrine self-concern in the moral life, but also for the way they point to the possibility of drawing more nuanced distinctions between different modulations of this concern. If we think of self-concern in the way these practices suggest, as a kind of care—care as of something entrusted—we might find ourselves less monolithically opposed to the appearance of the self within the structure of moral motivation.

If this suggests one way the concept of self-concern can be nuanced, a closer reflection on the aesthetic character of moral aspiration (to which I linked such self-concern above) might suggest others. One can glimpse some of the possibilities if one looks beyond the Arabic tradition to other philosophical works where the appeal to aesthetic concepts forms a central element. An interesting case study here is Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, rife as it is with such concepts. Among the many junctures where these concepts make an appearance, an especially instructive one is in the context of his remarks about the different standards we use in assessing our own character. There are two such standards, one an idea of "exact propriety and perfection" and another the common instantiation of this idea or ideal, and the best kind of person measures himself against the former, not the latter. This is an ideal that Smith characterises in aesthetic terms on at least two levels, with regard to the way it is produced, and with regard to the way it is experienced. We create it like artists, "drawing" it with different degrees of exactitude based on our experience, "colouring" it more or less justly, constantly refining it and trying to form a more correct "image" of it. Faced with this image, the best kind of person experiences a powerful aesthetic response, finding himself "deeply enamoured of its exquisite and divine beauty."[47]

The Platonic echoes of this notion will be obvious. What will also be interesting, given the anti-theological streak governing the work of Hume and his successors—a streak in sharp contrast with the one that runs through many Arabic philosophical texts and that underpins their idealism—is the idealistic view in which it results. The virtuous person who perceives this ideal "endeavours as well as he can, to assimilate his own character to this archetype of perfection," even as he recognises he must always fall short. As a result, he is deeply imbued with a sense of modesty.[48]

47 Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 291-292.

48 Ibid., 292.

The virtuous person's moral experience, on this account, is enmeshed with images—his moral standard parsed as the grasp of an image, and his moral aspiration grounded in a comparison of that image with the image of his own character—in ways that involve an important self-referential dimension. The virtuous person looks at the image of perfection, and looks at his own, as in a mirror. Like the great-spirited person of the Arabic tradition, his perception of beauty translates into a desire to possess it as his own, a desire to be beautiful himself, and indeed to be as great as the ideal he surveys. But in looking at his own image, he is constantly referring it to something that surpasses it. And he knows that any beauty he does succeed in assimilating is only his 'own' in a derivative sense, and he is merely participating in a greatness that does not properly belong to him, as a copy relates to the original.

This kind of perspective does not lie many leagues removed from the Arabic tradition, where the conception of the moral life as an effort to assimilate a beauty only derivative to human beings—belonging properly to God—achieved prominent expression.[49] More could be said about this perspective and about how well it exonerates the self-concern implicit in the aesthetic model of the moral life. More could also be done to defend the value of open-ended aspiration more fully. Could one sign up to the moral project of an incessant striving for ever-greater excellence, it might be asked, for example, without *ever* counting the costs? Is there no point at which the next increment of improvement comes at a price too high to pay? Or again: does such a project allow room for legitimate self-satisfaction—for an enjoyment of 'who one is' which, as John Kekes has argued, is a central part of what gives life its salt?[50] Both of the responses I have outlined could certainly take further development. To the extent that they focus on the negative task of disarming objections, they will no doubt speak more strongly to those already inclined to sympathise with what I earlier described as the impetus of this exercise—the sense that this ideal of character is sufficiently attractive to warrant closer investigation.

In this context, I have not sought to settle all questions invited by this ideal; my aim has been more modest. Starting from an outline of the Arabic understanding of greatness of spirit, I asked what it would mean to take it seriously, setting this against a larger question about what it might be to meaningfully engage with historical works about the virtues, particularly outlying works not already alive in our philosophical conversation as founders or partners. A more restricted way of approaching this question is by examining its credentials as a

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49 Al-Ghazali's meditation on the divine names in *Al-Maqsad al-asna*, which is rooted in a Sufi sensibility, offers a particularly evocative exemplification of this project, but the notion of imitating God is also a staple among philosophical writers from Abu Bakr al-Razi onwards.

50 Kekes, *Enjoyment*. I'm grateful to Dan Russell for driving these kinds of questions home.

candidate for admission into our classification of the virtues. A more open way of approaching it is through a number of broader questions, such as whether it offers us a new language for talking about things that matter, or foregrounds values in ways that provide a new focus for ethical reflection or debate. Both approaches thematise the more basic question: what kind of virtue *is* this? I considered two construals of the virtue, one as a second-order virtue or meta-virtue, another as a first-order virtue whose closest cousin is Aristotle's view of the characteristic qualities of the young, which recently received philosophical defence as the virtue of emulousness. It is especially the latter construal that enables us to pick out the distinctive values foregrounded by the virtue and those of its substantive commitments which would make it a non-trivial and debatable entrant in our understanding of character excellence. These commitments include its emphasis on open-ended aspiration and the self-referential elements built into it. In isolating the features that might be found controversial, I have also tried to outline some of the ways in which they could be defended. And although my defence has been limited, for my purposes it will be enough if I have indicated the space for debate this virtue opens and suggested that such debate is worthwhile.

The question might be posed here: suppose we grant the value of confronting the evaluative perspective imported by this particular ideal; suppose, even, that we find ourselves, after a process of debate, seeing the merits of this perspective and endorsing it as our own. Just how far could we push the notion of 'learning' from historical texts? We might conceivably appropriate a particular sense of what matters. But could we appropriate the language in which this sense was expressed by thinkers of another place and time—especially ones not already organically connected to our present through a longer history of cultural and intellectual influence? Could we envisage learning to use 'greatness of spirit' as an active part of our moral vocabulary?

The distinction between acknowledging the scope and concerns of a virtue and being able to give that virtue a place in ordinary language is at least as old as Aristotle's nameless virtues. Looking at other philosophical attempts to engage with and learn from historical texts on the virtues, a number of them would seem implicitly or explicitly focused on a 'learning' that pertains to the former level. Aristotle's discussion of greatness of soul is a good example, its few defenders seeking to exonerate its controversial validation of the reflexive attitudes of the morally worthy without generally translating this into a claim about the need or utility of recovering the specific language in which this validation was originally parsed. Ordinary language is in some respects more recalcitrant to revision than evaluative views. Yet the two dimensions cannot be entirely separated. Even if we accept the distinction between lower-level and higher-level forms of first-person reason-giving developed by philosophers of the virtues, an ideal of character that has no purchase in ordinary language would be an ideal with a rather weaker hold in the moral life. And however the case may be with greatness of soul, several philosophical projects on the virtues (including ones

grounded in a historical listening exercise) can be seen proposing not merely values, but a not-so-ordinary language for them.[51] The challenge is not a small one. Yet if we wish to imagine what it would be like to have not just the concerns of this virtue but its language, a very first step would be to lean even more closely to the historical texts that carried it to observe its ordinary life.

It is sometimes hard for students of historical texts not to feel like apologists seeking to convince a sceptical audience of the value of works to which their own interest has contingently attached. If being invested in the virtues means being invested in a tradition of thinking about the virtues, the effort to engage its past contributors in conversation will be no tangential part of the task and no small way of extending that tradition forward. That task may sometimes seem forbidding, given the different intellectual terms on which historical works on the virtues are often drawn. The above exercise will have served its purpose if it has at the very least suggested the rewards we may stand to reap by going out of our way to include them into our conversation.

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[51] Kristjánsson's bid to introduce 'emulous' and 'emulative' into our vocabulary is one such example; his bid to instate 'pridefulness' as a praiseworthy trait—a trait that can be seen, importantly, as a modern-day heir of Aristotle's *megalopsychia*—is another. See his *Justifying Emotions*, Chapters 3 and 4, esp. 3.3.

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