

Nobility and Necessity: The Problem of Courage in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*

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In the current debate over the status of moral virtue in ethical and political theory, Aristotle is an imposing and controversial figure. Both champions and critics of the ancient conception of virtue identify Aristotle as its most important proponent, but commentators often obscure the complexity of his treatment of moral virtue. His account of courage reveals this complexity. Aristotle believes that courage, and indeed virtue generally, must be understood as both an end in itself and a means to a more comprehensive good. In this way Aristotle's political science offers a middle course that corrects and embraces the claims of nobility and necessity in political life. Honor is central to this political science. It acts as a bridge between the desires of the individual and the needs of the political community and reduces the dangers posed by the excessive pursuit of nobility and the complete acquiescence to necessity.

For centuries, Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* has been widely recognized as the definitive expression of the classical understanding of virtue and ethical training. Alisdair MacIntyre's (1984) influential *After Virtue* proposes the possibility of restoring the Aristotelian conception of virtue as a corrective to the regnant, but in his view increasingly discredited, utilitarian and subjectivist theories of ethics.¹ For MacIntyre, the classical view, with its emphasis on the nobility and inherent goodness of moral action, is superior to the crude self-interest that marks contemporary ethical theory. The understanding of virtue and ethics that MacIntyre opposes originates in Machiavelli's root-and-branch rejection of classical moral virtue in the dawn of modern political theory. The critique of the Aristotelian understanding of virtue in *The Prince* redefined the very possibility of virtue and nobility in light of a conception of human nature that reflects the primacy of the passions and necessity over reason and nobility (Machiavelli [1532] 1985, esp. chap. 15, and [1531] 1996, I:23.2, II:20). For Machiavelli, the classical theory of virtue exemplified in Aristotle was too idealistic and too directed to the moral horizon of the gentleman to be a practical guide for those concerned with the harsh but effectual truths of political power. To the modern view of ethics, so profoundly influenced by Machiavelli (Hobbes [1651] 1994, 100; Locke [1700] 1975, 68–70), the standard of political morality must be what individuals actually do, not what they ought to do.

I shall argue that both MacIntyre and Machiavelli exhibit a partial understanding of Aristotle's complex teaching on moral virtue. My investigation of the treatment of courage in the *Nicomachean Ethics* will show that both the simple acceptance or rejection of

Aristotle's conception of nobility tends to distort his deeper moral teaching. His presentation of the complexity of political life and moral virtue challenges the sharp distinction between ethical and political theory maintained by MacIntyre and Machiavelli. Aristotle attempts to demonstrate both how courage can be understood as a moral virtue and how an appreciation of moral virtue can be accommodated within political life by means of honor. His account of courage, and of virtue generally, reveals the inconsistencies in and ultimate incoherence of the morally serious individual's view of the self-sufficiency of virtuous action, but he preserves and justifies that individual's concern for nobility. In this way Aristotle also rejects the complete politicization or functionalization of the virtues. His treatment of courage offers a defense of moral virtue that can provide guidance to lawgivers concerned with distributing honors for virtue as well as to the morally serious individual in practically any regime. I also shall argue that his treatment of moral virtue encourages the possibility of noble action but at the same time resists the idealization of the noble and offers a far from naïve assessment of the harsh necessities of political life.

Courage, the first moral virtue Aristotle discusses, in several ways serves as a pattern for his treatment of moral virtue as a whole. First, Aristotle argues that courage, like moral virtue generally, must be performed for the sake of nobility, but he also states that courageous acts are subject to praise and blame, and thus subject to the political community, which confers praise and blame through the distribution of public honors. Second, although courage may be more emphatically political than many of the other virtues he considers, Aristotle's account of courage explores important questions relating to moral responsibility, the saliency of pleasure and pain, and the difficulty in distinguishing between the external appearance of an action and the disposition of character that generates it. These issues are central to Aristotle's treatment of all the particular virtues. Third, Aristotle indicates that moral virtue is inseparable from the human capacity for the deliberation and choice required for moral responsibility (Aristotle 1934, 1113b5–8; hereafter

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¹ See especially chapters 5–6 and 10–2. MacIntyre (1984, 159–60) has reservations about Aristotle's defense of slavery and his assumptions about class and the political capacity of barbarians, but he maintains that "these limitations do not necessarily injure [Aristotle's] general scheme for understanding the place of the virtues in human life." The appeal to Aristotelian virtue is also a theme of MacIntyre 1988.

NE).² Inasmuch as courage involves confidence and fear in dangerous situations, in which we have only imperfect control over external forces, it serves as a test case for the very possibility of understanding virtuous action as the product of a morally responsible agent.

Aristotle's treatment of courage reflects an ambiguity in the notion of the moral virtues themselves, which, for Aristotle, must be understood as both ends in themselves and as means to other ends. Far from merely urging noble action for its own sake, as the *Ethics* is typically understood to do (Nussbaum 1986, 295–6; Sherman 1989, 167; Urmson 1988, 62), Aristotle explores ways of life and facets of human nature that threaten decent political life.³ In light of the problematic character of the noble as well as its attraction, Aristotle urges a middle course that gives its due to both nobility and necessity, to the perspective of MacIntyre's morally serious individual and to Machiavelli's assessment of the harsh realities of political life. That middle ground involves honor and shame. By containing an element of dependence on the judgment of others, honor and shame can bridge the tension between the private interests and concerns of the individual and the political needs of the community.

MORAL RESPONSIBILITY AND CHOICE

Aristotle's detailed discussion of moral responsibility in Book III serves as a preface to his treatment of the particular virtues. He immediately raises the issue of human control over one's actions as the essential precondition for the possibility of encouraging virtue and discouraging vice. Human control is complicated by the need to understand virtue in terms of both emotions (*pathe*), which literally are things done to or that befall a person, and actions (*praxeis*), which are generated by the individual. The attribution of moral responsibility is gauged with respect to the individual's relation to the external world, both as the agent and the recipient of actions. The dynamic and reactive dimensions of virtue make moral responsibility a multifaceted phenomenon. Aristotle suggests this complexity when he distinguishes voluntary actions, which are either praised or blamed, and involuntary actions, which "are condoned, and sometimes even pitied" (NE 1109b30–2). From the outset of this discussion Aristotle presents himself as a teacher of statesmen, as he argues that clarifying the difference between voluntary and involuntary actions is necessary for "those examining virtue" and "will also be of service to the legislator in assigning honors and punishments" (NE 1109b34–5).⁴ Even at

this early point in the discussion Aristotle adumbrates the prominent role honor will assume in his treatment of moral virtue. Yet, his presentation of the issue of moral responsibility also exposes the tension between an individual's act for the sake of the noble and the rewards and punishments offered for his or her action by the political community. Action for the sake of the noble may require a kind of forgetting of the legal and social encouragements for virtue. Aristotle's look at moral responsibility from the perspectives of both individual and community reminds us that the problem of the political character of the moral virtues underlies this entire discussion.

Aristotle begins his account of moral responsibility with a treatment of involuntary actions. These are inappropriate for praise and blame and the legal and social devices of reward and punishment. Although Aristotle argues that these actions can only be condoned or pitied, he nevertheless considers them in his exploration of the ground of virtuous action. The two causes of involuntary action are compulsion and ignorance. Compulsion is evinced when the action originates from outside the individual, making the recipient passive with respect to the action. Actions done through "fear of a worse alternative" are not involuntary. The example Aristotle offers is that of a tyrant who forces someone to perform a base act by threatening his or her family (NE 1110a6–7). The individual is forced to make a difficult choice, but the choice is, nonetheless, the individual's. Even the compulsion of a tyrant, who neither rules by law nor distributes public honors to those courageous in battle (NE 1115a32; also Aristotle 1984, 1295a18–25; Bodeus 1991, 129; Xenophon 1991, V:1–2, VI:12–6, VII:1–10), does not deprive an individual of the capacity for voluntary action. Even less so would the compulsion of law and honor do so. Acts performed under compulsion are necessarily painful, whereas actions done for their "nobility are done with pleasure," but Aristotle recognizes a kind of "mixed" class whereby men are actually praised for submitting to some disgrace or pain "as the price of some great and noble object" (NE 1110a22, b12). Aristotle argues that there are limits to such submission, matricide being one, but he raises here the possibility of praising actions for some "noble object" (*kalon ti*), as opposed to action for the sake of the noble itself. In addition, he suggests that such praiseworthy actions may involve the endurance of pain.

The second cause of involuntary action is ignorance. The ignorance that avoids blame is not a general ignorance displayed in moral choice but a particular ignorance of "the circumstances of the act and of the things affected by it" (NE 1111a1). Although "pleasure and nobility between them supply the motives of all actions whatsoever," it is the knowledge of particular circumstances that determines voluntary and involuntary action and hence the very possibility of virtue (NE 1110b12). Because Aristotle offers his own work to the

² For Aristotle's broader treatment of the role of pleasure and pain in the virtues generally, see NE 1109b4, 1116a15–1117a28. For most of the *Ethics* citations I use Rackham's translation (Aristotle 1934). I will indicate in the notes when I use my own translation.

³ Nussbaum (1986, 343) recognizes the complex mix of nobility and necessity in virtuous action, but for her the contingent quality of Aristotle's understanding of virtue is revealed most importantly in the relations of virtue, such as love and political friendship, rather than virtuous states of character, as seen in courage (p. 344). Although I acknowledge the former, I emphasize the latter as well.

⁴ My translation of *tois peri aretes episkousi* as "to those examining virtue" seems better than Rackham's "for the student of ethics,"

inasmuch as mine preserves the integrity of Aristotle's choice of the word for virtue (*arete*), as opposed to the concept of ethics (*ethika*), which Aristotle introduces in Book II.

legislator to assist in assigning rewards and punishments, he suggests the possibility of achieving some degree of control over chance and applying a general understanding of virtue to particular situations. In order to see whether this correction to the problem of particular ignorance can encourage the control of fear and confidence that courage demands, we must turn to Aristotle's discussion of voluntary actions.

A voluntary act is one in which "the origin lies in the agent, who knows the particular circumstances in which he is acting" (*NE* 1111a22). Thus, voluntary action requires freedom from compulsion and a kind of knowledge of particulars. It demands a recognition of chance, but Aristotle also emphasizes that anger and desire do not exempt an individual from moral responsibility inasmuch as "the irrational feelings are just as much a part of human nature as reason" (*NE* 1111b1–2). This determination seems to locate courage firmly within the realm of voluntary actions, insofar as courage along with moderation are said to be virtues of the irrational parts of the soul (*NE* 1117b24). The question of human control over fear and confidence is complicated by Aristotle's locating the virtue involving these emotions in the irrational parts of the soul. Are these parts of the soul educable? More generally, can the human control over chance situations be taught and encouraged with any degree of permanence if parts of the soul are recalcitrant to such education?

Aristotle begins to address these questions in his treatment of choice and deliberation. He argues that an act of virtue must be more narrowly defined than a simply voluntary act, which could include the actions of animals and children. Virtuous acts must be a manifestation of human rationality expressed through deliberation and choice. Aristotle concurs with common opinion that actions originating in the agent can be the product of desire (*epithumia*), spirit (*thumos*), opining (*doxesis*), or wishing (*boulesis*), but he argues that none of these can be identified as choice (*NE* 1111b12–1112a13). Although choice and wish are particularly akin, Aristotle distinguishes them in that choice, unlike wish, cannot aim at the impossible; it must be directed toward conditions within one's control (*NE* 1111b25–30). Choice is a voluntary act preceded by deliberation about things we can affect that, "though subject to rules that generally hold good, are uncertain in their issue" (*NE* 1112b10). Choice and deliberation, then, involve the attempt to control the uncertainty produced by particular circumstances (Bodeus 1991, 39). As such, choice involves means rather than ends. But if virtuous deeds are chosen as Aristotle maintains, must they not then be means to other goals? Yet, Aristotle clearly presents virtuous acts as intrinsically good. To what extent must virtue be understood as both an end in itself and a means to a more comprehensive goal?

Aristotle soon distinguishes the good individual (*ho spoudaios*), who is "the standard and measure of the noble and the pleasant," from the many (*hoi polloi*), who are misled by bodily pleasure (*NE* 1113a33–5). The mass of human beings aim at pleasure, "for it seems to them to be good, though it is not" (*NE* 1113b1). If the good individual is the measure of the

noble and the pleasant, however, it is unclear whether the discourse of the broader political community that aims to determine the "advantageous and harmful, the just and unjust," can be granted the status of a solid foundation for virtuous activity (Aristotle 1984, 1253a15). Likewise, if the multitude is driven by pleasure, it is unclear how citizens can be brought to sacrifice and endure pain for the sake of the common good. An important modern view, especially in its Kantian formulation, would preserve virtue by isolating it from the self-interested pleasure seeking of political life, but it was Aristotle's project to preserve a connection between morality and happiness, the noble and the pleasant.

Aristotle suggests that if the fundamental alternatives in human life are the many beasts who seek only pleasure and the rare godlike individuals who alone determine the standards of nobility in abstraction from the political community, then political life and citizenship dissolve into one or the other. Yet, the presumption of moral responsibility, he argues, underlies all political life. This is seen both in the practice of private life and by the practice of lawgivers, who punish and extract redress from those who do evil and "honor those who do noble deeds, in order to encourage the one sort and to discourage the other" (*NE* 1113b25). The role of public honor in encouraging virtue establishes a link between honor and the performance of noble deeds. Between the extremes of the good individual and the mass of pleasure seekers lies the political community, which exercises its own version of deliberation and choice in the conferring of public honors, and which establishes law as a measure of right action. Although it is not clear whether a political community that fully incorporates the perspective of the good man and of the masses is possible, the direction of Aristotle's argument has serious implications for our understanding of courage.

As the discussion of moral responsibility reveals, the virtues are only possible if humans can achieve some degree of freedom from necessity. Necessity emerges as the antithesis of nobility. Aristotle suggests that necessity is rooted in the bodily concerns for self-preservation, physical pleasure, and material well-being. Considerations of necessity threaten the free moral agency required by nobility.⁵ An individual may perform a courageous act, for example, not for the sake of its moral excellence but for some other material, social, or political end. In this case courageous action is not freely chosen but is only the means to some other good. It is a necessary means, even if it is not the only possible means. That we have bodies, that we are mortal, necessitates that we consider ends other than the noble. Courageous acts may also be necessitated by dangerous situations, which an individual would rather avoid. Again, our physical mortal lives make us vulnerable to a host of dangers, and in such cases there is even less choice and freedom involved than when

⁵ I thank an anonymous referee for helping me clarify and distinguish these two elements of necessity—instrumentality and compulsion—as they operate in Aristotle's account of courage.

courage is chosen as a means. Both the instrumental and compulsory elements of necessity will recur as problems in Aristotle's account of courage.

Aristotle suggests that the practice of conferring honors is the political manifestation of a general recognition of nobility and an awareness of the human potential for some freedom from necessity. In this light, the distance from the fear of death that courage promises may be necessary for that degree of objectivity required for the deliberative and adjudicative functions of the city.⁶ Aristotle supports the city's presumption of the possibility of moral responsibility. This conclusion is suggested if not proven by his claims that "our characters are the result of our conduct," and "we are in a sense ourselves partly the cause of our moral dispositions" (*NE* 1114a10, 1114b24–5). Yet, the extent to which the freedom from necessity required for courage is possible for the individual is left unclear by Aristotle's ambiguous use of the first person plural of the verb: Who are the "we" who are partly responsible for our moral dispositions? Is each individual partly the cause of his or her own character, or is the political community partly the cause of the character of each of its members? The truth, of course, may end up being a mixture of both.

COURAGE AS A MEAN

Aristotle complicates his presentation of the first moral virtue he discusses by designating two passions, fear and confidence, with which courage is involved (*NE* 1115a6; also 1107b1). This produces, in his analysis, two sets of extremes in relation to courage, one involving fear (cowardice and fearlessness, or insensitivity to pain), the other involving confidence (despondency and rashness) (*NE* 1115b25–1116a3).⁷ Whatever the subtle internal differences between fearlessness and rashness (or between cowardice and despondency), however, their external manifestations would be virtually impossible to distinguish.⁸ This may be why, as Aristotle's discussion proceeds, he collapses the two, speaking of courage as a mean, and cowardice and rashness as the extremes (*NE* 1116a5). Thus his discussion of the moral virtues begins by making fine distinctions about internal dispositions of soul that have no visible external manifestation in the corresponding acts of virtue and vice. Ethical matters, as he told us at the

beginning of Book 1 (*NE* 1094b12–5), do not admit of the same degree of precision as mathematics.

The determinations of cowardice and rashness are made even more difficult when we compare the virtue with the extremes between which it falls: "A brave man appears rash in contrast with a coward and cowardly in contrast with a rash man" (*NE* 1108b19). If appearances are so deceiving, then how is a political community able to make the proper distribution of honors for courage and punishments for cowardice and rashness? How can the community find any reliable means to encourage the virtue and discourage the vices? At this point, Aristotle observes merely that courage may be recognized as a kind of mixture of fear and confidence that involves feeling both in the right way, at the right time, and regarding the right things (*NE* 1115b10–7). Although the right time and the right things depend on particular circumstances, the right way to perform courageous acts is "for the sake of what is noble" (*NE* 1115b12).

The universality of the motive of courageous action—for the sake of the noble—stands in contrast to Aristotle's narrow definition of the circumstances in which courage is displayed: facing death in battle. To support this argument Aristotle dismisses several applications of the term courage applied "by analogy," such as bravely facing a flogging, death by drowning or by disease, and boldly risking disgrace. In the latter case he explains that common opinion may blur the distinction between shamelessness and courage because they both appear to display fearlessness, but he indicates that it is not lack of fear per se that marks courage; rather, it is the correct disposition toward fear in situations that allow noble action. He contrasts the defective character of the shameless individual with the commendable actions of the "equitable person, with a due sense of shame," who displays a fear of disgrace (*NE* 1115a15). The effect of Aristotle's correction of the common praise of shamelessness as courage is to leave room for a virtuous person who acts at least in part for the sake of honor. Like the individual who fears disgrace, the courageous person, despite appearances, is not fearless.

That courage involves risk in battle is "borne out by the principle on which public honors are bestowed in republics and under monarchies" (*NE* 1115a32). Aristotle presents the bestowing of public honors for courageous actions performed in the face of the "greatest and noblest dangers" as an almost universal function of political life (it is unclear whether tyranny would be included as a species of monarchy). Aristotle's argument here, however, has disturbing implications for his larger account of this virtue. He proves that courage involves battle by relying on the judgment of the political community, whereas he defines the courageous act as one performed solely for the sake of the noble. He raises the possibility that the opinions that ground and direct virtuous action are rooted in the city's understanding of those actions.⁹ The discrepancy

⁶ Nichols (1992, 91) draws this connection between courage and justice: "While the courageous person sufficiently distances himself from his fear of death that he can risk his life, the judge sufficiently distances himself from the competition for goods that he can consider what a just distribution would be."

⁷ Aristotle argues that the excess of fearlessness has no name, but he suggests madness or insensitivity to pain as possible categorizations. He offers no precise definition for the deficiency in confidence, but he calls such a person "despondent" (*duselpis*) in addition to being a coward (*NE* 1116a3).

⁸ Hardie (1968, 140 and 145) and Pears (1980, 171) have even suggested that courage operates in two distinct modalities, the one intelligible in terms of fear and the other of confidence. Therefore, they argue it is possible that courage may involve two separate virtues.

⁹ Faulkner (1972, 88) makes the point in a somewhat different context that the application of the noble as the universal standard for

between the proof that courage involves risk in battle, which is based on public honors the law bestows, and its purely noble motive reveals a deep ambiguity in Aristotle's treatment of courage.

By identifying courage with facing death in battle—as opposed, for example, to facing flogging or death by drowning or disease—Aristotle suggests that courage must possess some element of self-generated action aimed at controlling chance. Yet, as we have noted, the universal practice of cities in distributing battle honors confirms that courage has a strong political core. Thus, Aristotle indicates that courage requires individual control over chance, but it also emerges in a context greater than the individual. Cities go to war, but Aristotle suggests that the political may not exhaust the moral and intellectual possibilities for courage. Through his discussion of the specious forms of courage, he sheds further light on the tension between these different manifestations of courage.

THE SPECIOUS FORMS OF COURAGE

The potential disjunction between the external appearance of an action and the disposition of the actor emerges as a central theme in Aristotle's account of courage. Although virtuous action must be performed for the sake of the noble, Aristotle observes that many actions which appear virtuous are actually motivated by concerns other than nobility. He finds this difficulty to be inherent in the internal structure of the virtues themselves, but it is particularly prominent in his account of courage, for only there does he treat systematically the specious forms that appear to be the true virtue.

The first imperfect form is citizen courage (*he politike*), which is divided into two kinds. Citizen troops (1) appear to “endure dangers because of the legal penalties and the reproach attaching to cowardice, and the honors awarded to bravery,” or (2) are driven into battle by fear of the commander and the desire to avoid the pain he will inflict for disobedience (*NE* 1116a15, 30). Either kind is manifestly contingent on conditions extrinsic to the nobility of the act itself, with one variety driven by a desire for honor and a sense of shame and the other by the avoidance of pain and fear of the commander.

Although Aristotle distinguishes citizen courage from true courage, he insists that its highest form “most closely” resembles true courage because it is “prompted by a virtue, namely the sense of shame, and by the desire for something noble, namely honor” (*NE* 1116a27). He thus corrects his earlier statement that shame is not a virtue but an emotion (*NE* 1108a30) and calls honor, which he earlier distinguished from virtue because of its dependence on the opinion of others (*NE* 1095b25–6), a noble thing (Joachim 1951, 116).

virtuous action does not in itself supply the knowledge of the particular things we are to do. I concur with his suggestion that, for Aristotle, the law is the primary source of these more particular opinions, and “to this extent human action is not free, but decisively subject to the law and the community that forms the law.”

The importance of this supposedly specious form of courage is suggested as well by his use of an expression for citizen courage identical to that used in Book I to refer to the architectonic art of politics.¹⁰

Aristotle illustrates the two forms of citizen courage, based on love of honor or fear of commanders, by quotations from Homer (*NE* 1116a22–5, 34–5). The desire for honor possessed by Homeric heroes presupposes that they alone are responsible for their virtue. Only if it were self-generated would they deserve the honor they crave. They are prime candidates for a teaching that courage is for its own sake, or for the sake of the noble, which implies that their virtuous deeds are utterly free. But the presupposition of their heroism, the self-sufficiency of courage, is based on a delusion, for they do desire honor, even if as Aristotle tells us, honor is a noble thing. He does not merely reveal their contradiction; his insistence that courage requires facing death in battle corrects their delusion of noble self-sufficiency, because the city and its need for defense are both the occasion and the end of courage. This view of the Homeric heroes, and their delusion that their actions can escape all compulsion or necessity, leads to a brutalizing of politics. Deluded by his self-sufficiency, for example, Achilles watches his fellow Achaeans slaughtered by the Trojans. (It is no accident that Aristotle uses the Homeric heroes as examples not only of an excessive love of honor but also of those who brutally compel their own soldiers to fight.) There is similarly a certain logic of harsh imperialism reflected in Pericles' view of the Athenian empire as a project freely chosen (Nichols 1992, 128–9; Orwin 1994, esp. chap. 1; compare Strauss 1964, 28).

Aristotle's implicit criticism of the Homeric heroes' delusion of self-sufficiency elucidates the defect in MacIntyre's attempt to view the virtues in total separation from considerations of utility or instrumentality. At the same time, by insisting on the specious courage of those who would skulk off the field if not for fear of the commander (*NE* 1116a34),¹¹ Aristotle refuses to reduce virtue to necessity in the manner of Machiavelli.¹² Perhaps somewhere between the proud Homeric commanders and their cowering soldiers lies Aris-

¹⁰ In both cases, Aristotle simply uses the feminine form of the adjective “political.” Whereas it must be understood to modify courage in the discussion of that virtue (*NE* 1116a17), it presumably modifies *technē* in the phrase usually translated as “political science” (*NE* 1094a30, b15; 1141a21, b24). In this manner Aristotle diverges from the way he identifies political justice, to *politikon dikaiōn* (*NE* 1134a25–30, b18).

¹¹ There is a discrepancy between the rendition of this passage by Aristotle and by Homer (1951, II: 391). I agree with Charney (1988, 69–70) that Aristotle's presentation of true courage points to the deficiencies of the Homeric presentation, but I disagree with her conclusion that Aristotle's aim is to reveal that the “bravest acts of political courage are a form of cowardice.” Rather, I contend that the combination of dependence and compulsion in citizen courage is related to Aristotle's argument that the poetic-heroic account of courage belies the complexity and variety of motives attending political action (compare Hardie 1968, 106; MacIntyre 1984, 157).

¹² Although Machiavelli advocates honor-loving commanders, he does so in a way that emphasizes the inescapable necessity that grounds this natural appetite. Moreover, he does not hold the courage driven by compulsion as any less moral than that freely generated. See the example of Hannibal in *The Prince*, chapter XVII

totle's exemplar of courage, at once less scornful of necessity than the hero and yet more capable of moral responsibility than the impressed soldier.

The second specious form of courage relies on a certain kind of knowledge acquired through experience. The chief example Aristotle cites is "the type of bravery displayed . . . by [professional] soldiers" (*NE* 1116b3–6). He admits they are superior fighters to courageous men, just as the armed will ordinarily conquer the unarmed, and the stronger the weaker (*NE* 1116b13–5), but theirs is a specious form of courage. In view of the preceding discussion, we would expect Aristotle to explain that the noble, not knowledge or expertise, defines true courage. Surprisingly, he emphasizes the unreliability of professional troops. Because their confidence is based on their superiority to the enemy, they take flight in reversals of fortune, "fearing death more than disgrace" (*NE* 1116b19–23). Aristotle now praises the citizen soldiers (*ta politika*), for whom "it is shameful to flee, and for whom death is preferable to such safety" (*NE* 1116b20).

Aristotle's criticism of the courage of experience, moreover, relies on a crucial abstraction from the issue of time (Sherman 1989, 178–9 and 191–2). Aristotle fails to acknowledge that the inevitable result of the consistent exercise of courage in battle over time is experience. The virtues, he stated earlier, are inculcated by the repeated performance of certain acts (*NE* 1103a17). How, then, are we to distinguish the confidence arising from experience and the confidence properly belonging to true courage? The performance even of truly courageous acts must be a mixture of action for the sake of the noble and action affected by experience. Experience in battle can provide knowledge of the correct means to perform noble acts.

The third specious form of courage is spiritedness, which appears to be true courage because it is both a part of courage as well as its "most natural" form (*NE* 1116b24). The naturalness is rooted in a certain unflattering affinity between humans and enraged wounded animals. Aristotle admits that the truly courageous are motivated by nobility, but "spirit operates in them as well" (*NE* 1116b31). Spiritedness "when reinforced by deliberate choice and purpose . . . appears to be true courage" (*NE* 1117a5).¹³ Aristotle's distinction between spiritedness and courage becomes even more obscure when he argues that spirited warriors are not guided by "reason" but by "emotion," for "the motive of their confidence is not the noble" (*to kalon*) (*NE* 1117a8).¹⁴ If emotion is inconsistent with nobility, then how can spiritedness operate in true courage?

By forcing us to see the expanded role of reason in

virtue, thus distinguishing animal courage from true courage, Aristotle directs us to the problem of attempting to identify courage in abstraction from its particular causes. The connection between reason and courage allows the possibility of a broader meaning of purpose, different from the noble itself. In Aristotle's model of nobility, for example, how can we distinguish the actions of the citizens of a good city in a just cause from a bad city in an unjust cause (Jaffa 1952, 80–2)? I agree with Jaffa that the problem of patriotic courage lies in its connection to the varying forms of legal justice, which means it cannot be true courage in a certain or strict sense. Yet, inasmuch as courage is an emphatically political virtue, and legal justice varies by regime, the very possibility of regime in some sense requires courage, and thus any understanding of true courage would possess a patriotic dimension. Perhaps Aristotle's argument that spiritedness plus deliberate choice and purpose appears to be true courage suggests the importance of political regime for the virtues, inasmuch as spirited citizens defending a good city—one in which the citizens engage in deliberation and choice—becomes the closest instance to true courage that we can perceive.

The fourth kind of specious form is the courage of "good hope" (*NE* 1117a10).¹⁵ It resembles true courage, because "both are confident" (*tharrousin*), but it differs in that it cannot endure changing tides of battle. The courage of hopefulness is born from an expectation of victory, even easy victory, and the confidence it produces is readily shattered by sudden reversals of fortune in battle. True courage, Aristotle argues, is manifest in "unforeseen dangers," when it "springs more from character" and "there is less time for preparation" (*NE* 1117a20). Courage in "sudden alarms" will be displayed because "it is noble to do so and base not to do so" (*NE* 1117a15–9). The problem is how to harmonize this fixed disposition displayed in sudden alarms with the deliberate choice that Aristotle associates with true courage in the previous section on spirit.¹⁶ Although correct split-second battlefield decisions are certainly not impossible, Aristotle suggests that the conditions of battle clearly militate against the careful deliberation he identifies with virtue in his earlier treatment of moral responsibility. How, then, is the individual to know what is noble to do in each particular situation without engaging in careful deliberation and choice? In this section Aristotle seems to reduce the courageous individual to a kind of noble machine, an automaton that acts courageously but ceases to be a deliberative agent. Only if human beings were automata could their action be generated solely

([1532] 1985, 67) and the examples of Manlius Torquatus and Camillus in *Discourses on Livy* ([1531] 1996, Book III, chap. 22–3).

¹³ Mara (1995, 290) makes the interesting observation that Aristotle's use of Homer to illustrate spirited courage, as well as courage by compulsion, reveals that Homeric courage in Aristotle's presentation registers both an internal and external impulse at variance with true courage. Compare Charney 1988, 73.

¹⁴ Rackham (Aristotle 1934, 169) quite inexplicably translates *to kalon* as "honor" at this point, but a more literal translation as "the noble" seems perfectly in keeping with the sense of Aristotle's argument.

¹⁵ Here I depart slightly from Rackham, who translates *euepides* as sanguine.

¹⁶ Reeve (1992, 92–3) sees courage as an example of virtuous action involving "instantaneous or compressed deliberation and decision." I agree that actions performed from a "virtuous state" will be, at least indirectly, the result of prior deliberation and decision, but this does not negate the complexity of the issues explored in the account of the courage of experience. If anything, Aristotle seems to be indicating the difficulty of distinguishing actions arising from confidence and experience from those due to deliberation and choice; the former he criticizes, and the latter he applauds.

for the sake of the noble without any other, extrinsic consideration.

The fifth and final specious form of courage is produced by ignorance. This imperfect type resembles “good hope” but is inferior because its practitioners lack “sufficient worth” (NE 1117a24). The single example of the Argives who mistook the Lacaedaemonians for Sicyonians recalls the common thread in all the examples of specious courage (with the notable exception of the higher form of citizen courage); namely, it involves an initial display of confidence that crumbles in the course of battle. True courage clearly requires some knowledge of the particular danger one is facing. In view of Aristotle’s initial argument that voluntary action requires knowledge of “particular circumstances,” we are left to wonder how a general concern with acting solely for the sake of the noble can be made compatible with the knowledge of particular circumstances required to escape the false courage produced by ignorance.

Aristotle’s account of the five specious forms of courage raises serious problems for his presentation of true courage. His inability to sustain a logic of action for the sake of the noble separate from extrinsic causes is revealed in the problematic and often contradictory character of this account. The example of courage provides the paradigm for Aristotle’s understanding of the potential tension between an individual’s internal disposition and the appearance of his or her external actions. Courage, inasmuch as it relates to the correct disposition toward fear, is particularly open to the confusion of external appearance and internal reality.¹⁷ The etymological origins and development of the Greek word for fear (*phobos*) had associations both with fear as an internal feeling and with flight as an actual physical activity.¹⁸ Aristotle suggests that the appearance of flight need not necessarily reflect the actions of individuals unable to control their fear, just as individuals who, at least initially, hold their ground in battle may do so not from true courage but because of hopefulness, ignorance, or compulsion.

PLEASURE AND PAIN

The difficulty in Aristotle’s attempt to separate courageous acts for the sake of the noble from any extrinsic causes is clearly exposed in his account of the centrality of pleasure and pain in our understanding of courage. Aristotle originally presented courage as a mean relating to fear and confidence, but he now reveals that it mainly deals with fear and pain. “Courage itself is

attended by pain; it is justly praised, because it is harder to endure painful things than to abstain from pleasure” (NE 1117a35; compare 1117b25, 1119a5). Although he previously argued that the pleasantness of courage “is obscured by the attendant circumstances,” he now concludes that the particular circumstances tell a truer tale than he previously suggested: “It is not true therefore of every virtue that its active exercise is essentially pleasant” (NE 1117b15). He moves even farther away from his initial argument that “the man who does not enjoy doing noble actions is not a good man at all” (NE 1099a17). To understand this dramatic shift in Aristotle’s position, we must analyze his analogy to the boxers.

Aristotle employs this analogy to reveal how courage can be understood as a mixture of pleasure and pain or, more precisely, an endurance of pain for the sake of a later pleasure. For boxers, the blows and training are painful, but the end, “the wreath and honors of victory,” is pleasant. This remarkable image brings some of the earlier problems into sharper focus. Does the warrior’s end also include the pleasure from gaining wreaths and honors? Does the nobility of the warrior’s end depend on victory? The boxer analogy exposes the tension between the noble and the good more clearly than Aristotle has suggested hitherto. Although earlier he argued that truly virtuous action is not supposed to have an end extrinsic to itself, now he ponders whether men “of flesh and blood” will endure pain for the sake of the pleasure inhering in a “small thing,” presumably like a wreath or honors (NE 1117b5).

Aristotle exposes the tension between the pain involved in noble action and the unquestionable good of preserving one’s life, especially if one enjoys a happy life. If the pleasant end is dwarfed by the attendant pain, then it is difficult to see how nobility alone can sustain courage. Aristotle concedes as much when he reveals that, contrary to expectation, the more an individual has every virtue and is happy, the more s/he will be pained by death, for s/he has more to lose and knows it (NE 1117b17). But these people are not the less courageous, Aristotle observes, and perhaps are even more so, because they prefer the noble in war to other goods. Aristotle nevertheless concludes that they may not make the best soldiers; those less courageous who have no good beside life to lose will therefore exchange it for a small gain. People of the greatest virtue have more difficulty sacrificing their own good for the good of the city than the most selfish mercenary.

The conclusion of the boxer analogy, which suggests that despite specious courage the professional is a better soldier than the truly courageous individual, must be seen in relation to Aristotle’s earlier statements ranking citizen soldiers above professionals (NE 1116b15–20). Both the virtuous individual and the mercenary, paradoxically, abstract from the complexities involved in the action of a citizen soldier, who acts from a variety of motives and for a larger purpose, namely, the defense of the city. The citizen’s defense of the city reflects the composite associations and layers of commitment to private and public interest that

¹⁷ This potential disjunction between external appearance and internal disposition also can be seen in Aristotle’s treatment of other virtues, such as moderation, liberality, and truthfulness (NE 1108b19–23, 1127a27, 1127b8–9).

¹⁸ Aristotle uses *phobos* to mean fear, but at least since the time of Homer the word also had strong connotations of physical flight. The same is true for the verb *phobeo*, which can mean either to frighten or to put to flight. This deep connection between the internal sensation and the external manifestation presents an ambiguity that Aristotle raises and explores in his discussion of the specious forms of courage. For another perspective, consider Herodotus (1988, 8.87–8) and Ward’s (1999, 12–4) excellent treatment of this story.

characterize political life (Salkever 1986, 252).¹⁹ Because professional and true courage are free from the concerns of any particular city, they both present problems for the city and its needs. In Aristotle's reevaluation near the end of the discussion of true courage, the citizen soldier, with his sense of shame and desire for honor mixed with compulsion and dependence, emerges as the better defender of the city than the truly courageous man.

Aristotle's treatment of the difficulty that pleasure and pain present for nobility in courage prepares for the refinements in his later argument in the *Ethics*. The intractable character of pleasure and pain plays a role in his discussion of the moral virtues generally, all of which, Aristotle says, involve pleasure and pain (*NE* 1105a12, 1109b4; but see 1126a20, 1126b11–36, 1128a7–27). The ubiquitous and ineradicable human desire for pleasure and avoidance of pain, Aristotle suggests in this discussion, belies a simple understanding of human nature presumed by the perspective of the noble. Aristotle's original presentation of nobility is complicated by his later suggestion that human nature "is not simple" (*NE* 1154b22–32). He implies that only if human nature and the dispositions of character were simple and unchanging would nobility, as opposed to other states of character, be the sole condition for virtuous action.

Aristotle ends the discussion of courage with this observation: "From what has been said it will not be difficult to form . . . a rough outline of its nature" (*NE* 1117b22). Perhaps the specious forms of courage that comprise this "rough outline" are not as discrete and distinct as his enumeration of them suggests. His admission that the specious forms often resemble one another and his argument that spirit operates in true courage suggest that the categories are separable in speech but may not be so in deed (*NE* 1102a31–3). Aristotle may not be juxtaposing true courage to the specious forms; rather, he may be indicating that courage must be properly understood as a composite, more closely resembling the composite association that it serves. From this perspective, the specious forms expressed in common civic discourse and rooted in notions of politics (*politike*), experience (*empeiria*), spirit (*thumos*), hopefulness (*euelpis*), and even ignorance (*agnoia*) can be understood as elements that may or may not operate to various degrees in particular acts of courage, although none alone can be simply identified with courage.

The tension in Aristotle's account between the necessity underlying courage and its appearance as virtuous action for the sake of the noble points to his own understanding of the complexity of political life. Aristotle presents courage as a trait that distances human

beings from necessity. The practice of the virtues points beyond mere bodily pleasure toward a notion of the good that is more consistent with our awareness, however dimly, of our place in the whole. The good and the pleasant are not identical. Yet, his discussion ends in *aporia* inasmuch as the all-too-natural desire for pleasure and fear of pain hinder courage in battle. Insofar as courage, more so than all the virtues, deals with the fear and pain revolving around self-preservation (a concern Aristotle argues that we share with the lower animals), the noble conflicts with a narrow but seminal construction of the good as the preservation of life itself (*NE* 1094b19). Each specious form of courage contains, to varying degrees, an animating principle of self-preservation that resists the stringent demands of the noble. Political life requires that human beings somehow transcend their animal, necessitous nature, but Aristotle's conclusion to the section on courage indicates that this is not a natural or inevitable process.

Yet, Aristotle also abstracts from necessity to present the virtues as something like beautiful symbols of our self-sufficiency, in light of which we understand ourselves. The virtues have no ends outside themselves to which they are subordinate and no causes other than the individual's free choice of good actions for their own sake. That we act for the sake of the noble is both an illusion and a sign that we are capable of rising above necessity. The virtues reflect the human desire to be free of accident, chance, and necessity. Although Aristotle's discussion of courage is saturated with the language of *kalon*, as we proceed to unearth some of its internal contradictions, the virtues become unintelligible as ends in themselves. They begin to appear as willful impositions not unlike Glaucon's polished statues of the just and unjust man (Plato 1968, 361d4). Just as Glaucon demanded that Socrates make justice perfectly visible, revealing the being of the just and unjust men in their appearance, Aristotle at first presents true courage as the perfect harmony between body and soul. We come to suspect that virtuous action cannot be understood separately from its consequences. The treatment of the specious forms of courage in particular calls attention to the intent behind virtuous action and the difficulty in distinguishing the true and apparent causes of human action. In the single chapter on the specious forms of courage, some form of the verb "to seem" (*dokein*) occurs nearly twice as often as in the other three chapters on courage combined.²⁰ To understand Aristotle's purpose in presenting courage in the manner he does, we must examine the tension between nobility and necessity.

THE TENSION BETWEEN NOBILITY AND NECESSITY

Much has been written on the rhetorical aspects of Aristotle's political and moral teaching (Ambler 1985; Nichols 1987; Tessitore 1996).²¹ My previous discus-

¹⁹ My point here runs counter to that of Salkever (1986, 252), who argues that the problematic character of Aristotle's account of courage indicates an attack on the ancient Greek idea of political virility and is meant to blur the distinction between public and private things. I believe Aristotle's intention is to show the connection between the public and private concerns that are interwoven in the complex association of the city. Of course, to show a connection between two things presupposes a more primary distinction.

²⁰ It appears seven times in Book III, chapter viii, but only four times throughout chapters vi, vii, and ix.

²¹ For different treatments of the audience of the *Ethics*, see Tessi-

sion of the problematic features of Aristotle's account of courage may shed light on his larger rhetorical purpose in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Just as Aristotle presents each particular virtue as a mean between two extremes, his presentation of courage suggests that virtue can be viewed as a mean between nobility and necessity.

Aristotle exposes the problem of nobility by demonstrating the difficulty of grounding true courage solely in action performed for the sake of the noble. This severing of virtuous action from particular or contingent circumstances makes the possibility of any such action uncertain, as Aristotle indicates in his discussion of magnanimity (Tessitore 1996, 28–35).²² Magnanimity is an ornament (*kosmos*) of the virtues, without which they are incomplete and therefore not virtues (*NE* 1123b30, 1124a2; Davis 1996, 4). Yet, as Aristotle makes clear in his account of the magnanimous individual, the concept of the noble itself produces a kind of illusion of self-sufficiency; nobility may provide an idea of the end of an action but no enduring motive for its performance. The noble is not a satisfactory motive for the performance of virtuous action because it lacks specific content, being an abstraction from particulars.

The magnanimous individual (literally, “great-souled” [*megalopsychos*]) in Book IV exemplifies this illusion of self-sufficiency, for he “wonders at nothing,” and “nothing is great to him” (*NE* 1125a3). This profound detachment is seen in his resistance to recognizing his debts and his general idleness (*NE* 1124b10–5, 26). It is worth noting that, in the initial list of virtues in Book II, magnanimity is described as a mean concerning honor and dishonor (*NE* 1107b21–3), but in the thematic treatment in Book IV, greatness, not honor, becomes the measure of magnanimity. To the great-souled, “even honor is a small thing” (*NE* 1124a19). Whereas honor and dishonor are supplied by the political community, greatness, Aristotle indicates, is not dependent on recognition. These individuals are honored for being great or doing great things, but they are not great because they are honored. For Aristotle, greatness itself, like nobility itself, exists independently of politics.

This illusory character of the noble is compounded by the dangers of excessive self-love in a city's prominent figures. The detachment encouraged by a concern for nobility can fuel the attempt to transcend the bounds of political life in a desire to experience the enjoyment of performing noble acts, which Aristotle presents as the only true reward for such action. Magnanimous individuals can experience this pleasure in a manner detached from the good of the political

community or even to its detriment (*NE* 1124a19, 1124b10–5, 1125a19).²³ In the pursuit of the noble, they forget their human needs, mirroring the truly courageous individual who forgets the elements of experience, compulsion, ignorance, spirit, and desire for honor that operate in courageous action.²⁴ And it goes without saying that if honor is a small thing to magnanimous people, of even less significance would be the bodily pleasures that most humans seek. Their intense gratification lies elsewhere, in a disdain for the many particular needs of human beings, which is potentially detrimental to the political community. Thus, the desire for the noble distorts our conception of politics and encourages a kind of idealized individualism that makes decent political life problematic.

Because Aristotle's presentation of the noble abstracts from the extrinsic causes of courage, it also obscures the fundamental causes of war. This difficulty may be seen more clearly if we reconsider citizen courage. The compulsion and dependence in citizen courage manifests a love of one's own, reflected in private property, as the cause of war most consistent with the city's interests. In contrast to courage for the sake of the noble, citizen courage is more closely related to the actual causes of war, such as the defense of hearth and home. The Guardians in Plato's *Republic*, whom Aristotle criticizes in Book II of the *Politics*, are rigorously educated in the noble, and their communized condition removes from them the motivations for citizen courage (Aristotle 1984, 1260b25–1264b25).

Aristotle identified two major problems with Socrates' communistic proposal: It leads to an excessive unity, which destroys the layers of association that compose the *polis*, and it undermines the virtues by abolishing the equipment required for their performance (Aristotle 1984, 1261b1–15, 1263a25–b13). These concerns apply to the noble itself as Aristotle presents it in the *Ethics*, for both the noble and Socratic communism abstract from particular physical and political necessities. By completely denying the instrumental and compulsory aspects of virtuous action, the aspirations of the noble can only find expression in a condition that allows the individual to act out of the pure motive of pursuing moral excellence, a disposition unsullied by concerns for the social and material demands of political life. Only after the abolition of private property and the private family can the Guardians perform virtuous action for its own sake, without the intrusion of such extrinsic motives as particular material concerns and private desires.

Necessity rooted in bodily pleasures and pains presents even greater difficulties than the noble in Aristotle's account of courage. Most human beings are driven primarily by pleasure, and those without self-restraint who act solely out of desire cannot exercise choice in

tore (1996, 19–20, 34) and Ambler (1985, 183). By arguing that Aristotle's rhetorical strategy in the *Ethics* is both rooted in common opinion and aims to go beyond it in order to improve political communities, I follow closely Nichols (1987, 660–1, 675–6).

²² Tessitore's treatment of the description of magnanimity in *Posterior Analytics* (Aristotle 1960, 97b16–24) is especially useful. Aristotle's references to Alcibiades, Achilles, Ajax, Lysander, and Socrates as examples of magnanimity—clearly, individuals defined in some sense by their conflicts with fellow citizens—suggest that he intends his portrait of the magnanimous person to elucidate the dangers of idealized individualism for healthy political life.

²³ I thank an anonymous referee for bringing to my attention another passage that deals with the relation of nobility to self-love (*NE* 1169a3–35).

²⁴ Winthrop (1978, 1212) argues, however, that Aristotle's discussion of the importance of friendship for the magnanimous individual points to the significance of the desire for honor “in order to confirm his or her opinion about the existence and worth of his virtue.”

the fullest sense (*NE* 1113a35). Aristotle's inability to ground true courage in the needs of the city may be symbolic of the enormous problem pleasure poses for political life. Of the three ways of life posited in Book I—honor, pleasure, and contemplation—Aristotle dismisses from the discussion there the life dedicated to pleasure as “utterly slavish” and fit “only . . . for cattle.” Yet, he acknowledges that it cannot be so easily dismissed, at least from discussions of politics, when he admits that the life of pleasure characterizes “the many” (*NE* 1095b19).

Necessity seems destined to make political life inherently tragic, because the “many take pleasure in things that conflict with one another” (*NE* 1099a12). Political life simply dissolves into the competition for material goods. The slavish may perform a kind of service for the political community—apolitical mercenaries “will barter their lives for trifling gains”—but the political possibilities for humankind are severely restricted when such mercenaries are more useful soldiers than the noble among the citizenry (*NE* 1117b20). If the slavish life dedicated to bodily pleasures and necessities is antithetical to decent political life, then Aristotle may be cautioning about the disadvantage of the idealized individualism of the few: If most human beings are unfit for political life, then where does one find man the political animal (Aristotle 1984, 1253a2)?

Aristotle's discussion of the noble serves as a way to gain distance from particular necessities and to allow reflection on the good in contradistinction to the pleasant. As Faulkner (1972, 86) suggests, perhaps “in moral science some exaggeration of human powers is salutary.” Aristotle exposes a contradiction in the political understanding of virtue. The city projects a standard of nobility in order to make political life possible, by pulling human beings out of their necessitous animal nature, but the consequence of the extreme pursuit of nobility is an abstraction from the city's very real needs. It is precisely this exaggeration of human powers that produces the tension between the noble and the good. The tension is resolved in part by the notion of honor, which has as one component the recognition of our goodness in and by others, a recognition that allows us to avoid the dangers posed by the excessive pursuit of the noble and by the complete acquiescence to necessity.²⁵ Moreover, the recognition bestowed in honor can be modified and purified in the relations of justice, equity, and ultimately friendship, which both constitute human happiness and mark decent political life.

Aristotle's treatment of honor is as complex as his account of courage. In Book I, honor and the life of action are depreciated in the following terms: “Honor

after all seems (*dokei*) too superficial to be the Good which we are seeking; since it appears to depend on those who confer it more than upon him upon whom it is conferred” (*NE* 1095b25). Honor cannot be the good to which all actions aim because it depends on the judgment of others and points beyond the act itself to the desire to be recognized for one's virtue. Here Aristotle seems unequivocally to subordinate honor to virtue, or action for the sake of the noble. But as we move through the account of courage, as we have seen, the distinction between the noble and honor becomes blurred. Perhaps it is Aristotle's initial criticism of honor that will emerge as too “superficial.”

Aristotle criticizes honor for encouraging dependence on the judgment of others, but it combines desire for pleasure with virtuous action in a manner that benefits the city. The awareness of one's imperfection that is signified by the desire for honor allows virtue to be chosen as both an end in itself and a means to another more comprehensive good. Honor, the active moral principle of the citizen soldier, links the individual and the community in a way not possible in the perspective dominated by the extremes of nobility and necessity. One is publicly honored both for one's own merit and for service to the political community. In describing honor as “something noble,” Aristotle defines the relation between the two as that between the particular and the universal (*NE* 1116a28). The noble transcends any particular, and honor operates as a particular manifestation of the noble expressed through public and private rewards.

What is only implied in the *Ethics* is brought out more clearly in the *Politics*. There Aristotle (1984, 1281a1–3; see also 1252b29) explains that the *polis*, which comes into being for the sake of the necessary, or mere life, continues for the sake of the noble or good life. This double character of the city requires that virtue operate as both an end and a means. As Nichols (1992, 92) suggests, perhaps the entire account of courage has led to this signal recognition that the military element in the city most clearly “stands on the border between necessity and nobility, between preservation of life and living well.” Honor may act as a bridge between these two aspects of political life. Courage, then, is paradigmatic for our understanding of the virtues inasmuch as the importance of public recognition of noble acts performed out of necessity is seen most clearly in the case of courage, which literally deals with the very survival of the political community.

CONCLUSION

In presenting his view of honor as the political expression of a kind of mean with respect to the excessive pursuit of nobility and the complete acquiescence to necessity, Aristotle offers a remedy to the dangers posed by both the MacIntyrean and the Machiavellian understanding of the possibilities for moral virtue. Aristotle signals that the attraction toward idealized individualism seen in MacIntyre's praise of virtue for its own sake is animated by the intense personal enjoyment of virtuous actors seeking to claim all the

²⁵ Whereas Mara (1995, 281, 291–3) views Aristotle as critical of honor inasmuch as it promotes “the attempt to exert control over others,” I argue that Aristotle presents nobility, not honor, as the dangerous impulse toward imperial domination. Indeed, Aristotle views honor as a corrective to the problem of the noble. I believe he rehabilitates honor and corrects the perspective of the morally serious as a way to resist the complete functionalization of the virtues by a view of political life, narrowly understood.

reward of nobility, or as much as possible, for themselves. The unbridled pursuit of nobility as an expression of self-love can be destructive to decent communities when individuals seek to transcend the constraints of political life. Aristotle identifies dangers in the pursuit of nobility that MacIntyre largely ignores.

Yet, in recognizing honor as a way to identify private pleasure with the public good, Aristotle articulates a means to avoid those dangers, and he does so in a manner that also avoids Machiavelli's tendency to redefine honor simply in terms of necessity. Even Machiavelli's attempt to make the love of honor the animating principle of the citizen soldier stands in the service of his critique of all previous understandings of moral virtue.²⁶ For Machiavelli, the harsh necessity rooted in the demands of individual self-preservation and communal survival subsumes and redefines the notion of honor in terms of this inescapable necessity. As such, his appeal to the love of honor is inseparable from the love of acquisition and the lupine politics that reflect his view of the fundamentally necessitarian character of human existence. In contrast, Aristotle's treatment of honor presents a greater scope for the human capacity to transcend necessity. The concern for moral excellence may always be tied to the needs of political life, but the very possibility that human beings may act as morally responsible agents in pursuit of an end beyond direct physical and political necessity—in a way neither totally instrumental nor utterly subject to compulsion—suggests more elevated possibilities for moral virtue and political life than Machiavelli allows. Aristotle's view of the possibilities for moral virtue is at once more constrained than that of MacIntyre and more free than that of Machiavelli.

Because Aristotle's discussion of courage blurs the distinction between nobility and honor, it forces a reassessment of the position of shame in the realm of the moral virtues. Early on Aristotle argues that, although "it is praised," shame "is not a virtue" (*NE* 1108b1). It cannot be a virtue at this point in the account because the context it presupposes is fundamentally defective: having done something ill for which one is ashamed. Later, however, shame emerges as a state of character between virtue and vice that typifies the vast majority of human beings (*NE* 1150a10–5). Shame and honor provide a correction to Aristotle's presentation of nobility because they register a cognizance of the inherently mixed character of human actions, the actions of beings who always, at least potentially, are disposed to vice. Aristotle implies that this is the structure of the virtues (*NE* 1129b20–5; Davis 1996, 3). Indeed, he reveals in the *Politics* that war, and therefore courage in battle, is at best a necessary evil (Aristotle 1984, 1333a35). Thus, courage

highlights the presupposition of potential vice that underlies his broader treatment of moral virtue.

The ambiguous nature of shame, which marks the "man of middle character," surfaces in Aristotle's attribution of desire for honor and fear of shame to the citizen soldier.²⁷ Perhaps the citizen's fear of shame, which depends in a crucial sense on the judgment of the community, reveals the full import of the earlier and somewhat cryptic reference to the "man of middle character" (*NE* 1108a34). The formulation that shame is not a virtue per se, but reveals a middle character, confirms that there are other medial states in addition to virtue (Burger 1991, 127; Pears 1980, 172, 176).²⁸ I suggest that shame occupies a kind of middle ground between virtue and vice; it supplies an awareness of one's deficiency in failing to perform a virtuous act, and hence reveals the "middle character" of those political acts rooted in necessity, but points to higher ends. Also, the religious connotation of shame evident in Aristotle's account of citizen courage at the Battle of the Temple of Hermes (*NE* 1116b19) may allow for a consideration of piety in his political science that is not immediately apparent in an otherwise radically secular account of courage as a moral virtue.

Another important function of honor is its capacity to link Aristotle's notion of virtue to his idea of justice and friendship. The role of the legislator in distributing honors is a reminder that the people who act solely for the sake of the noble forget their dependence on the city and its laws. These individuals lack self-knowledge. The final effect of Aristotle's discussion of courage is to challenge the simple distinction between the moral and intellectual virtues. How does one know it is right to be moral? Aristotle's implicit response—that the knowledge of the actor relies at least somewhat on the confirmation of the community—is only a partial answer. Knowledge of the rightness of moral action involves recognizing and harmonizing both self-interest and communal interest, which seems to require the perspective of the lawgiver or political philosopher. This dual aspect of public honors, that is, their material cause is the community's needs and their efficient cause is the legislator's knowledge of the correct principles for distributing honors, provides an example of the practical-moral and theoretical-intellectual virtues that mark Aristotle's political science.

The discussion of courage foreshadows the prominent place Aristotle gives to distributive justice in Book V. The legislator distributes honors and thus encourages virtue and discourages vice. To some extent both courage and justice support the perspective of the morally serious individual. Aristotle presents these

²⁶ Machiavelli's subsumption of honor into necessity is a major feature of his argument for the infeasible character of the human passions. A dramatic example of this argument is his reflection on the effects of the Agrarian Law in Rome (Machiavelli [1531] 1996, I.37.1). For two recent studies that powerfully illustrate Machiavelli's understanding of the inescapable necessity rooted in self-interest and the love of acquisition, see Mansfield 1996 and Sullivan 1996.

²⁷ For the attribution of shame as a motive for citizen soldiers, see *NE* 1116a27–30. It is important to note that in this passage and at 1108b1, where he refers to shame as a mean, Aristotle uses *aidos* rather than *aischune*. The latter signifies shame or disgrace in a negative sense, as attached to bad acts, whereas the former has a positive religious connotation, such as awe and reverence. See also Plato 1984, 12b1–c3.

²⁸ I agree with Hardie that courage is inextricably bound with shame, but I see its role as more pervasive than simply providing a self-regarding motive "for not seeking to survive at any cost" (Hardie 1968, 330).

virtues not only as connected to actions that are intrinsically praiseworthy but also as revealing the harsh necessity underlying political life. Courage is important not merely because it is good in itself; justice is important because it is concerned with the equitable distribution of goods, of which there is not an inexhaustible supply (*NE* 1129a30–b6, 1132b35). Aristotle shows that the perspective of the morally serious individual must be corrected in light of politics, but he also argues that the *polis* must resist the total functionalization of the virtues. His concern to support the distribution of public honors to morally serious individuals is a reminder that the *spoudaios* should remain a kind of standard for citizenship, a standard for both legislators and the citizenry. The significance of the assignment of public honors, a key element of distributive justice, is indicated in the introductory statement in Book III: The treatment of moral virtue will be of use to both “those examining virtue” and “to the legislator in assigning honors and punishments” (*NE* 1109b35).²⁹ In light of the problems in Aristotle's account of courage, we are prepared to accept the possibility that “the legislator” and “those examining virtue” are not necessarily different kinds of individuals. Aristotle both accepts the practical failure of most regimes to provide a sound moral education to the citizenry and offers a way to correct this problem.

The position of the morally serious individual (*ho spoudaios*), who is “the standard and measure of the noble and the pleasant,” is mirrored in Aristotle's presentation of the courage that is born out of concern for nobility. Aristotle's exposition of the limits and shortcomings that attend the specious forms of courage popularly misconstrued in active political life elucidates the problems faced by legislators who are concerned about the proper moral education of the citizenry. Both the morally serious individual and the *Nicomachean Ethics* provide salutary examples of the moral freedom of which humans are capable. By disclosing the link between virtue and honor, Aristotle's treatment of courage presents the virtues as both worthy of practice by morally serious individuals and as emphatically honorable from the perspective of the community's political leaders. Aristotle admits that moral science can never reach the degree of precision of mathematics, which suggests that honoring all the virtues for the correct reasons has not, and may never be, within the capacity of most political regimes. Yet, he indicates that the ability to encourage certain actions through the bestowal of public honors is a ubiquitous feature of all regimes (*NE* 1113b25). His treatise on moral virtue offers the possibility of more fully incorporating the morally serious individual into the political life of actual regimes because it provides guidance for the legislator who wants to encourage the practice of the virtues among the citizenry in order to produce a morally serious city.

The importance of public honor for courage suggests that the discussion of justice, the social virtue par

excellence in Book V, can be a corrective to the treatment of the virtues in books III and IV. The dependence on others that was the ground of Aristotle's criticism of honor emerges in the later books as a salutary concomitant of the goods constituted by justice and friendship. Especially through the latter, Aristotle validates our need to confirm our own goodness through the recognition of another self or selves. In a sense, Aristotle's differing approaches to the issues raised by honor—as it relates to the noble, justice, and friendship—mark the stages of development in the *Ethics*. The centrality of honor undermines the noble illusion of self-sufficiency and leads to a recognition that justice involves others; finally, friendship more fully displays the salutary potential of honor by allowing another to confirm our own goodness in a more refined and particular sense. The centrality of honor in Aristotle's political science presents a human good that both reflects and transcends political life, narrowly understood. Although honor is not unproblematic and can never overcome the tensions in political life, there is a flexibility in this fundamental political phenomenon that allows its basic principles to be adapted to the more elevated considerations of justice and friendship that mark Aristotle's political science. Honor acts as a crucial signpost pointing beyond itself to a more complete good.

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²⁹ For an explanation of my departure from Rackham here, see note 4.

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