Souls Great and Small:

Aristotle on self-knowledge, friendship and civic engagement

Suzanne Stern-Gillet

University of Bolton and University of Manchester

“Friendship we believe to be the greatest good of states and what best preserves them against revolutions.” (Politics II 4, 1262b7-9)

Abstract: Aristotle’s portrait of the man of great soul (ho megalopsychos) in both the Eudemian and the Nicomachean Ethics has long perplexed commentators. Although his portrait of the man of small soul (ho mikropsychos) has been all but ignored by commentators, it, too, contains a number of claims that are profoundly counter-intuitive to the modern cast of mind. The paper is an attempt at identifying the nature of the discrepancies between Aristotle’s values and our own, and at placing the ethical claims that he makes on greatness and smallness of soul within the
context of his ethics and political philosophy. The Aristotelian man of great-soul, it is here contended, is best understood as a man who assesses external and internal goods, both his own and those of others, at their true value. His overall excellence fits him to play a key political role, not only in states where the principle of distributive justice dictates that the best should rule, but also in states with a democratic constitution, in which citizens take it in turn to rule and be ruled. He is therefore paradigmatically capable of engaging in civic friendship, a relationship that Aristotle left largely undefined in spite of holding it to be a powerfully cohesive force in the state. The man of small-soul, by contrast, is best understood as a man whose disinclination to take risks of any kind makes him reluctant to contribute to the well-being of his city and who, as a result, proves incapable of engaging in civic friendship.

**Introduction**

Aristotle’s philosophy of friendship has recently benefited from a good deal of scholarly attention. While such renewal of interest, which comes after centuries of neglect, has shed new light on some of the puzzles already identified by the ancient commentators, it has also thrown up fresh cruces and complexities. At one end of the spectrum are the many scholars who, in the second half of last century, sought to identify the nature of the relationship between the three forms of friendship distinguished in the *Ethics*. In so doing, these scholars have taken up and developed a question that had already been formulated in the second century AD when Aspasius the Peripatetic asked whether the friendship of virtue, the friendship of utility and the friendship of pleasure are related analogously or by virtue of the focal meaning that Aristotle ascribed to the friendship of virtue. At the other end of the spectrum are the scholars who, more recently, have probed the meaning of
Aristotle’s definition of virtue friendship as “other selfhood” or who have taken position on the vexed question as to whether Aristotelian eudaimonism can be described as a form of ethical egoism. At the heart of these questions are concepts such as self, egoism and altruism, which had no currency in antiquity or had a very different meaning from the one they came to acquire later. To avoid projecting modern meanings on ancient concepts, therefore, scholars interested in questions of this latter kind must be clear as to how and why the key notions in which Aristotle expressed his views differed from their own. Only so can they hope to mine his ethical insights for all their considerable worth.

The present essay is concerned with questions of this second kind. Taking friendship as my focus, I shall address two clusters of question. Turning first to Aristotle’s paragon of virtue, the great-souled man (ho megalopsychos), I shall ask whether, or to what extent, his many excellences prepare him for engaging in friendship at both the personal and the civic level. Is his virtuous self-sufficiency so great as to make the formation of personal ties redundant? Can he be counted upon to engage readily in the association that Aristotle calls “civic friendship” (politikē philia)? Turning then to the mysterious character whom Aristotle describes as the small-souled man (ho mikropsychos), I shall ask why he is presented as vicious and, more specifically, why he is held to be a potential source of harm to the state. Both sets of questions have mostly been ignored by ancient and modern commentators alike, eager to turn to what they perceived to be weightier matters in the master’s Ethics. In this, as I hope to show, they were mistaken. Aristotle famously tells us on more than one occasion that “friendship ... seems to hold states together, and lawgivers apparently devote more attention to it than to justice.” This being so, we need to understand why he considered that the great-souled man, for all his aloofness, is nonetheless an asset to the state.
Correspondingly, we need to understand why he held that the vice of the small-souled man, whose civic dimension is far from being immediately apparent, involves a failure of friendship and responsible citizenship.

These are not easy questions to deal with. Not only is Aristotle’s description of *mikropsychia* (literally: smallness of soul) terse in the extreme, but it also comes as a corollary of his analysis of the most elusive and most misunderstood of all the virtues listed in the *Ethics*, namely *megalopsychia* (literally: greatness of soul). The absence of any ready equivalent in our modern vernaculars for either the virtue of *megalopsychia* or the vice of *mikropsychia* suggests that, as far as modern readers are concerned, Aristotle’s characterization of *mikropsychia* as a vicious deficiency of *megalopsychia* is truly a case of explaining the obscure by the more obscure.

In an attempt to overcome the exegetical and philosophical difficulties involved in coming to terms with these twin dispositions of character, I shall proceed as follows. In section 1, I shall offer some introductory remarks on the difficulties that Aristotle’s translators encounter in rendering the two concepts into modern vernaculars. If nothing else, a survey of their largely unsuccessful efforts will begin to give us a sense of the conceptual territory covered by the Aristotelian notions. In section 2, I shall briefly sketch what I take to be those features of *megalopsychia* that make it most likely to contribute to the realization of the end of the city-state, as Aristotle conceived it. In section 3, I shall turn to the political dimensions of *megalopsychia* and show how, in Aristotle’s viewpoint, a *megalopsychos* is likely to be the source of considerable benefits to both his friends and his city. Section 4 will be devoted to an analysis of Aristotle’s definition of *mikropsychia* and of his claim that, in contrast with *megalopsychia*, it is incompatible with both the best kind of friendship and an optimal level of civic engagement. In section 5 I shall
offer some brief remarks on the normative gap that separates Aristotle’s concept of pride from ours.

1. A translator’s headache: megalopsychia and mikropsychia

In the fourth book of the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle defines “megalopsychia” as the virtue of the “man who thinks he deserves great things and actually does deserve them.” A page later he writes that megalopsychia is the “crown of the virtues” in so far as “it magnifies them and cannot exist without them.” Taken together, the two statements have long been a source of perplexity for Aristotle’s later readers, most of whom were brought up in one or the other of the Abrahamic religions. As is well-known, these religions teach that pride is a sin and the proud man “an abomination to the Lord”. Unlike Aristotle, who viewed the megalopsychos’ keen awareness of his merit as an integral part of his virtue, these religions discourage the faithful from dwelling on their own deserts and attainments. It should therefore come as no surprise that, from the Middle-Ages onwards, translators found megalopsychia, with the commendatory connotations that it has in Aristotle’s usage, well nigh impossible to render into Latin or their own vernacular.

Of the most common renderings of megalopsychia - “pride”, “magnanimity”, “high-mindedness”, “great-soulness” and “great-heartedness” - none is semantically close enough to the Aristotelian concept while also carrying its highly commendatory connotations. Least acceptable of all is “pride”. Not only has it become too negatively connotated to enable modern readers to understand how Aristotle could hold it to be the crown of the virtues, it is also the traditional rendering of superbia, the Latin word by which medieval commentators rendered Aristotle’s name for the vicious excess of megalopsychia, namely chaunotēs. “Magnanimity”, which is an exact
rendering of the Greek via the Latin magnanimitas, tends nowadays to denote the virtue of those who are disposed to overlook the slights and offenses of which they may have been the object. As such, “magnanimity” lacks the cognitive import that lies at the very core of Aristotelian megalopsychia. “High-mindedness”11 sounds an archaic note. Furthermore, in so far as it has long denoted the state of one who is generally “high-principled” or “moral” (in the modern sense of the word), it is too vague to convey the very specific virtuous disposition that Aristotle classifies under the name of megalopsychia in both versions of the Ethics. Attempts at literal renderings of the Greek, such as “greatness of spirit”12 and “greatness of soul”13 have no resonance for modern readers, and do not, therefore, serve their needs any better than would a mere transliteration of Aristotle’s own word. As for “great-heartedness”14, it is too close to “big-heartedness” to be a possible contender since it tends nowadays to characterize the generosity of those whose response to appeals on behalf of victims of natural disasters is immediate and pre-reflective. As will presently be seen, the generosity of Aristotle’s megalopsychos is of a different kind.

Aristotelian mikropsychia is almost as alien to modern mentalities as megalopsychia. In so far as Aristotle holds it to be a culpable (psektos) disposition of character which leads people to under-assess their capabilities and merits,15 it, too, runs counter to the moral intuitions of readers of the Ethics brought up in any one of the Abrahamic religions. What could be morally worthier, their religiously-based intuitions intimate, than to refrain from proclaiming one’s own merit and from actively seeking to reap one’s due rewards? Admittedly, there is some resemblance between Aristotelian mikropsychia and the modern psychological concept of “low self-esteem.”16 But the resemblance is no more than skin-deep: while the Aristotelian concept denotes a moral vice for which one is to be blamed, the modern-day concept denotes a psychological dysfunction for which
one is to be pitied or even, in some extreme cases, offered treatment. Furthermore, while Aristotelian *mikropsychia* affects only men of substance who shy away from the kind of civic engagement that is part and parcel of a life well lived, as objectively conceived, low self-esteem is a condition that can affect anyone and stands in the way of self-fulfillment and happiness, as subjectively conceived.

Such discrepancy between Aristotle’s viewpoint and later intuitions has caused *mikropsychia*, like *megalopsychia*, to fare badly at the hands of his translators. Of all the renderings to be found in currently available translations of the *Ethics* - from pusillanimity to humility - none successfully conveys the meaning and the connotations of the Greek concept. “Pusillanimity”\(^\text{17}\), the Latinized equivalent of *mikropsychia* (*pusillus animus*), once the standard rendering of *mikropsychia* in English, is now almost obsolete. Although, like the Greek word, it does denote excessive timidity, it fails to convey what, in Aristotle’s outlook, stands at the vicious core of *mikropsychia*, namely lack of self-knowledge. “Small-mindedness”\(^\text{18}\) denotes a preoccupation with petty, narrow-minded, concerns rather than the cognitive failing that Aristotle identifies as the root of *mikropsychia*. As for “small-soulness”,\(^\text{19}\) “little-soulness”\(^\text{20}\) and weak-heartedness\(^\text{21}\), they have no ready meaning at all for modern readers and set no barrier, therefore, to the construed of *mikropsychia* as “modesty” or even “humility”. As will presently be shown, such construed is the most misleading of all since it actively invites the anachronistic projection of religiously-grounded notions onto a philosophy to which they are profoundly alien.\(^\text{22}\)

To guard against all such assumptions and misapprehensions I shall here leave untranslated both *megalopsychia* and *mikropsychia*. Although this may well be taken to be a counsel of despair, it has the advantage of setting no semantic barrier between Aristotle and ourselves.
2. Megalopsychia and self-knowledge

Aristotle’s definition of megalopsychia as “the crown of the virtues”,

23 together with his characterization of the megalopsychos as “a man who thinks he deserves great things and actually does deserve them” (N.E. 1123b1-2), entail that there is in his view an objective ratio of public recognition (or honor) to individual desert, and that the megalopsychos correctly surmises that, in his own case, the ratio is particularly high. His specific virtue, which is also the highest point of virtue, is therefore made up of two elements, exceptional merit and accurate self-assessment. These will now be taken in turn.

“Crown of the virtues” is, on the face of it, a curious expression to use on the part of a philosopher who holds a unitary theory of the virtues. Since, according to this theory, one person cannot have some virtues while lacking others, and anyone possessing one virtue also possesses all the others, the question arises as to why there should be a “crown” of the virtues and, if there be occasion for one, why it should go to megalopsychia. The answer, as inferred from the text of both Ethics, is that the crown-like status of megalopsychia is grounded in its necessary association with greatness (megethos, N.E. 1223b8) and nobility (kalokagathia, E.E., 1249a16). The link between megalopsychia and kalokagathia, which is but tenuous in the Nicomachean version, is the object of a helpful, though compressed, argument in the Eudemian version. Kalokagathia, Aristotle there explains, is “perfect virtue” (aretē teleios); it is the virtue of a man for whom the things that are good by nature are “fine” and valuable in and for themselves (ta kala di’ hauta), rather than solely for their consequences. Since wealth, birth and power enable such a man to perform actions that are both advantageous and fine (sympheronta kai kala),

24 it is just that these
goods of nature should be his. As Aristotle will have further occasions to argue in the *Politics*, “what is just (*dikaion*) is fine, and what is according to worth (*kat’ axian*) is just.”25 In performing fine and advantageous actions, therefore, the Aristotelian *kalokagathos* or *megalopsychos* shows himself worthy of the incidental advantages that nature and circumstances have bestowed upon him. He is therefore in a position to lead the best human life possible, namely a “life of excellence, when excellence has external goods enough for the performance of good actions.”26 Modern readers of Aristotle, of course, will point out that, given the nature of the incidental conditions that he takes to be necessary for the possession of *megalopsychia*, it is unlikely that it could ever be practised by more than a handful of individuals at any one time. Women,27 slaves,28 resident aliens,29 the unintelligent, the less than wealthy, and those whose achievements fell short of the highest, could not realistically aspire to it in 4th century Athens, however great their merits and determined their efforts. The unpalatable conclusion, therefore, appears unavoidable that Aristotle restricted the achievement of the crown of the virtues to the aristocratic rich.

A careful reading of the text of the *Nicomachean* version, however, reveals that the conclusion is not quite as unpalatable as it might appear at first glance since Aristotle presents the possession of such incidental advantages as wealth and high birth as necessary, as opposed to sufficient, conditions of *megalopsychia*. To these necessary conditions, he added another one, namely that, in order to be worthy of wearing the crown of the virtues, a wealthy nobleman needs also to be consistently disposed to perform the fine actions that circumstances call for, and to confer upon the state and his fellow citizens the high benefits that his position enables him to confer. No one, Aristotle takes care to add, can lay claim to the virtue of *megalopsychia* who does not fulfill both conditions: “whoever possesses the goods of fortune without possessing excellence or virtue is not
justified in claiming great deserts for himself, nor is it correct to call him a *megalopsychos*, for neither is possible without perfect virtue.”

In so far as the *megalopsychos*’ entitlement to civic recognition and honors is conditional upon the fulfillment of this latter, moral, condition, he is within striking distance - surprisingly so - of the faithful servant of the synoptic gospels: “to whom much is given, of him much will be required.”

Other aspects of Aristotle’s account of *megalopsychia* have proved more difficult to reconcile with our moral intuitions. One such is the claim that it is characteristic of the *megalopsychos* to be fully aware of the extent of his merit and achievements. While no commentator has disputed that the ability to take the measure of one’s own worth is to be esteemed in proportion to its rarity, many have resisted Aristotle’s claim that it is a moral virtue. Far more virtuous it is to be aware of one’s limitations than of one’s merits, goes a long-standing and widespread view. Holding such a view, modern commentators have mostly been united in expressing their dismay at Aristotle’s commendation of the *megalopsychos* for his keen awareness of the extent of his deserts. So put out, for example, were Burnet and Joachim by the portrait of the *megalopsychos* drawn in the *Ethics* that they could not believe that Aristotle had meant it in earnest; it was, they conjectured, quietly “humorous”, “half-ironical,” or obviously exaggerated. Rather than seeking to provide a detailed account of this particular difference between Aristotle and ourselves - a task that would far exceed the space available in this volume - I shall here, more modestly, try to make Aristotle’s position appear less distasteful to those who regard pride as a vice (or a sin) and modesty (or humility) as a virtue. Accordingly, I shall now proceed to outline the cognitive excellences that enable the *megalopsychos* to take a just measure of his merit and, on that basis, to accept, graciously if not enthusiastically, whatever high civic honors come his way.
The self-knowledge that an Aristotelian *megalopsychos* needs to have in order to be worthy of the name goes far beyond the particularities of his own person and situation. To begin with, he must have a secure grasp of the standards and criteria by which merit happens to be assessed in his city; only so will he be able to measure his attainments against his capabilities and to compare both with those of his peers. More crucially, however, he must have an understanding of the standards and criteria by which it is right and proper that merit should be measured; only so will he be able, not only to keep his own standards of excellence independent of local contingencies, but also to value in himself and his friends what is most truly valuable. In Aristotelian terms this means that the *megalopsychos* must identify himself with his thinking element (*nous*), on the understanding, whether explicit or not, that “the thinking element is what each of us mostly is” (*N.E.*, 1168b34-5), and that it behoves us, therefore, to cultivate and promote it over all others. Truly to have identified himself with his *nous* and become a *megalopsychos*, such a character will therefore have had to nurture the thinking element in himself and trained his appetitive and emotional drives into habits of easy compliance with it. If such self-training has been successful, the *megalopsychos* will, in all relevant circumstances, consistently choose the good of his soul in preference to all external goods. This will make him a self-lover (*philautos*) in Aristotle’s commendatory sense of the word, namely someone who “loves and gratifies the most sovereign element in him” (*ibid.*, 1168b33-34) and “obeys it in everything” (*ibid.*, 1168b31). The *megalopsychos*’ self-knowledge, it can now be concluded, is of a virtuous nature since it gives him, beyond the certainty of his own worth, the assurance that his life is consistently governed by the element in him that is best suited to rule.34

Whether the *megalopsychos*’ correct understanding of the end of human life be theoretical35 or
practical,\textsuperscript{36} one thing is certain: it consistently informs his deliberations in matters related to his personal and civic life. Amongst these, honor and public recognition figure more prominently than we would expect, and the question will presently have to be asked as to why Aristotle should have assigned honor such a significant role in the life of the \textit{megalopsychos}. For the moment let us simply note that, having classified honor as “the greatest external good” (\textit{N.E.}, 1123b20-21),\textsuperscript{37} he proceeds to claim that it is entirely proper for the \textit{megalopsychos}, not only to strive after such honors as his merit warrants (\textit{N.E.}, 1123b19), but also to be chagrined at being denied them (\textit{E.E.}, 1232b12-3). This, however, does not mean that the \textit{megalopsychos’} attitude to honor is one of anxious concern. Far from it. Aware that honor depends as much upon luck and the opinion of those who have it in their gift as it does upon the merits of the recipient, the \textit{megalopsychos} regards it as an external good unfit to play more than a minor role in the best life for a human being to lead. Thus he disdains the small and ill-judged honors bestowed upon him by the unthinking many\textsuperscript{38} and, although he is moderately pleased at being the object of the highest honors, he yet knows better than to attach undue importance to them:

> From great honors and those that good people confer upon him he will derive a \textit{moderate} (cf. \textit{metriōs}) amount of pleasure, convinced that he is only getting what is properly his or even less. For no honor can be worthy of perfect virtue. Yet he will accept such honors, because they have no greater tribute to pay to him. (\textit{N.E.}, 1124a5-9, tr. Ostwald, modified)

As can be seen, therefore, virtue has distanced the Aristotelian \textit{megalopsychos} from worldly success, wealth and power, all of which are for most men objects of anxious concern. Not being at the mercy of fortune and the opinion of others, the \textit{megalopsychos} has made himself as self-
sufficient as a human being can be.

Does this mean that his self-sufficiency is so complete that he has no reason or need to engage in friendship? Indeed not. Besides holding that human self-sufficiency cannot ever be such as to preclude the need for friendship, Aristotle gives us clear grounds in both versions of the "Ethics and in the "Politics" for thinking that his paragon of virtue, far from remaining aloof from the affairs of men, has an important political role to play in the city, and that he readily engages in friendship at both the civic and the personal level. Let us see how.

3. Megalopsychia and Civic Friendship

a. The end of the city-state

In book I of the "Politics" Aristotle summarily restates his teleological conception of human nature. Human beings, he teaches, cannot achieve self-sufficiency on their own or in isolation; they need a social context in which to grow to maturity and develop their power of reason. This is why nature, which does nothing without a purpose or in vain, has implanted in human beings a social instinct. This instinct prompts them, in the first place, to form communities (koinonai), such as households and villages, with the immediate purpose of securing for themselves the "bare necessities of life." Once a community, or group of communities, has grown materially self-sufficient or very nearly so, it evolves into a polis or sovereign city-state in which "the limit of self-sufficiency" is attained (Pol. I 2, 1252b29). In Aristotle’s outlook the city-state is the optimal political unit, being inclusive enough to be self-sufficient, but not so large as to make it impossible for the citizens to know each other by reputation, if not personally. Mutual acquaintance, he held, breeds mutual confidence (pistis pros allèlous) and instills in the citizens a desirable sense of
community. So much is evident, he pointed out, from the fact that tyrants, who must divide in order to rule, “take every means to prevent people from knowing one another”42 and, for that reason, forbid the practice of meals in common (sussitiai) and the formation of clubs and fellowships (hetairai). Precisely because Aristotle wanted the citizens to know each other and to interact in leisure as in work, he favored the custom of taking meals in common for the opportunities it provided for the discussion of topics of mutual interest.43 Although, surprisingly enough, the issue of civic friendship is hardly ever broached in the Politics, Aristotle’s insistence on the desirability of social and educational interaction between the citizens would seem to justify Richard Kraut’s conclusion that Aristotle “sees common meals as a way of fostering civic friendship.”44

From the a priori anthropological considerations offered in the opening remarks of the Politics, Aristotle concluded that the state is obviously (cf. phaneron) a creation of nature and that human beings are political animals by nature.45 He did not, however, stop there and proceeded to draw from his conception of the state and human sociality as “natural” the norm which lies at the very foundation of his ethics and political philosophy. The city-state (polis), he taught, being the completion or end (telos) of associations formed for the sake of survival and self-sufficiency, is the best form of political association; it alone provides humans beings with the conditions in which they can flourish and lead the best possible human life. To the realization of this end, friendship, as created by associations of various kinds between the citizens, plays an important part. As we read in a characteristically dense passage:

It is clear then that a state is not a mere society, having a common place, established for the prevention of mutual crime and for the sake of exchange. These are the
conditions without which a state cannot exist; but all of them together do not constitute a state, which is a community of families in well-being, for the sake of a perfect and self-sufficing life. Such a community can only be established among those who live in the same place and intermarry. Hence there arise in cities connexions, brotherhoods, common sacrifices, amusements which draw men together. But these are created by friendship, for to choose to live together is friendship. The end of a state is the good life, and these are the means towards it. And the state is the union of families and villages in a perfect and self-sufficing life, by which we mean a happy and honorable life. Our conclusion, then, is that political society exists for the sake of noble actions, and not of living together. Hence they who contribute most to such a society have a larger share in it (tēs poleōs metesti pleion) than those who have the same or a greater freedom or nobility of birth but are inferior to them in political excellence (cf. tēn politikēn aretēn); or than those who exceed them in wealth but are surpassed by them in excellence. (Pol. III 9, 1280b33-40)

Aristotle here highlights two factors that contribute to the realization of the end of the polis: friendship between the citizens and compliance with the principle of distributive justice that dictates that those best qualified to hold political office should be given a share in the government of the city commensurate with their ability.

b. Egalitarian and aristocratic constitutions

While the promotion of civic friendship is entirely consonant with Aristotle’s conception of the state as a relatively compact community aiming at a self-sufficing and good life, the application of
the principle of distributive justice, as alluded to in the above lines, runs counter to the egalitarian conception of the state that Aristotle defends elsewhere in the *Politics*, when he claims that:

... it is obviously necessary on many grounds that all the citizens alike should take their turn of governing and being governed. Equality consists in the same treatment of similar persons, and no government can stand which is not founded on justice.(Ibid., VII 14, b25-30).\(^{46}\)

So outlined here, the principle of citizenly equality grounds Aristotle’s argument in book IV of the *Politics*, that the best constitution for most states is one in which the middle classes (*hoi mesoi*) are in charge. Citizens of the middle class, he there optimistically avers, being “equals and similars (cf. *isôn kai homoiôn*)”\(^{47}\) and possessing the goods of fortune (beauty, strength, and wealth) in moderation, are more likely than the very rich or the very poor to follow the rule of reason (*logos*) and to lead a life lying in the mean, as defined in the *Nicomachean Ethics* II 6-9.

“Equal and similar” to his fellow citizens is precisely what the *megalopsychos* is not. Being pre-eminent in virtue, nobility and wealth, he is capable of making a greater contribution to the community than most other citizens. For that reason, the principle of distributive justice alluded to in *Politics* III 9 and 13 dictates that he should be given a proportionately larger share in the government of the city-state. Rather than simply taking it in turn to rule and be ruled, the *megalopsychos* is qualified, on the ground of his overall excellence, to play a consistently dominant role in the realization of the function of the city-state. When, later in book III, Aristotle returns to the question of the civic role best suited to the man - or men - of “pre-eminent excellence” (*diapherôn kat’ aretēn*), he answers as follows:

If ... there be one person, or more than one, although not enough to make up the full
complement of a state, whose excellence is so pre-eminent that the excellence or the political capacity of all the rest admit of no comparison with his or theirs, he or they can no longer be regarded as part of a state; for justice will not be done to the superior, if he is reckoned only as the equal of those who are so far inferior to him in excellence and in political capacity .... For men of pre-eminent excellence there is no law – they are themselves a law. (III 13, 1284a4-14)\(^{48}\)

Rather than prevent such exceptional men from being continuously active in government, Aristotle here claims that, in accordance with the principle of distributive justice: “the only alternative is that ... all should happily obey such a ruler, according to what seems to be the order of nature, and that men like him should be kings in their state for life.” (1284b12-14) While acknowledging the somewhat utopian character of such aristocratic, or monarchic, conception of the state, Aristotle, even so, presented it as preferable to all others, whenever circumstances were such as to permit its implementation.\(^{49}\) The famous formula “excellence furnished with external means”\(^{50}\) neatly encapsulates the requirements for holding high office in the kind of aristocratic regime he favored. That the *megalopsychos* described in *N.E.* IV 3 meets these requirements is beyond doubt. As Robinson’s aptly notes in an *ad loc.* comment to the above-quoted lines: “Aristotle did worship, or at least look up to with awed respect, some ideally highminded or ‘megalopsychic’ person who ‘demands great honors and deserves them.’”\(^{51}\)

To be sure, such aristocratic model of the constitution, according to which those who are pre-eminent in virtue and contribute most to the city deserve a proportionately large share in government, is not easily reconciled with the egalitarian model, according to which citizens of the middle class (*hoi mesoi*) should take it in turn to rule and be ruled.\(^{52}\) Fortunately, however, since
the present context does not require that an attempt be made at reconciling the two models, we can turn without further ado to Aristotle’s conception of civic friendship. Which role, we shall now ask, can citizenly cooperation and concord, be it in an aristocratic or a democratic state, play in the life of a man who combines great wealth and supreme moral excellence?

c. Civic friendship

In Politics III 9, 1280b33-40, as quoted above, Aristotle assigns to friendship, pithily defined as voluntary living together, a central role at every stage in the formation of the city-state. At the level of restricted associations within the polis, as he explains in the Nicomachean Ethics, friendship bonds individuals in the pursuit of common aims:

Men address as friends their fellow travelers on a voyage, their fellow soldiers, and similarly also those who are associated with them in other kinds of communities. Friendship is present to the extent that men share something in common, for that is also the extent to which they share a view of what is just. (N.E., VIII 9, 1159b27-31)

In so far as such restricted associations are aimed at advantage, they readily fall under the category of friendship of utility. As such, one presumes, they do not outlive the realization of the particular common aim for which they were set up. Yet, in spite of their limited scope and life-span, they do contribute, albeit modestly, to the fulfillment of the end of the city-state, namely to ensure citizenly cooperation in the pursuit of specific aims.

In the formation of the polis itself, considerations of need and mutual advantage also play a crucial role. Civic friendship, Aristotle tells us in the Eudemian Ethics, is based on utility and can even be compared to a “cash-in-hand transaction” since those who first set up the city had entered
into a “definite agreement” (cf. *kath’ homologian*)\textsuperscript{54} to assist each other and to further their common interests. In book VIII of the *Nicomachean* version, too, Aristotle includes the *polis* itself among the associations entered in for the sake of advantage:

> All communities are like part of the political community. Men combine with an eye to some advantage or to provide some of the necessities of life, and we think of the political community as having *initially* (*ex archēs*) come together and as enduring to secure the advantage [of its members]. (*N.E.*, VIII 9, 1160a8-12)

If, in the manner of Aristotle in these two passages, one concentrates on the motives behind the formation of the city-state, civic friendship cannot but be classified as a variety of the friendship of utility, a friendship which can vary in scope and duration depending on the character of the persons who come together.\textsuperscript{55} To the extent that those who associate for reasons of advantage expect to receive benefits proportional to their outlay,\textsuperscript{56} the basis of their friendship is equality of advantage gained or hoped for.

However, as Aristotle takes care to stress in book nine of the *Nicomachean* version, a state cannot become, or remain, a flourishing community, as opposed to a mere association of men and women banded together for survival, unless the friendship which binds the citizens evolves in depth as well as in scope.\textsuperscript{57} Not only should it come to encompass the present as well as the long term interest of the state, but it should also aim at the moral and intellectual fulfillment of the citizens. To this nobler bond, Aristotle gave the name of “concord” (*homonoia*):

> We do attribute concord to states, when the citizens have the same judgment about their common interest, when they choose the same things, and when they execute what they have decided in common. In other words, concord is found in the realm of action,
and in the realm of action in matters of importance and in those matters in which it is possible for both partners or all partners to attain their goals. (N.E. IX 6, 1167a26-30)

So conceived, civic friendship transcends mere utility and can flourish only in states with a sound constitution.\(^5\) It flourishes, paradigmatically, in states run along the aristocratic model, when “both the common people (ho dēmos) and the better classes (hoi epieikeis) wish that the best men (hoi aristoi) should rule.”\(^6\) In such a case citizenly concord consists in the recognition, on the part of the majority, of the moral and political superiority of a small minority among them. Unequal and hierarchical, such civic friendship involves gratitude and deference on the part of the inferior and good government on the part of the superior. The benefits conferred on to the citizen body as a whole by the aristoi in the city, who include the megalopsychoi, considerably outweigh the return they get from their fellow citizens. While the majority get the internal good of living in a city-state that is well run and dedicated to the pursuit of “a happy and honorable life,” the aristoi in charge of public affairs gain nothing better in return than the external good of public recognition. Such external good, as Aristotle wryly notes in IV 3, 1124a5-9, gives them only a moderate amount of pleasure since honor is no match for moral excellence and political ability.

Modern readers will be reassured to learn that Aristotle did not restrict the disinterested kind of civic friendship to aristocratic constitutions. Having stated that it can prevail among good men of sound judgment, who are “of the same mind each with himself and all with one another” and who, in addition, wish “for what is just,” he concluded that it could bond also those who are equal in both virtue and citizenly status.\(^6\) As such, it can fit the democratic model of the constitution, in which the citizens take it in turn to rule and be ruled.\(^6\) In such a democratic constitution, committed as it is to the principle that “political society exists for the sake of noble actions,” the
megalopsychos, although not consistently occupying the high political offices of the state, would nonetheless have considerable opportunities to make a disinterested contribution to the end (telos) of the state. Not only would he entertain relations of civic concord with other good men and citizens and, in association with them, promote justice, but his wealth would also enable him to bestow munificent gifts on the city. Lastly, in extreme circumstances, his “all-complete” (pantelēs) virtue would prompt him to perform noble actions, not indeed for the sake of his own advantage, but to benefit both his personal friends and his fellow citizens. Let us now turn to the crucial lines in which Aristotle outlines how far his paragon of virtue would go in benefiting city and friends, be it in an aristocratic or a democratic constitution.

**d. The megalopsychos as friend**

Take, to begin with, benefits of a financial nature. A megalopsychos could be relied upon to perform high-profile public services or “liturgies” (leitourgiai), all of which entail heavy financial liabilities, such as equipping a trireme or financing the cost of a chorus for one of the dramatic festivals. The importance of such contributions to the life of the city-state is not to be underestimated. Since there was no overall regulated system of direct taxation in Classical Athens, the liturgies provided a large part of the public revenue needed by the city to maintain its fleet and public buildings as well as to provide for the regular scheduling of religious and dramatic festivals. So very considerable was the financial burden entailed by liturgies that many rich citizens sought exemptions from them or looked for loopholes in the regulations governing the institution. Some even resorted to various expedients of doubtful legality to hide their wealth. Not so the megalopsychos. From the repeated references in both versions of the Ethics to the public honors bestowed upon him by the city on account of services rendered, it can safely be inferred that a
megalopsychos would be highly unlikely to shirk his responsibilities as a potential liturgist.

Financial contributions are not, however, the only sacrifice that an Aristotelian megalopsychos would consent to make for his city. Far from it. I shall now argue, on the basis of chapter eight of book IX of the Nicomachean version, that the megalopsychos, although no “lover of danger” (oude philokindunos, N.E., IV 3, 1124b7), would nevertheless be prepared, if the need arose, to lay down his life “for his friends and for his native land”.

In N.E., IX 8 Aristotle mounts an intricate and highly compact argument to show that virtuous friendship is best understood by reference to self-love (philautia) properly so-called, which is the love of the highest and most sovereign element in oneself, namely reason. This kind of self-love, Aristotle contrasts with self-love the misnomer, which seeks the gratification of the lower appetites and impulses. While self-lovers of the first kind promote their reason by following its counsel in all things, self-lovers of the second kind seek mostly pleasure, comfort and personal safety. The difference between the two kinds of self-love is highly relevant to the present issue. Self-love directed at the promotion of one’s own reason tends not to produce inter-personal conflicts in so far as the demands of one person’s reason are unlikely to conflict with the demands of another person’s reason. By contrast, self-love conceived as the gratification of appetitive wants and needs is very likely to result in inter-personal conflicts whenever, as often happens, the desired good is in such limited supply that one person’s having more of it entails another person’s having less. While rationality cannot be an object of competition, money and honors tend to be eagerly sought and fiercely fought over.

In Aristotle’s viewpoint, therefore, a self-lover of the first kind will not let considerations of personal safety or comfort stand in the way of what he understands to be the demands of the
situation he finds himself in. Far from considering personal risk to be of any great moment, he will readily sacrifice his comfort or safety to assist his friends or his native land, whenever either would benefit from his assistance. In some admittedly exceptional circumstances, he will even be prepared to lay down his life for them.

At this point Aristotle’s argument begins to take the appearance of paradox. Even when the virtuous self-lover consents to the ultimate sacrifice, so Aristotle avers, he still stands to benefit. The argument, which is consequentialist in nature, begins as follows:

Those ... whose active devotion to noble actions is outstanding win the recognition and praise of all; and if all men were to compete for what is noble (hamillōmenōn pros to kalon) and put all their efforts into the performance of the noblest actions, all the needs of the community (cf. koinēi) will have been met, and each individual (cf. idiai) will have the greatest of goods, since that is what virtue is. (IX 9, 1169a 6-11)

The paradox comes through a few lines later, when Aristotle contends that the beneficiaries of noble actions are not restricted to the agent’s philoi and city, but that the self-sacrificial agent, too, stands to benefit. Even if he were to lose his life, he would gain the (internal) good of virtue and the (external) good of honor:

It is also true that many actions of the man of high moral standards [ho epieikēs] are performed in the interest of his friends and of his country, and if need be, he will give his life for them. He will freely give his money, honors, and, in short, all good things that men compete for, while he gains nobility (to kalon) for himself. (ibid., 1169a 18-22., tr., Oswald, modified)
Aristotle is not unaware of the paradox involved in holding that self-sacrifice can be self-serving. As he knew well, the conventional view holds that heroes can benefit others only by sacrificing themselves. But the conventional view, Aristotle here argues, takes account of only one side of the issue. It fails to understand that the agent who offers himself in sacrifice secures for himself, albeit posthumously, the greatest of all goods, namely \textit{to kalon}. Appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, he concludes, the self-sacrificial agent is, in this case, a gainer as well as a loser, and what he gains is greater than what he loses.

Who is the rare person whom Aristotle has here in mind? Who is the “man of high moral standards” (\textit{ho epieikēs}), whose devotion to noble actions is such that he faces death with equanimity? From the context, we know that he is a man capable of the highest kind of friendship, namely the friendship of virtue. My claim is that the \textit{megalopsychos} is such a man. Not only is Aristotle’s \textit{megalopsychos} worthy of wearing “the crown of the virtues” but, from Aristotle’s description of his character, we can safely assume that he is capable of the highest of the three kinds of friendship distinguished in both \textit{Ethics}.\textsuperscript{66} Indeed, far from presenting him as too self-absorbed to engage in friendship at all, Aristotle writes of him that “he cannot adjust his life to another, except to a friend” (\textit{N.E.}, 1124b31-32). Clearly, such a paragon of virtue, who is forever disinclined to accept benefits from others (\textit{ibid.}, 1124b9-11), would not want to cultivate the friendship of utility. As for the friendship of pleasure, his general loftiness of purpose and demeanor would most likely make him despise it. Since we had already been told earlier in the \textit{Nicomachean} version that the \textit{megalopsychos} “will face great risks, and in the midst of them he will not spare his life, aware that life at any cost is not worth having” (\textit{ibid.} 1124b8-9),\textsuperscript{67} we are entitled to infer that he is the paradigmatic \textit{philautos} who, as described in chapter eight of book
IX, is prepared to die for his friends or country.

This may well seem to us an impossibly heroic ideal of friendship and civic engagement. Not so in ancient Greece, where a short and heroic life was traditionally held to be nobler than a long and undistinguished existence. This ideal, which we find already expressed in the Iliad,\textsuperscript{68} was still current at the Classical age, as testified by Isocrates’ panegyric of Evagoras, the deposed ruler of Salamis. In that oration, likely to have been composed for political motives, the famous orator found it judicious to say that “... men of ambition and greatness of soul (cf. philotimous kai megalopsychous) not only are desirous of praise for such things, but prefer a glorious death to life, zealously seeking glory rather than existence, and doing all that lies in their power to leave behind a memory of themselves that shall never die.”\textsuperscript{69} Since the oration was composed in the mid-360’s, it is likely that Aristotle, who had arrived at Plato’s Academy in 367, either heard or read it. What at any rate is certain is that the verbal parallels between the orator’s lines and the above-quoted passage from N.E. IX 8 show that the conception of the megalopsychos as a man capable of heroic acts for the sake of his friends or country was far from unfamiliar to Aristotle’s contemporaries. The honors they would readily bestow on the megalopsychoi amongst them are a reflection of that conception.\textsuperscript{70}

4. Mikropsychia

Aristotle’s eulogy of megalopsychia has cast a shadow over his disparagement of mikropsychia. So exercised have medieval and modern commentators been about his presentation of megalopsychia as a virtuous mean that they have mostly left out of account, or misunderstood altogether, his description of mikropsychia as the corresponding vice of deficiency. This is
unfortunate in so far as a close reading of these passages would have given these commentators a further opportunity to appreciate the gap that separates the values of the ancients from those of later ages. A more immediately relevant reason for paying attention to Aristotelian *mikropsychia*, however, is that it stands to confirm - or to invalidate - a conclusion drawn earlier in this chapter, namely that self-knowledge plays a crucial role in Aristotle’s conception of friendship at both the personal and the civic level.

From the number of times that *mikropsychia* is mentioned in the *Ethics*, it is clear that Aristotle attaches significance to it. However, since his various descriptions of it, besides being terse, do not appear to be entirely consonant with each other, at least at first sight, our first task must be to consider the passages in some detail. I shall begin with the *Nicomachean* account, which sets out the issue more fully and more discursively than the corresponding *Eudemian* passage.

In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, *mikropsychia* is first mentioned in the context of the broad taxonomical considerations offered in book II:

> As regard honor and dishonor the mean is *megalopsychia*, the excess what we might call vanity and the deficiency *mikropsychia*. (*N.E.* II 7, 1107b21-23, tr. Ostwald, modified)

In book IV, embedded in the chapter devoted to the *megalopsychos*, we find a highly compressed argument designed to show that the faults of the *mikropsychos*, like those of the vain man, are of a cognitive nature:

> Such then is the *megalopsychos*. A man who falls short is a *mikropsychos*, and one who exceeds is vain. Now here, too, these people are not considered to be evil - for they are not evil-doers - but only mistaken (*hêmartêmenoi*). For a *mikropsychos*
deprives himself of the goods he deserves. What *seems* to be bad (*kakon*) about him is due to the fact that he does not think he deserves good things and that *he does not know himself* (cf. *agnoein heanton*); if he did, he would desire them, especially since they are good. Such people are not regarded as stupid so much as timorous (*oknēroi*). However, a reputation of this sort seems to make them even worse (*cheirous*). For while everyone (cf. *hekastoi*) strives to get what they deserve, these people keep aloof from noble actions and pursuits (*aphistantai tôn praxeōn tôn kalōn kai tôn epitēdeumatōn*) and from external goods as well, because they consider themselves unworthy (*anaxoi*). ... *Mikropsychia* is more opposed to *megalopsychia* than vanity is, for it occurs more frequently and is worse. (Ibid., IV 3, 1125a16-34, tr. Ostwald, modified)

As characterized in these lines, the *mikropsychos* is someone whose desires and ambitions are more modest than they should be and whose achievements, as a result, fall short of the highest. Failing to know the extent of his capabilities, he stands back from the internal good of performing noble deeds and engaging in fine pursuits. Such diffidence, in turn, makes it impossible for him to serve the city in ways that would make him worthy of receiving from the city the external good of honor (*timē*). Although he cannot be said to be “evil”, there is nonetheless something bad about him’ since, in Aristotle’s estimation, there is nothing meritorious in seeking to obtain less than one’s capabilities would warrant.\(^{71}\)

In the more succinct *Eudemian* account there is no mention of fine actions or noble pursuits. The focus is firmly placed on the external good of *timē*, *mikropsychia* being there described as a culpable (cf. *psektos*)\(^{72}\) failure to lay claim to goods which lie within one’s reach and to which one
The vice that pertains to one who is worthy of great things without deeming himself to be is weak-heartedness (*mikropsychia*), since it seems to be the mark of the weak-hearted person to fail to deem oneself worthy of anything great despite the availability of that which would render the claim just. (*E.E.*, III 5, 1233a12-15, tr. Inwood and Woolf)

What are the qualities that the *mikropsychos* fail to recognize in himself? As we learn by implication later in the same chapter, they are mostly contingent qualities relating to legal status and social rank:

... it would not be called weak-hearted (*mikropsychos*) if a resident alien did not deem himself worthy of high office but held back, whereas it would be in the case of a well-born citizen who considered high office a great thing. (Ibid, 1233a28-30, tr. Inwood and Woolf)

This is the point at which we must take care not to project our own values on to Aristotle’s text. Two mistakes in particular are to be avoided. First, before deploring Aristotle’s “elitism” or superficiality in his choice of criteria of civic worthiness, we should bear in mind that the conception of civic culture in Classical Athens differed from our own in a number of respects. Although it was not impossible for resident aliens, slaves and low-born citizens to achieve wealth and renown, civic obligations and privileges were mostly in the hands of those who, descended from citizens, were of high rank and possessed large estates. These were the citizens who were expected to contribute the most, financially as well as personally, to the city’s renown and
prosperity. As shown in section three above, in the absence of any comprehensive system of direct taxation, the civic obligations that went with wealth and rank were as onerous as the rewards for fulfilling them were considerable. Properly understood timē, therefore, was considered to be part and parcel of the performance of fine actions and noble deeds. Accordingly, to be the object of the highest civic honors was, for most citizens, a matter of legitimate pride. Correspondingly, citizens who, though high-born and wealthy, avoided getting involved in costly or risky civic endeavors would be rebuked and shamed for their lack of public spiritedness. Their reluctance to seek such public esteem as normally rewarded the holding of high office or the bestowal of munificent gifts on to the city would be regarded, not indeed as commendable reticence, but as culpable reticence. In describing the vice of mikropsychia as he does in the Eudemian Ethics, Aristotle, therefore, expresses commonly held opinions (endoxa) as well as his own view.

Secondly and more importantly, mikropsychia is not to be thought of as the Classical Greek counterpart of humility. To conflate, in the manner of many a later commentator, Aristotelian mikropsychia, defined as reticence to lay claim to goods of which one is worthy, and humility, defined as a propensity to value others above oneself, is to make Aristotle’s position well nigh unintelligible. Aristotle’s position, I shall now argue, becomes clear once it is appreciated that his reasons for castigating the mikropsychos are the converse of his reasons for praising the megalopsychos and that both sets of reasons flow directly from his conception of civic worthiness and friendship. Once this is understood, the gap between his values and ours, although considerable, will no longer seem unbridgeable.

The blameworthy mikropsychos of Aristotle’s description is a person who combines external assets such as status, wealth and leisure with other, less contingent, qualities such as physical
strength, natural authority and political intelligence. Although such a person cannot be assumed to be unaware of his lineage and the extent of his wealth, he yet fails to take the full measure of his capabilities and advantages, so reluctant is he to take on the civic onus that they place upon him. Such failure, together with the resulting discrepancy between what he could do and what he actually does for the city is precisely what Aristotle blames the *mikropsychos* for. So much is confirmed by his description in both versions of the *Ethics* of another character, the man of limited abilities and small achievements, who, keenly aware of his limitations, refrains from attempting to do great things and seeking high honors. Although Aristotle is not greatly interested in this lackluster character, who is in no position to contribute significantly to the life of his city, he yet expresses esteem for him, and if the praise he gives him is faint, as one would expect, it is praise nonetheless. To the extent that this man knows himself, so Aristotle contends, he resembles the *megalopsychos*, and his character is “as reason bids” (*E.E.*, 1233a23); in spite of his small worth, he deserves to be called “*sophrôn*” (*N.E.*, 1123b5).

This is more than can be said of the *mikropsychos* who, content to remain unaware of his capabilities, harms the city by default. Just how much harm Aristotle considers him to inflict upon the city emerges from his claim, as put forward in the *Nicomachean* version, that *mikropsychia* is “more opposed to *megalopsychia* than vanity (*chaunotēs*) is, for it occurs more frequently and is worse (*cheiron*)”.* To modern readers, this appears to be one more bemusing statement in a chapter that abounds in them. How, these readers wonder, could Aristotle believe that the tendency to under-assess one’s merits is worse than the tendency to over-assess them? How, for that matter, could he flout the experience of everyday life by presenting the first tendency as more widespread than the second?
The fact that Aristotle made no attempt to justify either claim shows that he did not expect his contemporaries to find them contentious. In an attempt to understand how Aristotle’s contemporaries would have received them, let me first elaborate somewhat on Aristotle’s terse presentation of the *mikropsychos* as deficient in the very respects in which the *megalopsychos* excels. The *mikropsychos*, like the *megalopsychos*, has been blessed with the “goods of fortune,” but, unlike him, he does not appreciate the moral onus that such goods place upon him. While the *megalopsychos*, who judges great and small goods at their true value, does not hesitate to shoulder the expenses of liturgies, for example, the *mikropsychos* takes advantage of legal loopholes to avoid incurring the financial responsibilities involved, in the mistaken belief that private wealth is a greater good than civic engagement. While the *megalopsychos*, who cares little for the opinions of the many and is open in love as in hate, speaks up in the Assembly and the law courts, even when it is dangerous to do so, the *mikropsychos*, who would do anything for a quiet life, is ever reluctant to stand and be counted. While the *megalopsychos*, who does not think life worth preserving at all costs, is prepared to lay down his life for his friends and country, the *mikropsychos* consistently chooses the good of personal safety over that of performing “noble actions” likely to put life and limb at risk. While the *kalon* is the ultimate good for the *megalopsychos*, it holds no motivating force for the *mikropsychos*. While the *megalopsychos* accepts graciously whatever honors the city bestows upon him for services rendered, the *mikropsychos* purposefully eschews honors in the mistaken belief that most of them cost too much. All in all, the differences between the two men stem from the fact that while the one effortlessly follows the guidance of his thinking element, which advises him that a life of safety is not the ultimate good, the other, who lacks an understanding of what befits a man of substance, aims at an easeful existence in the course of
which his needs and wants will be met. To put the same point differently: both men aim at the
good, but while the good of the megalopsychos is the real good, the good of the mikropsychos is
only what appears to him to be the good.\textsuperscript{76}

Can we find confirmation in the text that this comparison is in line with Aristotle’s thinking on
mikropsychia? A first encouraging piece of evidence comes from his use of oknēros to describe
the man who, through self-ignorance, turns away (aposterei) from the great goods that he can, and
should, aspire to and who becomes worse as a result (\textit{N.E.}, IV 3, 1125a24). In classical and post-
classical Greek, oknēros and its cognate oknein most often connote timidity, reluctance and
weakness.\textsuperscript{77} As for Aristotle’s own use of oknēros and oknein, it is unfailingly deprecatory.\textsuperscript{78} Thus
in the \textit{Historia Animalium}, he expresses the view that “in virtually all animals”, including human
beings, the female of the species is “more afraid of action” (oknēroteron VIII.1 613b13, tr. D.M.
Balme) than the male, while the male is “more courageous” (andreioteron, 613b16) than the
female. In the \textit{Politics}, he writes that “in time of war the poor are apt to hang back (oknein) unless
they are fed; when fed, they are willing enough to fight.” (IV.10, 1297b10-11, tr. Jowett/Barnes,
modified). This is consonant with Aristotle’s use of mikropsychos, again in the \textit{Politics}, to refer to
those who are too timorous to consider conspiring, even against a tyrant.\textsuperscript{79} Taken together, these
passages show that Aristotle labels oknēroi those who show reluctance to perform the courageous
or noble actions of which they are capable, but which are incompatible with their comfort or safety.
Such usage, which highlights the pejorative connotations of mikropsychia, brings into vivid relief
the disanalogies between mikropsychia and the commendable disposition of character that we call
modesty or humility (in the secular sense), words that denote the disposition to refrain, mostly out
of consideration for others, from putting oneself forward or boasting about one’s own capabilities
and achievements. This latter disposition, Aristotle thought just as commendable as we do since, as we saw, he ascribes it to the *megalopsychos*. What, by contrast, he called *mikropsychia* is best understood, therefore, as culpable timidity or, in Grant’s felicitous gloss, “want of spirit.”

Further confirmation that it is on grounds of civic disutility that Aristotle takes *mikropsychia* to be a vice comes from his contention that it is a worse vice than vanity. To find a justification of what is, to our minds, a counter-intuitive claim, we must turn, in succession, to books II and IX of the *Nicomachean* version. In II 8 (1108b35-1109a20), Aristotle expresses the view that some virtues present a greater similarity to one of their two extremes than to the other. Whenever human nature has a greater propensity to one extreme than to the other, he there explains, we take this extreme to be more opposed to the mean of virtue, and therefore worse than the other extreme. For example, because human nature is more prone to cowardice than to recklessness, he argues, we take cowardice to be more opposed to the mean of courage, and therefore worse than recklessness. The contention, as put forward in book IV, that *mikropsychia* is worse than vanity stems from a similar assumption. Since human nature, in Aristotle’s viewpoint, is more prone to the kind of diffidence, or lack of spirit, that goes under the name of *mikropsychia* than to vanity, it must be regarded as a worse failing. Admittedly, it is not entirely clear at this point whether Aristotle himself agrees with the view he is reporting. The concluding sentence of the chapter, in which he switches from what “we describe” to “what is,” however, makes it plain that he shares the view that he is reporting:

We describe (*legomen*) as more opposed to the mean those things toward which our tendency is stronger; and for that reason excess, manifested as self-indulgence (*ousa hyperbolē*), is more opposed (*enantiōtera*) to self-control than is its corresponding
deficiency. (Ibid., 1109a16-19, tr. Ostwald, modified)\\(^81\\)

By analogy, we may infer, *mikropsychia* is worse than vanity since human beings have a greater propensity to shy away from noble undertakings than to boast of having undertaken them. Is Aristotle’s argument as convincing as it is cogent? Not as it stands. For, after all, the vain man and the “diffident” man are guilty of the same mistake, the mistake of taking their worth to be other than what it actually is. And if the mistake is the same, why should Aristotle, who praises the *megalopsychos* above all for his self-knowledge, consider one kind of failure of self-knowledge to be morally worse than another? To understand Aristotle’s position on the matter, we need to remind ourselves of the *megalopsychos* of his description, whose consciousness of his own worth, as shown in section 3(d) above, goes hand in hand with his willingness to benefit his friends, personal and/or civic. Compared with this noble character, the *mikropsychos* is likely to fail his friends and country both through his erroneous assessment of what he can do and his craven desire to lead a quiet life. His unwarranted diffidence leads him to shy away from all sorts of challenge, ranging from taking a leading part in a hazardous military expedition to holding the high offices to which his status and ability would suit him. In the process, his diffidence grows and he becomes ever more reluctant to intervene in circumstances that call for decisive action or generous intervention. He becomes a man who generally prefers to play safe.\\(^82\\) This downward spiral is the converse of the process of acquiring moral virtue. Just as it is by performing courageous actions that one becomes courageous,\\(^83\\) it is by repeatedly refusing to run risks of all kinds on the ground of (assumed) personal inadequacy that one acquires, or re-enforces, the internal disposition of *mikropsychia*. To that extent, *mikropsychia* is an invidious and cumulative condition from which the state as a whole stands to suffer. To “shrink from rule,” as Aristotle puts the matter in the
Politics, “is an injury to the state.”⁸⁴ By contrast, the vain man of Aristotle’s description is less potentially harmful. Aping the manners and behaviour of the megalopsychos, his exaggerated view of his own ability leads him to undertake “honorable enterprises” (cf. tois entimois, N.E., IV 3, 1125a29) which he is incapable of carrying through. Fortunately, however, his ineptitude is soon discovered (cf. exelegchontai, ibid.) and he becomes a figure of fun. To the extent that he is revealed to be more show than substance, he is rendered largely harmless, and is therefore unlikely to inflict serious harm onto others by undertaking ore than he is capable of carrying off.

5. Conclusion

Aristotle’s megalopsychos, I have argued here, is a much maligned character, having fallen victim to the anachronistic projections of later commentators who approached the Ethics through the prism of their own, often religiously based, assumptions. A modicum of historical distance, and attention to the larger cultural context of fifth and fourth century BC Athens, should have alerted us to the radical shift in values that began to take place not long after Aristotle wrote the texts that have come down to us under the titles of Eudemian Ethics, Nicomachean Ethics and Politics. Viewed from the perspective of these treatises, the megalopsychos is best understood as an asset to any city-state with a sound constitution, although an aristocratic regime in which government is in the hands of the best among the citizens would give him the greatest opportunity for putting his overall excellence at the service of the polis. To the polis he gives much, both of his wealth and his person, by consistently acting in such a way as to promote the end of political society, which, in Aristotle’s viewpoint, is the performance of noble actions and the realization of the good life for all the citizens. To this end, the city must seek to achieve a high level of political and economic
self-sufficiency as well as to instill into all its citizens the values which will enable them to fulfill their potentialities as rational beings. In the realization of these two aims, as we saw, the *megalopsychos* has a large part to play: not only is he in a position to contribute much to the material well-being of the city, but his political excellence makes him a suitable candidate for the highest offices. In return for services rendered, the city bestows great honors upon him. These honors he graciously accepts, in the knowledge that they are deserved and that the city has nothing greater than honor to give him. No doubt, this makes him a proud man, but his pride, which is grounded in an accurate assessment of his worth and merit, is not inordinate, nor is it vested in inappropriate objects, nor is it accompanied by any kind of unseemly rebelliousness. The pride of the *megalopsychos*, being focused on his consistent success in meeting standards that are both high and true, cannot without paradox be stigmatized as vicious. This being so, it offers modern readers of Aristotle an opportunity to question, or enlarge, the concept of pride they are familiar with.

Unlike the *megalopsychos*, the *mikropsychos* has mostly been neglected by commentators, some of whom have been content to describe him as “modest” or “humble.” In leaving matters at that, they have failed to heed Aristotle’s classification of *mikropsychia* as vicious. Neither modest nor humble, the Aristotelian *mikropsychos* is someone who, although blessed with the goods of fortune and natural ability, consistently shies away from public involvement. Rather than putting his talents and assets at the service of the state, he chooses to lead a retiring life in the course of which he remains unconcerned with public affairs. In his craven desire for safety and comfort, he fails to heed the counsel of reason; he lets lesser men come forward and take positions of high responsibility for which they have little or no talent, and who later claim civic rewards to which they would not otherwise be entitled. So doing, the *mikropsychos* undermines the capacity of the
state to ensure that its citizens can lead the best possible human life. The harm he inflicts on the community by refusing political office is all the greater since the optimal Aristotelian *polis*, being relatively compact, can ill afford to lose the services of those who are recognised as having potentialities for statesmanship: “if the citizens of a state are to judge and distribute offices according to merit, then they must know each other’s characters.”85

Aristotle’s censure of the *mikropsychos* for his lack of responsible citizenship would, within a few years, be seemingly forgotten, having fallen on the deaf ears of Epicurus and his followers who sought to release themselves “from the prison of affairs and politics.”86 But Aristotle’s strictures would never be completely forgotten. In the intervening centuries distant echoes of them would be heard, particularly in times of war or international crisis. One such occasion occurred in 1961, when the citizens of one of the largest states on the planet were urged to ask, not “what your country can do for you,” but “what you can do for your country.”87
I am grateful to Denis O’Brien for helpful comments on an earlier draft and to Malcolm Schofield for bringing home to me that Aristotle’s *Politics* is an even more complex text than I had realized.

1 Except when otherwise indicated, all quotations from the *Politics* are in Jowett’s translation, as revised by Barnes on the basis of Dreizehnter’s 1970 edition.


4 The *megalopsychia* with which I am here concerned is the ethical virtue analysed in *E.E.*, III.5 and *N.E.*, IV.3. I shall therefore leave out of account both the terminological distinction that Aristotle draws in *A.Post* II, 97b15-25 and his description of the ordinary use of the concept in
Rhett. 1362b12 and 1388b3.

5 N.E., VIII 1; see also Pol. II 4, 1262b7-9, as quoted earlier, and IV 11, 1295b23-25. Unless otherwise flagged, all translations of the Nicomachean Ethics are in Ostwald’s translation (1962), with occasional modifications, flagged as such.

6 N.E., IV 3, 1123b1-2; see also E.E., III 5, 1233a2-3.

7 N.E., IV 3, 1124a1-3.

8 For the Old Testament, see, e.g., Proverbs 21:4 and 16:5; for the Qur’an, see, e.g., 7.146 and 16.23.

9 Ross’ historical sense seems to have been temporarily deserted him when he so translates megalopsychia and writes in an *ad loc.* comment to N.E., IV 3, 1123a34: “‘Pride’ of course has not the etymological associations of megalopsychia, but seems in other respects the best translation.” One wonders which “other respects” the great commentator had in mind.

10 In his translation of the Rhetoric Freese renders megalopsychia alternately as “magnanimity” or “high-mindedness”.

11 So Grant (1858) and Ostwald (1962).

12 So Rackham (1935).


14 So Inwood and Woolf (2013).


16 Thanks are due to John Dillon for drawing my attention to possible parallels between Aristotelian mikropsychia and low self-esteem in the modern sense of the word.

17 So Irwin (1985).

116
18 So Ostwald (1962) and Taylor (2006).
19 So Rackham (1952), Crisp (2000), and Sachs (2002).
20 So Rowe and Broadie (2002).
21 So Inwood and Woolf (2013).
22 For an example of such projection, see, e.g., Curzer (1990) and E. Lavielle (1999).
23 N.E., IV 3, 1124a1-2. See also E.E. III 5, 1232a31-2.
24 E.E., VIII 3, 1249a5-16.
25 Ibid., VIII 3, 1249a7-8.
26 Pol. VII 1, 1323b41-1324a2.
27 See, e.g., Thucydides 2.45.2 (Pericles’ funeral oration), according to whom “the greatest glory of woman is not to slip beneath the level at which nature has pitched her.” (my tr.) This cannot but exclude noble deeds for which a debt of public recognition might be appropriate.
29 This particular category of individuals is explicitly excluded in E.E., IV 3, 1233a29-30.
30 N.E., IV 3, 1124a26, tr. Ostwald, slightly modified. See also Pol., III 9, 1280b33-40.
32 So J. Burnet (1900:179) in an ad loc. comment on 1123b1 sqq.
33 So H.H. Joachim (1951:125). Let it be noted, however, that Joachim makes a point of expressly endorsing Aristotle’s view that claims should match deserts.
34 Please note that I am not here arguing that all the characteristics that Aristotle ascribes to the megalopsychos are morally admirable. His disdain for the many, for example, as expressed in N.E., IV 3, 1124b5-6, hardly seems morally justifiable, even within an Aristotelian perspective.
I cannot therefore fully agree with Michael Pakaluk’s (2004) otherwise convincing attempt at rehabilitating this much maligned character. The issue is discussed at some length in Stern-Gillet (2012). For an enlightening comparison between Aristotle’s views on self-knowledge and Kant’s, see Andrea Veltman’s article in the present volume.


36 As Hardie (1978: 68), more justifiably in my view, contends.

37 Aristotle is not entirely consistent in the matter since at 1169b1-10, in the course of a dialectical argument leading to the conclusion that “a happy man needs friends,” Aristotle writes that friends “are thought to be the greatest of external goods,” 1169b9-10. However, the fact that Aristotle needs to rely on this particular endoxon (received opinion) as a premise to ground his own conclusion suggests that he shares it.

38 E.E., III 5, 1232a39.

39 Ibid., VII 12 and NE VIII 1, 1155a5-9 and IX 9.

40 Pol., I 1, 1253a9 and I 2, 1256b21.

41 Ibid., 1253a29-30; see also N.E., I 7, 1097b11.

42 Pol., V 11, 1313b5-6 and 1313a41. The same point is made in Plato’s Symposium (Pausanias’s speech), 182c1-7.

43 Ibid., VII 10, 13b5-25, where Aristotle justifies the practice mainly on grounds of its antiquity.


45 Pol., I 2, 1253a2-3.

46 See also I 12, 1259b4-6, I 7, 1255b20, II 2, 1261a34-b5, and III 13, 1283b. Of the three Aristotelian models of the polis and citizenship discussed by Schofield (1999), this is the
rational model (103-106).


48 See also E.E., VII 10, 1241b36-37.

49 As aptly noted by Paul Cartledge (2000: 162) “… when forced to choose between equality and hierarchy, Aristotle regularly went for hierarchy.”

50 Pol. IV 2, 1289a33 and VII 1, 1323b41-1324a2.


52 In Pericles’ funeral oration, Thucydides effected an equipoise between the two models: “Our constitution is called a democracy because power is in the hands not of a minority but of the whole people. When it is a question of settling private disputes, everyone is equal before the law; when it is a question of putting one person before another in positions of public responsibility, what counts is not membership of a particular class, but the actual ability which the man possesses.” (History of the Peloponnesian War, II.37, tr. Warner).

53 E.E. VII 9, 1242a22-27,

54 Ibid., VII 10, 1242b35.

55 As usefully pointed out in Cooper (1977).

56 E.E., VII 10, 1242b32-33.

57 As can be seen, there are considerable differences between the two versions of the Ethics on the categorization of civic friendship: while the Eudemian account is of a fundamentally self-regarding relationship, the account given in book IX of the Nicomachean version is of a relationship that is indicative of the citizens’ virtue and can therefore be engaged in at varying degrees of depth. For a detailed account of the differences between the two versions of the

58 This puts me at odds with Schofield (213: 287-88), who claims that Aristotle “regards civic friendship as the social glue of mutual advantage between individuals who are personally acquainted, seeing it as exhibited above all in exchange and commerce.” As the above-quoted lines make clear, citizens of states with a sound constitution do not have to be personally acquainted in order to cooperate in political and social matters of importance. The matter is further dealt with in section 3(d) infra in which it is argued that an Aristotelian megalopsychos is prepared to go to great lengths in order to benefit his country or assist his fellow citizens, whether or not he is personally acquainted with them.

59 N.E. IX 6, 1167a35-1137b1.

60 In N.E. IX 6, 1167b5-6 and 9-10, Aristotle describes civic friendship as beyond the capability of bad men (hoi phauloi).

61 See note 45 above.

62 As quoted on p. XXX above.

63 N.E., IV 3, 1124a7-8.

64 For the rules and regulations governing the institution of liturgies, see Aristotle, Athenian Constitution, LXVI and LSVII. For a detailed account of the institution and how it was implemented, see Gernet (1955). For the cultural background of all these issues in the fifth and early fourth centuries, see Davies (1978, ch. VI).

65 For a reconstruction and attempted justification of the argument, see Madigan (1992), Stern-Gillet (1995: chapter 5, passim) and Pangle (1999: 191-96). In N.E., V 9, 1136b20-22, Aristotle
makes a similar point when he explains that the good man (ho epieikēs), in taking less than his fair share, secures for himself a higher good, namely glory or to kalon.

66 N.E., VIII 2 and 3; E.E., VII 2.

67 See also N.E., X 7, 1177b16-17 and E.E. III 5, 1232b10-12. According to Collins (1999: 140-41), the megalopsychos’ disdain of external goods, which extends to life itself, accounts for his “willingness to forgo [his] own good in favor of the noble which is not [his] good.” While this is certainly a factor in his readiness to die for his country and philoi, it is not the sole one since, as Aristotle takes care to note, the megalopsychos’ willingness “to adjust his life ... to a friend” provides an additional and powerful motivation for the ultimate sacrifice.

68 See, e.g. Iliad, XVIII, 97-104, in which Achilles, after the death of Patroclus, counters his mother’s counsel of prudence by saying that he would rather die forthwith than abide “a useless burden to the earth.”

69 Isocrates, Evagoras, 3, tr. Larue Van Hook. See also Thucydides, History of the Peloponnesian War, II 42.

70 See also Rhetoric 19, 1666b3-4. As Hardie (1978: 73) well said: “... the great man earns honors by his active services to his friends and country in great matters.”


72 E.E., III 5, 1232b39-1233a1. See also N.E., IV 3, 1125a18-27.

73 The distinction between two kinds of humility, religious and secular, however interesting in itself, is not directly germane to the present issue. Humility, as consistently praised by biblical authors (see, e.g., Matthew 19:30, Luke 1:52 and Paul, Philippians 2:3,) is awareness of our creaturely status; secular humility, on the other hand, is the disposition to place others above
oneself. Aristotle would hardly have been able to make sense of the religious kind of humility.

Contemporary philosophers of an existentialist persuasion might be tempted to describe *mikropsychia* as a form of self-deception, but Aristotle, who was the author of the distinction that these philosophers question, would not, of course, have done so.

N.E., IV 3, 1125a32-34.

The relevance of character to the choice of one’s good is brought out clearly in section I of Gary Gurtler’s contribution to this volume.

See L.S.J, s.v. *oknaleos* and *oknēros*, I.2; Chantraine (1974). Such evaluative divergences make translation a hazardous undertaking, and readers of ancient texts must avoid relying exclusively on the choice of words of even the best of translators. Ostwald’s rendering of *oknēros* as “retiring” and Irwin’s as “hesitant” both concede too much to modern assumptions in so far as the two adjectives lack the negative undertones that the words had in ancient Greek.

Bonitz (1831), s.v.

Pol., V 11, 1314a16.

Grant (1858: ad. loc. comment on 1125a17).

For particularly clear comments on those lines, see Broadie in Broadie and Rowe (2002: 309-10).

As also noted by Gauthier (1970: 297-98).

As Aristotle claims in N.E., II 1, 1103b2.

Pol. IV 3, 1295b12.

Pol., VII 4, 1326b15-16.

*Sententiae Vaticanae*, fr. 58, tr. Bailey. This particular aspect of Epicureanism is explored in


BIBLIOGRAPHY

I Primary Literature


II Secondary Literature


Grant, A. The Ethics of Aristotle illustrated with Essays and Notes in three volumes. London: John W. Parker and Son, West Strand, 1858.


