

What Does Aristotle’s Moral Exemplar Feel Contempt For?

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Abstract

One of the most striking and controversial features of Aristotle’s moral exemplar, the *megalopsychos*, is his tendency to be contemptuous. Not surprisingly, modern scholarship has found this attribute of the *megalopsychos* particularly unappealing. This article probes the question about the targets of the contempt of the Aristotelian *megalopsychos* and explores the forms that this contempt might take. I argue that the primary targets of the *megalopsychos* are people who claim superiority on the wrong grounds (their external prosperity and social status). The *megalopsychos*, who prioritizes virtue over external goods as a criterion of individual worth (*axia*), rejects the self-image these people claim for themselves and refuses to grant them the appraisal respect they are accustomed to receiving, and think they deserve.

Keywords

Aristotle, megalopsychia, contempt, greatness of soul, honor

The virtue of *megalopsychia* (*Eth. Nic.* 4.3; *Eth. Eud.* 3.5), commonly translated as “magnanimity,” “greatness of soul,” or “proper pride” is widely acknowledged to be the most controversial among the virtues of character articulated by Aristotle. The *megalopsychos*, according to Aristotle’s definition, is one who “considers himself worthy of great things, being worthy of them” (*Eth. Nic.* 4.3.1123b1-2), and what makes the *megalopsychos* worthy of great things is his complete virtue or excellence of character (*Eth. Nic.* 4.3.1124a4, 7–8). As Broadie (1991, p. 52) aptly put it, the virtue of *megalopsychia* is “the good man’s sense of the incomparable worth of his goodness.” Aristotle himself describes *megalopsychia* as a sort of “crown” or “ornament” (*kosmos*) to the rest of the virtues (*Eth. Nic.* 4.3.1124a1-2), yet modern Aristotelian scholarship has found this virtue particularly unappealing: the spirit of Aristotle’s *megalopsychos* has been described as “intolerable” (Stewart, 1892, p. i.335), “appalling” (MacIntyre, 2002, p. 76), and priggish (quoted

by Hardie, 1968, p. 119).¹ This is largely due to the contemptuous attitude that Aristotle’s moral exemplar is thought to demonstrate. The characteristic of contempt to demote its target and treat it as being of comparatively low status sits uneasily with modern egalitarian sentiments and the belief in the fundamental moral equality of all persons. Despite the philosophical distinction (Bell, 2013, p. 100) between moral *status* and moral *standing* (the former admitting of degrees, the latter not), the idea that a morally good person can find others morally inferior and despise them on this account sounds particularly unsavory to the modern ear.²

A common scholarly assumption about the *megalopsychos* is that he despises all non*megalopsychoi*, that is, all people who are not moral exemplars like himself (Bell, 2013, p. 140). This statement, however, is too sweeping and potentially misleading. First, Aristotle does not actually specify *who* the objects of the *megalopsychos*’ contempt are. More importantly, Aristotle allows for gradations in the case

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of non-fully virtuous people, so the group of *nonmegalopsychoi* necessarily comprises disparate kinds of individuals of varying degrees of moral worth or moral baseness. To give a few examples, Aristotle distinguishes between irreparably bad people, “continent” people who have not aligned their desires with what is noble but nonetheless do the right thing after a process of moral struggle, as well as people who do the right thing out of fear or shame (the latter being superior to the former).³ The group of *nonmegalopsychoi* would also include young people, who are still in the process of moral development, as well as, we might speculate, mature people who strike the mean in their emotions and actions *most* of the time, but who have not yet reached the point of being paragons of virtue.⁴ These gradations of virtue, then, raise the question of whether the *megalopsychos* is at all sensitive to these differences, or whether we are meant to assume that he feels the same kind of *justified* contempt for *all* non-virtuous states. This article has a twofold aim: first, to probe the question about the targets of the contempt of the Aristotelian *megalopsychos* and, second, to explore the forms that this contempt might take.

Objects of Contempt: Things

We may safely assert that the *megalopsychos* feels contempt for certain *things*. As Aristotle says, the *megalopsychos* cares about a few things only, and his preferences are not shaped by what other people see as important or great. In particular, the *megalopsychos* assigns little or no value to things that most people deem valuable such as wealth, power, and good luck. He only cares about honor and only moderately (*Eth. Eud.* 3.5.1232a38-1232b12; *Eth. Nic.* 4.3.1124a12-20). The implication of this is that the *megalopsychos* adopts quite a unique stance when it comes to the pursuit of generally desirable goods, the goods that Aristotle calls “common objects of competition” among ordinary men (*perimachēta agatha*, *Eth. Eud.* 8.3.1248b27-29; *Eth. Nic.* 9.8.1169a20-21). Not only does the *megalopsychos* not pursue these prized goods *himself*, but he is also not at all *impressed* (as ordinary people tend to be) when he encounters other people who possess them. It is this tendency of the *megalopsychos* to think little of such positional goods, Aristotle says, that creates a strange aura around this character and makes him appear disdainful (*hyperoptēs*, *Eth. Nic.* 4.3.1124a20). Thus, some scholars argue, the *megalopsychos* feels contempt for *things* rather than *people* (Pakaluk, 2004, pp. 244–245), and his apparently contemptuous attitude is only the *impression* he creates in ordinary people as a result of his detachment from popular objects of pursuit such as wealth and power.

As Bell (2013, pp. 59–60) rightly remarks, however, contempt applies primarily to people and is used only by extension with reference to things. Given this characteristic of contempt, therefore, it is important to explore further whether the *megalopsychos* does feel contempt for people, as well as things, and try to pin down with greater clarity some categories of people for

whom there is sufficient evidence to suggest that they do form the targets of this contempt.

Objects of Contempt: People

One category of people that immediately attracts attention is the people with whom Aristotle explicitly contrasts the *megalopsychos*, namely wealthy, fortunate, and powerful people:

Good fortune (*ta eutychēmata*) is thought to contribute to greatness of soul. For the well born and powerful and wealthy people are considered worthy of honour (*timē*); for they are in a position of superiority (*hyperochē*), and whatever is superior with respect to some good is more worthy of honour. This is why such things make people more great-souled; they are honoured by some people. In truth, however, only the good person (*agathos*) is to be honoured; but the person who has both is considered more worthy of honour. They, on the other hand, who possess such goods without virtue (*aretē*) are neither justified (*dikaiōs*) in considering themselves worthy of great things nor are they correctly (*orthōs*) called great-souled; for that is impossible without complete virtue. People who possess this kind of goods are among those who become arrogant (*hyperoptēs*) and insolent (*hybristēs*). For without virtue it is not easy to handle good fortune (*ta eutychēmata*) properly. And since they are not able to handle their good fortune and think that they are superior (*hyperechein*) to others, they look down on (*kataphronein*) other people, and they themselves do whatever they please. Without being like the great-souled person, they imitate him where they can; they therefore do not act virtuously and look down on (*kataphronein*) other people. For the great-souled person is justified (*dikaiōs*) to look down (for his beliefs are true), but most people do so arbitrarily.⁵ (*Eth. Nic.* 4.3.1124a20-1124b6)

Prosperous people, Aristotle says, attract honor and admiration on account of their prosperity and as a result tend to think highly of themselves. In this, they resemble the *megalopsychos*, yet the good opinion they have of themselves is neither correct nor justified. In fact, this is a group of people that the *megalopsychos* has good reasons to find contemptible. First, they adhere to a value system that is fundamentally misguided. These people place too much value on external goods, the very goods that the *megalopsychos* thinks little of, and base their claims to honor and worth on their social success. Instead of striving to develop their excellence of character, these people remain preoccupied with the pursuit of external prosperity. According to Aristotle, however, (and, of course, the *megalopsychos* himself) the “true” criterion of worth (*axia*), and the proper and legitimate ground for thinking highly of oneself, is goodness or moral virtue. To put it simply, these people have got their life priorities wrong. Second, people who pride themselves on their wealth, power, and social success reveal a mistaken conception about the role of luck in human affairs. They lose sight of the fact that the goods that they value so much are goods of fortune, and therefore largely outside their control, and (mis)attribute their achievements to their efforts and merit alone. Third, and as a result of that, they develop an inflated view about themselves and their worth, and become arrogant and hybriatic.⁶ They overvalue

themselves and treat ordinary people with contempt, thinking that they are unconditionally better and that their claims are superior to the claims of others.⁷

It is precisely towards such people that the *megalopsychos*, as Aristotle puts it, presents himself as “haughty” or “great”:

It is characteristic of the great-souled person ... to be haughty (*megas*) towards people of prominence (*axiōma*) and good fortune (*eutychia*), but moderate (*metrios*) towards ordinary people (*mesos*); for to be superior (*hyperechein*) to the former is difficult and dignified (*semnon*), but it is easy to be superior to the latter, and it is not ignoble to behave proudly (*semnynesthai*) towards the former group, but it is vulgar to do so among the humble, as it is to use one's strength against the weak. (*Eth. Nic.* 4.3.1124b17-23)

The *megalopsychos*, then, adjusts his behavior depending on the kind of people he interacts with. Towards ordinary people, who are not pretentious about their circumstances, he is modest and self-deprecating and avoids an overbearing attitude.⁸ Towards prominent and prosperous people, however, who are liable to the moral failings outlined above, he maintains his superiority, not out of petty competitiveness or a desire to show off, but because of his firm belief in the superior value of the value system that he endorses.⁹

Based on the attitude of the *megalopsychos* towards ordinary people, it has been argued (Irwin, 1999, pp. 221–222) that the *megalopsychos* may recognize his comparative merit without, however, despising others or treating them with contempt on this account. In other words, there is a distinction drawn between the *belief* of the *megalopsychos* in his moral superiority and the outward *manifestation* of that belief. This scenario gains some support from Aristotle's definition of “slight” or “belittling” (*oligōria*), the generic term of which contempt (*kataphronēsis*) is a species. Aristotle defines *oligōria* as “an actualization (*energeia*) of opinion (*doxa*) about what seems worthless or of no account.” The *megalopsychos* can thus be said to hold an opinion about his superior merit or the low merit of others without giving actual *expression* to this opinion in his interactions with them.¹⁰ Yet, Aristotle's remarks about the attitude of the *megalopsychos* towards prosperous and self-satisfied people that we examined above do not suggest that the *megalopsychos* restricts himself merely to the level of belief or an internal evaluative judgment. Rather, he seems to respond to these people's misguided and overbearing behavior, and his response demonstrates certain characteristic features of contempt as outlined, for example, by Macalester Bell (2013, pp. 37–43).

To begin with, the response of the *megalopsychos* is a holistic one, in that it takes whole persons as its object. What the *megalopsychos* responds to is not a particular *action* on the part of the powerful and prosperous, but the general character of those people and their outlook to life. His attitude is not a response to their wrongdoing but to their badbeing, it is a negative appraisal of the kind of people they *are*. His attitude also involves a reflexive and comparative element, in that the *megalopsychos* compares himself with these people and

places them on a lower moral level as they fail to meet the standard that the *megalopsychos* endorses, namely his firm belief in the priority of virtue over external goods and the idea that virtue is the proper criterion of worth.¹¹

A similar picture emerges from Aristotle's brief reference to contempt in his discussion of the emotion of emulation.¹² According to Aristotle:

Contempt (*kataphronēsis*) is the opposite of emulation (*zēlos*) and to emulate is the opposite of to feel contempt for (*kataphronein*). Necessarily, those in a situation to emulate others, or to be emulated, are contemptuous of those (and for these reasons) who have the evils which are the opposites of the goods that are worthy of emulation. This is why people are often contemptuous (*kataphronein*) of those who are fortunate (*hoi eutychoentes*), whenever the latter have good fortune without the goods that are really valued (*ta entima agatha*). (*Rh.* 2.11.1388b22-28)

Aristotle specifies two objects of contempt in this passage. First, a generic group of people who have the negative attributes that are the opposites of the positive attributes that are worth emulating. Second, a more specific group, the familiar one of fortunate and prosperous people, when their good luck is not accompanied with the “things” or “goods” that are really valued. To grasp the grounds of contempt towards these groups, therefore, we need to know which things, or goods, or attributes are valued and worth emulating.

Aristotle has provided a brief account of these “valued goods” in the immediately preceding lines:

But if valued goods (*ta entima agatha*) are the objects of emulation, necessarily the virtues are such a thing [i.e., an object of emulation], and all things that are useful and beneficial to others (for people honour benefactors and good people), and also those good things which are a source of enjoyment for our neighbours, for example, wealth and beauty more than health. And it is also clear who are the kind of people who are emulated; for those who possess these things and other things similar to them are objects of emulation. These things are the aforementioned ones, for example, courage, wisdom, public office (for those who hold offices can benefit many people), generals, politicians, and all those who have this kind of power. (*Rh.* 2.11.1388b10-18)

The things or attributes that Aristotle classifies as “valued goods” can be divided into two broad categories. The first category comprises the virtues of character and intellect in general, and Aristotle offers courage and wisdom as examples. The second category is more varied and comprises personal qualities and attributes such as beauty, and external goods like wealth, but also social roles and positions, such as being a magistrate or a general. The common feature that unites the “goods” in this category, according to Aristotle, is their other-regarding capacity, the fact that they enable their possessor to become useful and beneficial to others.¹³ This feature, of course, is also characteristic of the virtues of character (the first category), since the capacity to do good forms part of the very definition of virtue.¹⁴

On the basis of these observations, therefore, it emerges that contempt is, or should be, directed toward two groups of people. The first one comprises people who lack the virtues altogether or have the opposite of the virtues, that is, people who are bad or vicious and positively harmful to others. The second group deserves a closer look. Since Aristotle emphasizes the other-regarding capacity of things such as wealth and social roles and positions, it seems unlikely that he means to suggest that contempt is directed to anyone who lacks such roles and positions (e.g., poor people of low social status who are unable to rise to the highest offices). Rather, his point must be that legitimate contempt is directed to those who *do* hold such roles and positions, and therefore have the capacity to benefit others, but *fail* to do so, because they enjoy the privileges that their position provides without actualizing the position's other-benefiting potential. To put it differently, contempt is directed towards people who hold positions that command recognition respect, but prove themselves unworthy of appraisal respect as office-holders because they fail to perform the duties and obligations that their positions entail in such a way as to benefit others.¹⁵

This interpretation is reinforced by Aristotle's remarks in his analysis of the various forms of constitutions in the *Politics*. In the context of his discussion of monarchy and tyranny, Aristotle makes the point that citizens attack and subvert monarchies on account of the contempt (*kataphronēsis/kataphronein*) they feel towards the monarch or tyrant (*Pol.* 5.10.1311a25-26).¹⁶ As Aristotle explains, what makes the tyrants contemptible (*eukataphronētos*) in the eyes of their subjects, and therefore potential targets of attack, is their soft and debauched lifestyle characterized by heavy drinking, sloth, luxury, and indulgence of their appetites (*Pol.* 5.10.1311b40-1312a14, 1312b20-25; 5.11.1314b34-36); in a word, tyrants are deemed contemptible on account of their *vices*. Because they are not good rulers (i.e., they do not perform their role as they should, they are not worthy of appraisal respect in their role), subjects attack and remove them from power.¹⁷ This is why, Aristotle says, if a tyrant wants to appear dignified (*semnos*), instead of contemptible, and secure the respect (*aidōs*) of his subjects, he must cultivate military virtue at the very least (if not the rest of the virtues as well), and create for himself the reputation of a great military man (*Pol.* 5.11.1314b18-23; cf. 5.12.1315b16-17). Receiving respect, therefore, is the opposite of being the object of contempt, and requires possessing some (at least) of the virtues of character and acting in a manner congruent with the requirements and obligations that one's position and role entail.

We are now in a position to summarize our findings concerning the objects of contempt when it comes to people. Aristotle's remarks suggest that one appropriate target of contempt is morally bad people who tend to be positively harmful to others. Yet, both in his discussion of *megalopsychia* and in his discussion of emulation Aristotle seems to be more interested in a different group as the target of contempt in general, and of the legitimate contempt of the

megalopsychos in particular. This is the group of prosperous and powerful people who: (1) place too much value on external possessions and fail to recognize that the true criterion of worth is moral virtue; (2) exact respect from others on the wrong grounds and even actively depreciate or dishonor others on the same wrong grounds;¹⁸ (3) fail to grasp the real value of external goods such as wealth and power, which is their capacity to be used by the agent in ways that benefit others.¹⁹ With regard to this last failure, we may even distinguish between *two* potentially contemptible attitudes. One is manifested by those who take advantage of their external prosperity to gain easier access to positions of authority and power, and then use these positions for further self-aggrandizement, rather than for benefitting others as these positions require. The other is manifested by those who keep their external prosperity all to themselves and enjoy it selfishly staying away from social life and eschewing their social obligations. According to Aristotle, however, it is *precisely* people of status and social prominence who have a responsibility to *use* their abundant resources and engage in other-benefitting projects that promote the common good. This is, in fact, the scope of "magnificence" (*megaloprepeia*), the virtue pertaining to large-scale public benefactions, a virtue most appropriate or fitting (*prepein*) to people of wealth, reputation, and nobility of birth (*Eth. Nic.* 4.2.1122b29-33).²⁰

The Forms of Contempt

So much for the targets of contempt.²¹ Let us now turn to the forms that this contempt may take. According to emotion theorists, contempt motivates psychological and/or spatial *withdrawal*: people who feel and show contempt express their non-identification with the object of contempt and disengage themselves from it (Bell, 2013, pp. 44–45, 53–54). In Western culture, for example, characteristic expressions of withdrawal may take the form of turning one's back to the object of contempt or refusing to shake hands and further associate with them.

One obvious way for the *megalopsychos* to express contempt towards certain individuals is to refuse to include them in his select group of close friends. According to Aristotle, the happy or flourishing life (*eudaimonia*) of a virtuous person requires friends, in particular virtuous friends to spend time with (*Eth. Nic.* 9.9.1170b18-19). The *megalopsychos* is certainly not the kind of person who will easily compromise his principles in order to ingratiate himself with others (*Eth. Nic.* 4.3.1124b31-1125a2), but at the same time, he is not as self-willed as to think that he can live his life entirely independent of other people.²² The *megalopsychos* is well aware of the positive role of friendship in the good life and will choose to have friends. Virtuous friends, however, cannot be many in number (*Eth. Nic.* 9.10.1171a17-20), so the *megalopsychos* will necessarily be selective in his friendships and associate closely only

with a limited number of virtuous individuals like himself.²³ An expression of contempt on the part of the *megalopsychos* may therefore be to convey to another person, through verbal or non-verbal cues, that they are deemed unworthy to join this select group of virtuous friends (active contempt), or simply to fail to notice that person or consider them as a potential friend (passive contempt).²⁴

What is more interesting, however, is to explore the ways in which the *megalopsychos* can express contempt in the wider sphere of everyday social interaction with strangers and acquaintances. For this, we should turn to the virtue usually referred to in English as “friendliness,” one of the three virtues that Aristotle defines specifically in terms of their social character.²⁵ According to Aristotle, friendliness is located “in associations with others and in living together (*syzēn*) and participating in discussions and actions” (*Eth. Nic.* 4.6.1126b11-12), so the domain of friendliness is the sphere of social life and social interaction. Friendliness differs from friendship (*philia*) proper in that it requires no fondness or liking for the other person, no (pre)existing attachment or closeness; it can be manifested towards all people, strangers, and acquaintances alike, and requires no special affection (*stergein*) towards particular people as opposed to others (*Eth. Nic.* 4.6.1126b22-23). When meeting and interacting with others in a social setting, Aristotle says, the friendly person associates with them in the right way: he accepts and rejects the right things and in the right way, and he aims at pleasing others, or, at least, not causing them pain (*Eth. Nic.* 4.6.1126b11-19, 28–31). To grasp the scope of friendliness, therefore, we need to ascertain what it is exactly that the friendly person “accepts” and “rejects,” as Aristotle puts it, in the context of an interaction.

Goffman’s (1967) notions of *line* and *face* are especially useful in this respect. A *line* is defined as “a pattern of verbal and nonverbal acts by which [an interactant] expresses his view of the situation and through this his evaluation of the participants, especially himself” (p. 5). *Face*, on the other hand, is “the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact” (p. 5). A person may be said to have or maintain face “when the line he effectively takes presents an image of him that is internally consistent [and] supported by judgments and evidence conveyed by other participants...” (p. 6).²⁶ According to Goffman, human interaction is based on a tacit agreement between participants in a social encounter that each participant will, in principle, respect the face and projected image of the other participants (as well as his own), otherwise, participants will lose face and the interaction will become dysfunctional. This means, Goffman says, “that the line taken by each participant is usually allowed to prevail, and each participant is allowed to carry off the role he appears to have chosen for himself” (p. 11).²⁷ This tacit agreement and cooperation between interactants, however, is not unconditional. To take effect,

each participant must take into account what others are willing to accept.²⁸

It is a theory of interaction along these lines, I suggest, that Aristotle articulates in his analysis of friendliness. What friendliness disposes the *megalopsychos* (who possesses all the virtues) to “accept” and “reject” in the right way is (in Goffman’s terms) another person’s line and the face they project in social encounters. The *megalopsychos* is willing, as a rule, to go along with, and offer real or working acceptance of, his interactant’s line. He is, in other words, prepared to please people, by responding with approval to their actions and words, and seeks not to offend them or give them pain by challenging their line and posing a threat to their face.²⁹ But, he is prepared to act in this way up to the point when continuing to do so begins to pose a threat to *his* face or to compromise *his* respectability and self-respect. In such cases, the *megalopsychos* is equally prepared to react and object. He is prepared to *reject* a person’s line (and cause *them* pain) if accepting it would require him to sacrifice his own dignity or to make a painful concession to the principles he holds most dear.

Contempt is one of the forms this rejection can take. As Bell (2013, pp. 157–158) notes, “disengaging from a person who has failed to meet certain basic standards that are especially important to the contemnor can allow her [the contemnor] to maintain her self-esteem.” This is precisely the point that Aristotle makes with his remark that the friendly person is mindful not to cause pain to others while at the same time considering also what is fine or honorable (*kalon*, *Eth. Nic.* 4.6.1126b28-30). Suppose, for example, that the *megalopsychos* encounters a wealthy and powerful person who takes pride in their social condition, considers it only natural that they will be an object of admiration, and even attempts to exact respect from others on account of their external prosperity.³⁰ The *megalopsychos*, for the moral reasons outlined earlier, will feel contempt for this person and refuse to accept their line, as he would normally do with people of a different kind. He may break off the interaction altogether and make it clear that he wants no further association with that person. Alternatively, the *megalopsychos* will express his objection by refusing to pay even lip service to the line that the wealthy person takes, because this line goes against his most fundamental principles and would be beneath his dignity to accept. He will, therefore, refuse to approve or corroborate the wealthy person’s idea of themselves, the values they hold, and the image they project. In other words, the *megalopsychos* denies that person any sign of appraisal respect and withholds any token of approval, praise, or admiration they expect to receive on account of their favorable social condition. In this way, the *megalopsychos* refuses to acknowledge that person’s success in the social game and signals to them that (according to his standards) their adherence to a value system of this kind places them at a lower moral level.³¹

Socratic Contempt

To illustrate this form of behavior it is useful to consider the concrete example of an individual who is often taken to be the model of Aristotle's *megalopsychos*, namely Socrates (Pakaluk, 2004, pp. 243–244; Rees, 1971, p. 242). In Plato's *Symposium*, Alcibiades, the paradigmatic example of a prosperous, powerful, and conceited young man, says in his encomium of Socrates:

What you see is a Socrates who is liable to fall in love with beautiful young men, is always in their company and is greatly taken by them ... Believe me, he is not a bit interested in whether someone is good-looking, and in fact he despises (*kataphronein*) good looks more than you would ever imagine. The same is true of wealth and every other mark of distinction (*timē*) that most people regard as a matter for congratulation. He considers that all these attributes are worthless and that we ourselves—I mean it—are of no account (*ouden*).³² (*Symp.* 216d2-e4)

Socrates is well known for his dismissive attitude towards external goods and his firm belief in the priority of virtue for happiness, an outlook he expressed through his own lifestyle. In the same speech, Alcibiades describes how Socrates used to wear a light, shabby cloak and to walk barefoot even in extreme cold (*Symp.* 220a6-c1), and similarly, Plato's *Apology* presents Socrates as caring little for positional goods such as wealth, power, and public offices (*Ap.* 30a7-b4, 36b4-9). At the same time, according to Alcibiades, Socrates' contempt for these goods is not restricted to how he *himself* relates to them, but also extends to his behavior towards the young men who possess them and think highly of themselves for possessing them.³³ The gist of Alcibiades' words is that it was Socrates' conviction that these men were *of no particular worth* (*axia*) simply because they possessed conventionally admirable goods and that their external prosperity gave them no additional or special claim to respect. He thus typically refused to go along with the idea that Alcibiades and his likes had of themselves and denied them the appraisal respect they were accustomed to receiving and thought they deserved. To return to Goffman and Aristotle, in his interactions with these wealthy young men, Socrates refused to "accept" their words and actions (their *line*) and presented himself as a constant threat to the *face* they projected, and as a source of pain for them on this account. Indeed, Alcibiades repeatedly describes his interactions with Socrates as a source of emotional pain for himself on account of the blows Socrates delivers to his cherished self-image.³⁴

Now, Socrates is also well known as the "gadfly" (*Ap.* 30e) who actively sought to engage in conversations with people, questioning his interlocutors, exposing their moral weaknesses, and inviting them to care for their soul, mend their ways, and strive to improve. This kind of engagement with others may seem incompatible with contempt, which

is associated with disengagement and the desire to withdraw from the target of contempt. Socrates, in other words, may be said to engage in the kind of "firm but respectful confrontation" that theorists who question the moral value of contempt propose as an alternative response to vice (cf. Bell, 2013, p. 169; Hill, 2000, p. 92). Yet, this is not how Alcibiades himself interprets Socrates' behavior towards him and his friends. As Alcibiades' remarks suggest, Socrates' interlocutors interpret his withholding of appraisal respect as an expression of contempt on Socrates' part. In this respect, the perspective of Alcibiades is consistent with Aristotle's remark (*Rh.* 2.2.1378b35-1379a4) that people who consider themselves worthy of appraisal respect on certain grounds also expect to *receive* this respect and, if they do not, they interpret this denial as a "slight" (*oligōria*), an act of belittlement or contempt towards them. According to Alcibiades at least, the fact that one continues to associate and engage with others does not exclude the possibility of contempt. Rather, Alcibiades seems to understand contempt primarily in terms of a refusal to satisfy another person's positive face wants, which includes showing approval not only for the image they project, but also for the things they value and take pride in. As Brown and Levinson (1987, pp. 62–63) rightly stress, positive face (the desire that one's self-image be appreciated) entails also the want to have one's goals, possessions, and achievements approved of and thought of as desirable, a point grasped already by Aristotle in his rich account of the various "slights" that evoke the emotion of anger (*orgē*):

And people grow angry towards those who speak badly of, and show contempt for (*kataphronein*), the things which they themselves take most seriously (*spoudazein*), for example, those who take pride in philosophy grow angry if someone speaks badly of philosophy, and those who take pride in their appearance if someone speaks badly of their appearance, and similarly in other cases. (*Rh.* 2.2.1379a34-38)

The more central certain qualities, attributes, and values are to our identity and self-image, and the more proud we are of them, the more likely it is to interpret an expression of contempt towards these attributes and values as an expression of contempt toward *us*. Alcibiades makes this point emphatically clear in his famous narrative of his repeated, and unsuccessful, attempts to seduce Socrates:

After this exchange, and having as it were shot my arrows in his direction, I thought I had scored a hit. So without waiting for him to say anything more I got up and putting my heavy cloak around him (it was winter), lay down beside him under his own short cloak and put my arms around him, this truly superhuman and amazing man. This was how I lay all night long. Again, Socrates, you cannot deny that I am telling the truth. Yet despite all that, he completely defeated me, and despised (*kataphronein*) and mocked (*katagelan*) and insulted (*hybrizein*) my beauty—and in *that* respect I really thought I was something ... I swear to you by all the gods and all the goddesses too that when I got up in the morning after spending the night with Socrates, nothing more had happened than if I had slept with my father or elder brother. (*Symp.* 219b3-d2, transl. Howatson and Sheffield)

Conclusion

Aristotle's discussion of *megalopsychia* and his scattered remarks on contempt (*kataphronēsis/kataphronein*) throughout his corpus allow us to form a fairly consistent view of the kind of people and attitudes that Aristotle's moral exemplar finds contemptible. Though people who lack the virtues of character, in general, emerge as an appropriate target of contempt, the focus of Aristotle's attention is more explicitly on the category of privileged and powerful individuals, the "prosperous fools" (*Rh.* 2.16.1391a13-14), who have a great idea of themselves and tend to exact respect from others on the basis of their favorable circumstances and external prosperity. In this, Aristotle seems to be in line with modern theorists of contempt who maintain that contempt is the most appropriate attitude to the vices of superiority, such as arrogance, haughtiness, and overweening pride (Bell, 2013). To this purpose, the virtue of "friendliness" (*Eth. Nic.* 4.6) gives an idea of how the contempt of the *megalopsychos* can be expressed in the course of social encounters. The *megalopsychos*, who prioritizes virtue over external goods as a criterion of worth (*axia*), is not willing to accept the self-image that these "prosperous fools" claim for themselves in social interaction (their *face* in Goffman's terms) and is prepared to reject it. In the first instance, the *megalopsychos* will refuse to grant such people the appraisal respect they are accustomed to receiving on account of their social condition, an attitude which they readily, and rightly, interpret as an expression of contempt on the part of the *megalopsychos*. Depending on the social context and the interactant (if, e.g., the interactant shows signs of potential for improvement), the *megalopsychos* may even engage with them and seek to bring about their moral transformation. If, however, these attempts prove futile, or if circumstances demand it, the *megalopsychos* is also perfectly capable of showing even more marked (and painful for their target) forms of contempt characterized by disengagement and withdrawal. As Aristotle says, it is *precisely* towards people who claim superiority on the wrong grounds that the *megalopsychos* demonstrates his own superiority and justified contempt.

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Notes

1. Cf. also Bertrand Russell's comment on Aristotle's portrait (1979, p. 188): "One shudders to think what a vain man would be like."

Curzer (1991) challenges these criticisms of the Aristotelian *megalopsychos*.

2. For the distinction between moral status and moral standing, see also Kristjánsson (2016, pp. 56–57), who similarly argues that "believing that different persons ... might have unequal *moral worth as persons*, depending on their demonstrated level of moral attainment, is not tantamount to considering them of unequal *worth as moral persons*." (author's emphasis)
3. Continence and incontinence are discussed in detail at *Eth. Nic.* 7.1–10: both continence (*enkrateia*) and incontinence (*akrasia*) fall short of virtue (*aretē*), but continence is better than incontinence and incontinence is better than vice or badness (*kakia*). In his discussion of courage (*andreia*, *Eth. Nic.* 3.8), Aristotle also distinguishes between genuine *andreia* motivated by "the fine" (*to kalon*), and deficient forms of courage motivated by fear or shame.
4. That Aristotle allows for gradations in virtue can also be adduced from the following considerations. (1) Certain emotions, dispositions, and actions (e.g., shamelessness, Schadenfreude, adultery, and theft) are simply bad and doing any of these things at all (*haplōs*) is to do the wrong thing (*Eth. Nic.* 2.6.1107a8–17). (2) In Aristotle's scheme of virtue as an intermediate state between two vices, not all vices are equally bad. In certain cases the vice on the side of excess is worse than the vice on the side of deficiency or vice versa; in the sphere of wealth, for example, being ungenerous is worse than being extravagant (*Eth. Nic.* 4.1.1121a25–30). (3) Aristotle allows for friendships between people of unequal virtue (*Eth. Nic.* 8.13.1162a36–1162b1), in which case it is a friend's task to help their morally inferior friend improve, provided, of course, that they are capable of improvement (*Eth. Nic.* 9.3.1165b17–22).
5. Unless otherwise specified, all translations are mine.
6. Sandel (2020) observes how similar ways of thought and behavior have become widespread among the successful professionals of modern Western societies and warns of the corrosive effects of, what he calls, "meritocratic hubris" for democracy and social cohesion.
7. For similar statements about powerful and prosperous people, see also *Pol.* 4.11.1295b3–23 (people with an excess of the goods of fortune are unable to be ruled and despise others, *kataphronein*); *Rh.* 2.16.1390b32–1391a2 (it is typical of the rich to be hybriatic and arrogant). For detailed discussions of the psychology of *hybris* and the role of external goods, see Cairns (2020) and forthcoming).
8. See also *Eth. Nic.* 4.3.1124b29–31: "... and he speaks and acts openly (he is an outspoken person because he is prone to showing contempt (*kataphronētikos*), and is truthful except in situations where he is self-deprecating towards ordinary people (*hoi polloi*))."
9. Virtue is a superior criterion of personal "worth" (*axia*) than the possession of external goods because the circumstances of its development and cultivation are within us, whereas external goods are a result of luck and therefore something for which we cannot take responsibility or credit. But what if the *megalopsychos* happens to be himself a man of wealth and power (cf. *Eth. Nic.* 4.3.1124a25–26)? In such a case, the *megalopsychos* will behave in a manner that distinguishes him from the typical, vainglorious rich, and signals to people that the reason they should look up to him is his virtue, not his external prosperity and social success.
10. In such cases, the opinion (*doxa*) of the *megalopsychos* will be a correct one (cf. *Eth. Nic.* 4.3.1124b6, "for his beliefs are true"), so an instance of *oligōria* on his part would be justified and should not give its target an occasion for anger (*orgē*).
11. The belief of the *megalopsychos* in the priority of virtue is what Bell (2013, p. 40) calls "the subject's personal baseline," that is, the framework of values and attributes that constitute a person's value system. The point that contempt in general (not specifically the contempt of the *megalopsychos*) is directed towards targets that are considered of inferior status (in some respect or other) is also made in *Rh.* 1.11.1371a14–17, 2.6.1384b22–24, where people are said to feel contempt for those whose opinion is of no importance to them, for example, children and animals. The standard on which children and animals are deemed inferior is presumably their intellectual capacities.

12. Aristotle's remarks on contempt in this context do not refer specifically to the *megalopsychos*. Still, since emulation is, according to Aristotle, a morally positive emotion (*Rh.* 2.11.1388a35), it is virtuous people who are likely to feel emulation and the contempt that is its opposite.
13. The other-regarding capacity of wealth is obvious, but how is one's beauty useful or beneficial to others? This statement is presumably a reflection of the beauty-is-good stereotype, namely the cross-cultural human tendency to associate physical attractiveness with moral goodness, see Sapolsky (2017, pp. 88, 443).
14. Following ordinary views (*hōs dokei*), Aristotle defines virtue (*aretē*) as a capacity or faculty (*dynamis*) to procure and preserve good things and to do many and great benefits (*Rh.* 1.9.1366a36-b1).
15. For the distinction between recognition respect and appraisal respect, see Darwall (1977).
16. Other reasons for attacking monarchies mentioned in this passage are the fear (*phobos*) citizens may experience towards their monarch and the injustice (*adikia*), especially the hybriatic behaviour (*hybris*), of the monarch towards the citizens.
17. Hence, not being deserving of appraisal respect in a certain role may lead to being deprived of the recognition respect of the role itself.
18. This form of behavior is, in fact, morally faulty in two ways. First, prosperous people expect respect on the wrong grounds (external goods rather than virtue); second, they tend to try to *exact* this respect from others rather than wait for this respect to be freely given to them (albeit on wrong grounds); cf. Bell (2013, p. 102): "seeing oneself as having a higher status than others and desiring that this status be recognized may constitute a serious moral fault, especially when this involves dishonoring other persons or attempting to *exact* esteem and deference" (author's emphasis). Prosperous people are equally contemptible when they hypocritically and vainly *disclaim* their favorable circumstances which are patently evident to everyone around them, see *Eth. Nic.* 4.7.1127b26-29 with Beresford (2020, pp. 360–361, n. 50).
19. Cf. *Rh.* 1.5.1361a23-24 (wealth consists more in *use* than in possession) and *Eth. Nic.* 4.1.1120a9-23 (generosity, the virtue concerned with wealth, consists more in its *active* side, giving, rather than in its passive one, taking, and keeping).
20. Similarly, lack of political aspirations is a mark of pusillanimity (*mikropsychia*) for a well-born citizen, while not being so for a metic, a resident alien of the city (*Eth. Eud.* 3.5.1233a28-30). Aristotle's aristocratic pedigree and prejudices certainly form part of the background of these statements, but Aristotle also makes it abundantly clear that (a) moral virtue takes normative priority over external goods in determining an individual's worth (*axia*), and (b) the real value of external goods for an individual lies in their proper use to promote the welfare both of oneself and of others (family, friends, and fellow citizens).
21. The list need not be exhaustive. My analysis aims to show (a) that these are the categories of people for which there is sufficient evidence that the *megalopsychos* does feel contempt for, (b) that the grounds for this contempt are provided, and (c) that these grounds are morally justified on the basis of Aristotle's theory.
22. This is the state of "wilfulness" or "disagreeableness" (*authadeia*), the vice on the side of excess of "dignity" (*semnotēs*, *Eth. Eud.* 3.7.1233b34-38). The self-willed person (*authadēs*) lives with no consideration of, and shows contempt for (*kataphronētikos*), other people. His main fault is that he is so self-centered that he thinks that other people are not of any value to himself in any way, not even as friends.
23. The *megalopsychos* may also indeed engage in the kind of friendships or associations that Aristotle calls "utility" friendships (*Eth. Nic.* 8.3), but his meaningful and committed relationships will be virtue friendships with virtuous people.
24. On the distinction between active and passive contempt, see Bell (2013, pp. 48–51).
25. These virtues, which Aristotle says are nameless, are "friendliness," "truthfulness," and "wit" (*Eth. Nic.* 4.6–8).
26. On the notion of face, see also Brown and Levinson (1987, p. 61), who distinguish between two aspects of face: (a) *negative* face, the basic claim to territories, to freedom of action and freedom from imposition, and (b) *positive* face, the desire that one's self-image and wants be appreciated and approved of.
27. Hence, remaining in an interaction without challenging a person's line is (or can be interpreted as) a form of approval, whereas withdrawing oneself from it is a form of protest that breaks the tacit contract between interactants to respect each other's face, cf. Bell (2013, pp. 153–154).
28. Cf. Origi (2018, p. 17).
29. For a similar interpretation of the scope of friendliness, see Curzer (2012, p. 189): "the sphere of friendliness consists of situations in which one must take a stand on the words and deeds of others. The actions governed by friendliness are accepting, praising, opposing, and criticizing ... the friendly person seeks to give pleasure to others and to avoid causing others pain. The friendly person accomplishes this by generally responding with acceptance and approval to the words and deeds of others."
30. Or, a person who defends being a pimp or a human trafficker as an occupation.
31. On the withholding of appraisal respect as an expression of contempt, see also Bell (2013, pp. 171–177). As Bell rightly states, this form of contempt is not incompatible with recognition respect or the basic respect we owe to all persons. We may argue, for example, that we should look down on, and withhold appraisal respect to, shameless and conceited individuals, but this does not amount to saying that we agree that their human or civil rights be violated. Similarly, Aristotle's *megalopsychos* may refuse to show appraisal respect to wealthy and conceited fellow citizens, but he will nonetheless grant them the recognition respect appropriate to citizens.
32. The translations of the *Symposium* passages are from Howatson and Sheffield (2008).
33. See also *Symp.* 222a7-b4 for other young men who became the targets of Socrates' contempt, and Xen. *Mem.* 4.1.5 where Socrates is said to use strongly pejorative language ("fools" and "simpletons") to admonish those who pride themselves (*mega phronein*) on their wealth and think that they need no education because their wealth guarantees them that they will secure the objects of their desires.
34. Socrates makes Alcibiades think that his life is not worth living as it is (*Symp.* 216a1-2) and admit that despite his shortcomings he neglects himself and engages in public affairs (*Symp.* 216a4-6); Alcibiades feels shame (*aischynesthai*) before Socrates for the fact that he does not do what Socrates advises him to do, and he himself agrees that this is what he should do (*Symp.* 216a8-b6). On shame as a "global" or holistic emotion that involves a perception of the self, see Greucci et al. (2021) and Maurer (2021). See also *Rh.* 2.6.1383b11-15 for Aristotle's definition of shame (*aischynē*) as an emotion with a negative hedonic tone (*lypē*) concerned with situations (past, present, or future) perceived by the agent to impact negatively on their reputation and the way they are seen by others (*adoxia*), and consequently on their self-image and self-esteem.

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