Greatness of Soul and Virtues of Ignorance

Benjamin Visscher Hole IV
Lewis & Clark College
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Introduction

According to Aristotle, the virtues require knowledge. A virtue is a robust character trait, or a set of dispositions, induced by habits, for properly acting and exhibiting emotions (EN1105b25-26). Furthermore, in order to be a virtue, these sets of dispositions must be guided by a form of knowledge, *phronēsis* (EN1144b22-30). We use *phronēsis* to decide how to act. If a person is defective regarding this form of knowledge, then she only has, at best, an approximation of the virtues. It follows that, on Aristotle’s view, a fully virtuous person cannot act out of ignorance.

However, Julia Driver argues that some virtues require ignorance. For example, modesty requires ignorance of one’s accomplishments and traits. She argues that the statement ‘I am modest’ sounds odd and that a successful account of modesty should explain the oddity of this statement.¹ One way of explaining the oddity is to claim that the modest person understates her worth. That is, the reason a modest person would not say ‘I am modest’ is because she is disposed to understate her worth. According to this account of modesty, a person is modest if and only if she behaves modestly. So, she would avoid boastfulness by understating her self-worth. Note that this account does not require ignorance. It is compatible with an Aristotelian conception of virtue. Driver argues that this understatement account is insufficient because it lacks the resources for distinguishing between genuine modesty and false modesty.² For on this view, it is compatible with genuine modesty for one to believe that she is better than others, as long as she merely behave modestly. However, if modesty requires one to believe falsely one is less worthy than one actually is, then it is possible to distinguish genuine modesty from

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¹ Driver 17.
² Driver 18.
false modesty. Therefore, Driver concludes that ignorance is a necessary condition for modesty.

If Driver is right, the Aristotelian conception of virtue is inapplicable to the virtue of modesty. For similar reasons, Driver also thinks that it is also inapplicable to several other virtues, including impulsive courage, blind trust, charity, and forgiving and forgetting. If some virtues require ignorance, then knowledge is not, or at least not always, a necessary condition of virtue. These considerations force us to ask why Aristotle thought the virtues require knowledge in the first place. One way to approach this question is to turn to Aristotle’s interesting discussion of megalopsuchia or greatness of soul (EN IV.3). The great-souled person is virtuous because she possesses self-knowledge. This self-knowledge broadly includes knowledge of her self-worth, virtues, accomplishments, friendships, and so on. In this paper, I explain why knowledge of these things is valuable for Aristotle’s great-souled person. In section one, I give a brief overview of greatness of soul. In section two, I examine the role of external goods that fall under the sphere of greatness of soul. In section three, I explain the how Aristotle’s discussion of greatness of soul illuminates both his discussion of phronēsis and the reciprocity of virtues. In section four, I explain the role of phronēsis in moral development.

Since the great-souled person possesses self-knowledge, we might wonder whether she can be modest. So in section five, I argue that the great-souled person possesses something like modesty, without being epistemically defective. It is unclear, I argue, whether the great-souled person can be truly modest on an Aristotelian account of modesty. Surely, she cannot be modest on Driver’s account. Nonetheless, I attempt to
give resources for an Aristotelian to explain our intuitions that modesty is a virtue. I argue that the great-souled person will tend to behave modestly, but she will not possess any of the negative qualities that we associate with false modesty. I further argue that, on the Aristotelian conception of virtue, modesty is a crucial character trait in moral development. This, I hope, will be the beginning of a way for an Aristotelian to respond to Driver’s challenge.

I. Greatness of Soul

Greatness of soul is one of the virtues discussed in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*. It is the crown of the virtues, which “enhances their greatness, and … cannot exist without them” (*EN*1124a1-3).³ The great-souled person is medial with respect to the vain person who claims much but deserves little, and the small-souled person who claims little but deserves much (*EN*1123b12-13). However, the person who claims little and deserves little is not great-souled (*EN*1123b4). Aristotle draws the analogy that a person with a small body may have proportional beauty, but his body must have a requisite size in order to be truly beautiful (*EN*1123b5). Therefore, greatness of soul is also an extreme because the great-souled person claims and deserves much (*EN*1123b8).

Before I examine the virtue in detail, I should address the *prima facie* concern that the great-souled person is reprehensible. For example, when Bertrand Russell reviews the whole of Aristotle’s ethics, he focuses on greatness of soul. He compares the great-souled person to the “master” in Nietzsche’s master and slave moralities, and concludes that Aristotle’s ethics convey “an emotional poverty.”⁴ In comparison to the great-souled

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³ I use Rackham’s translation of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.
⁴ Russell, 175, 185.
person, Russell humorously remarks, “[o]ne shudders to think what a vain man would be like.”⁵ Alasdair MacIntyre is downright “appalled” by greatness of soul, and adds that Aristotle himself must not have been “a nice or good man.”⁶ J.L. Ackrill’s commentary omits the chapters on greatness of soul.⁷ W.D. Ross comments that greatness of soul is “the self-absorption which is the bad side of Aristotle’s ethics” and thereby translates it as “pride.” However, these critics uncharitably interpret what it means for the great-souled person to deserve and claim much. Aristotle does not directly explain what it means. Instead, the great-souled person is described by reference to dispositions towards honor and fortune.

According to Aristotle, honor, in a qualified sense, is the primary object of greatness of soul because it is the greatest external good (EN1123b34-35). Yet, the great-souled person does not care for all honors. Only honors accorded by persons of worth will give him pleasure because he does not care for honors given indiscriminately (EN1124a5-10). The great-souled person is not concerned with honor *qua* honor, then, because he regards it as a small good (EN1124a15-20). Thus, Aristotle states that the great-souled person must have the “right disposition” towards honor and dishonor (EN1123b22). Aristotle also claims that the great-souled person is, in a qualified sense, indifferent to fortune and self sufficient (EN1177a27-b1, EN1199b18-33). Yet, gifts of fortune, such as noble birth, wealth, and power contribute to greatness of soul (EN1124a20-24). This is because gifts of fortune contribute to the possession of the other virtues. Thus, the great-souled person is not entirely indifferent to fortune. Instead, Aristotle states that he must “observe due measure with respect to wealth, power, and

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⁵ Russell, 176.
⁶ MacIntyre, 34, 38-9.
⁷ Ackrill omits IV.3 of *EN* and III.5 of *EE.*
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good and bad fortune in general, as they may befall him” (*EN*1124a14). Therefore, the 
great-souled person is not obsessed with honor and apathetic towards everything else, as 
Aristotle’s critics have claimed. When the dispositions towards honor and fortune are 
interpreted correctly, the great-souled person is not reprehensible.

In short, greatness of soul has three important features. First, the great-souled 
person must have the right disposition towards honor. Second, he must also have the right 
disposition towards fortune. Having the right dispositions towards honor and fortune 
describe what it means for the great-souled person to deserve and claim much. Third, 
greatness of soul is the crown of the virtues. That is, the great-souled person possesses 
the other virtues and greatness of soul somehow enhances possessing them.

II. Greatness of Soul and External Goods

Greatness of soul consists in deserving and claiming much, which involves 
deserving and claiming great external goods. According to Aristotle, there are two ways 
an external good can be valuable for its possessor (*EN*1098b12-17). First, an external 
good can be valuable in that it is instrumental for some other good. Second, an external 
good can be valuable because it makes its own contribution to, and is partially 
constitutive of, *eudaimonia*.

On the one hand, gifts of fortune are valuable for the great-souled person because 
they are instrumental for some other good. The great-souled person is not entirely 
indifferent to gifts of fortune, because they are conducive to the possession of the other 
virtues. For example, wealth is conducive to magnificence or generosity, the virtue of 
properly spending large sums of money. Similarly, Aristotle claims that noble birth,
wealth and power are conducive to greatness of soul (EN1124a20-25). This kind of external good is valuable because it attains some other good.

On the other hand, honor is valuable for the great-souled person because it makes its own contribution, and is partially constitutive of, eudaimonia. According to Aristotle, the great-souled person values honor for at least three reasons: it is rendered to the gods, it is pursued by persons of worth, and it is the prize for noble accomplishments (EN1123b17-23). So, honor is the greatest external good, and the primary object of greatness of soul (EN1123b34-35).

Having the right disposition towards honor requires self-knowledge. This is because the right disposition towards honor requires knowledge that one’s accomplishments are noble. The great-souled person pursues honor, in part, because it is the prize for noble accomplishments. But she would not know whether to claim honor if she did not know whether she deserves it in the first place. Therefore, the right disposition towards honor requires self-knowledge because the great-souled person must know which accomplishments are noble. In other words, she pursues honor for the right reason, namely that she knows that she deserves honor.

Further, one who is disposed to care about what knowledgeable people think will receive an accurate indication of one’s worth. The great-souled person does not care for all honors. She only cares for honors accorded by persons of worth, not honors given indiscriminately (EN1124a5-10). The great-souled person is not concerned with honor qua honor. She is not a self-absorbed person who is overly concerned with the opinions of others. Rather, she does not care for indiscriminate opinions because they are indiscriminate. Indiscriminate opinions are unreliable indicators of one’s self-worth. For
example, if I want to be a good artist, I will care about the opinions of other artists, or perhaps art critics. This is because those who devote their life to art are good judges of artwork. Their opinions will likely be good indicators of the quality of my artwork. I will care less about the opinions of those who do not know about art, such as the general public. This is because the general public would be an unreliable indicator of the quality of my artwork. In order to know that I am a good artist, I do not need praise from everyone. The same line of reasoning applies to other skills and talents – only the opinions of knowledgeable people are worth taking seriously because not everyone is a good judge of such things.

However, good indicators are not a necessary condition for self-knowledge. Knowledgeable persons are good indicators of one’s self-knowledge because they give discriminating opinions. This self-knowledge broadly includes knowledge of one’s worth, accomplishments, and so on. Yet, having knowledgeable people tell me that my artwork is good is not the only way to know that it is, in fact, good. For example, it is conceivable for an artist to care about the opinions of the general public and have an accurate assessment of her worth as an artist. That is, an artist may have this self-knowledge while caring about the opinions of the general public – knowing full well that such opinions are unreliable indicators of good artwork. The artist may seek to make a living through art, and realizes that she can only do this through pleasing the greatest number of potential consumers. In such a case, however, the ground for the concern of the general public is detached from, and actually irrelevant to, the artist’s appraisal of the value of her work. It would be extremely difficult to have self-knowledge when caring about praise from everybody, where the praise was a significant ground for one’s own
self-appraisal. Such an artist would continually get inaccurate appraisals of her worth as an artist. Therefore, good indicators are conducive to, but not necessary for, self-knowledge because they make it easier to have self-knowledge.

In short, the disposition towards honor shows why self-knowledge is valuable.\(^8\) Honor makes its own contribution, and is partially constitutive of, eudaimonia. The right disposition towards honor requires knowledge that one’s accomplishments are noble.

Also, the right disposition towards honor produces good indicators of self-knowledge. So, self-knowledge plays a crucial role in obtaining the value of certain external goods, such as honor. Therefore, self-knowledge is valuable to the great-souled person.

### III. Phronēsis and the Reciprocity of the Virtues

In addition to external goods, self-knowledge also enhances the other virtues. Aristotle’s virtues are unified, at least in a limited way, because they are grounded in *phronēsis*. Aristotle states:

Virtue cannot exist without *phronēsis*. Hence some people maintain that all the virtues are forms of *phronēsis*; and Socrates’ line of enquiry was right in one way though wrong in another; he was mistaken in thinking that all the virtues are forms of *phronēsis*, but right in saying that they cannot exist without *phronēsis*. A proof of this is that everyone, even at the present day, in defining Virtue, after saying what disposition it is and specifying the things with which it is concerned, adds that it is a disposition determined by the right principle; and the right principle is the principle determined by *phronēsis*. It appears therefore that everybody, in some sense, divines that Virtue is a disposition of this nature, namely regulated by *phronēsis*. This formula however requires a slight modification. Virtue is not merely a disposition conforming to right principle, but one cooperating with right principle; and *phronēsis* is right principle in matters of

\(^8\) It is possible that the right disposition towards fortune also shows why self-knowledge is valuable, which I do not address here. I think this might involve appreciating the role of moral luck. For example, if one thinks she is in total control of her life, then she might be setting herself up for failure. Rather, she must have knowledge of what she is in control of and knowledge of her environment. That is, she must recognize the factors that are outside of her control. In this sense, the right disposition towards fortune might be necessary for *eudaimonia*. 
conduct. … These considerations therefore show that it is not possible to be good in the true sense without *phronēsis*, nor to be *phronimon* without Moral Virtue. (EN1144b16-30)\(^9\)

This means that if a person is a good practitioner of *phronēsis*, or a *phronimon*, then she has at least an approximation of all of the virtues. *Phronēsis* entails that if a person possesses one virtue, then she has at least an approximation of all of the other virtues. Recall that the great-souled person must fully possess all of the other virtues. This is because greatness of soul is the crown of the virtues, which “enhances their greatness, and … cannot exist without them” (EN1124a1-3). But how does greatness of soul enhance the other virtues?

As Roger Crisp and Rosalind Hursthouse argue, the great-souled person has self-knowledge, so self-knowledge plays a role in spurring one into action.\(^{10}\) By contrast, small-souled and vain persons will not be spurred into action. The small-souled person cannot fully possess the virtues because she does not realize that she possesses them. For example, if the small-souled person is ignorant that she possesses courage, then she might be less likely to act courageously. If she is ignorant that she possesses magnificence, then she might be less likely to act magnificently, and so on. This is why Aristotle claims that the smallness of soul prevents someone from performing noble actions (EN1125a25-27).

Consequently, if a person lacks self-knowledge, then she will abstain from noble actions because she does not know that she is worthy of them. For example, the small-souled person will not volunteer in a crisis because she does not realize that she can help. That is, she will not volunteer because she lacks self-knowledge. According to Hursthouse, the

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\(^9\) I substitute *phronēsis* for “prudence.”

\(^{10}\) Crisp, 167. Hursthouse, 103.
small-souled person would say “I can’t, I’m no good at that sort of thing, I’ll only make a mess of it” when she is in a situation that demands virtuous actions.11

The same line of reasoning applies to the vain person, who claims much but deserves little. She overestimates her self-worth. So she will volunteer in a crisis situation, but she will perform poorly. If she thinks that she is courageous and magnificent, but is not, then she surely will not act courageously and magnificently. Some might think that George W. Bush meets this description: a person who volunteers to do great things, but, when given the opportunity, is unable to do them very well. Therefore, the small-souled and vain persons lack virtue, in part, because they lack self-knowledge.

We can now put together the important aspects of sections two and three to get a clear picture of greatness of soul. The self-knowledge exhibited by the great-souled person involves an excellent exercise of phronēsis which enhances the other virtues by spurring one into action. Under the reciprocity of the virtues, possession of the virtues and phronēsis mutually entail one another. Similarly, the right dispositions and self-knowledge mutually entail one another. In section two we saw, the right disposition towards honor entails that the great-souled person knows what she deserves. Caring about the right honors also produces good indicators of self-knowledge. We can now add that the great-souled person is a phronimon because she fully possesses the other virtues and she has self-knowledge. While the phronimon possesses at least an approximation of the virtues, the great-souled person possesses them fully. She is also aware that she possesses the other virtues, which spurs her into action. We can now see, then, how greatness of

11 Hursthouse, 103.
soul enhances the possession of the other virtues through an excellent exercise of *phronēsis*.

**IV. Phronēsis and Moral Development**

Driver might argue that the kind of self-knowledge I have discussed above is not valuable. That is, she might argue that action-spurring cases do not show that self-knowledge is necessary for virtues. The real concern for virtue, she might argue, is reliability. On this view, a virtue is a disposition to act reliably in the right way. So a person does not possess a virtue if she does not act in accordance with it. For example, if a small-souled person fails to act courageously, in my example above, then she simply does not possess courage. This is because she is not a reliable actor, not because she lacks self-knowledge. We can nonetheless imagine a person who reliably acts courageously but does so without self-knowledge.

For example, Driver argues that acting courageously requires ignorance in cases of impulsive courage. According to Driver, the virtues of ignorance may involve propositional and inferential ignorance.\(^\text{12}\) Propositional ignorance is ignorance of certain facts; inferential ignorance is ignorance of what follows from certain facts. According to Driver, impulsive courage is a virtue of ignorance because it involves ignorance of inferential knowledge, i.e., ignorance of how the facts fit together. To illustrate her view, consider when a firefighter runs into a burning building. She has propositional knowledge – she knows that the building is on fire, that a child is trapped inside the building, and so on. Yet, when she runs into the building to save the child she is acting impulsively. She

\(^{12}\)Driver, 33.
does not hesitate to consider the facts. That is, she does not pause to infer that she will be in danger when she runs into the building.

By contrast, John Cooper argues that reasons are necessary for moral decision making, but deliberation from those reasons is not necessary.\(^\text{13}\) Cooper agrees with Driver that a virtue is a disposition to act reliably in the right way, but he adds that reasons after the fact are also necessary. That is, a virtuous person will often act without deliberating, but must be able to provide reasons after acting. For example, the firefighter runs into the building without pausing to deliberate. This is because she is disposed to act reliably in the right way. But in order for her decision to be moral, she must be able to give reasons for her actions afterwards. After the firefighter saves the child, she may tell the newscaster, ‘It was worth the risk to save the child’ or ‘I guess that was really dangerous, but I would risk my life again …’ for such and such reasons. Driver rejects Cooper’s view because she thinks that a firefighter who is unable to give reasons afterwards would still be courageous as long as she is disposed to act reliably in the right way.\(^\text{14}\)

Cooper might respond that it would be incredibly odd for someone to act reliably in the right way and be unable to give reasons for her actions. On Aristotle’s view, moral decision-making comes from *phronēsis*. Cooper interprets this as follows. The virtuous person is committed to reasons in the sense that the reasons involve general knowledge about what is conducive to *eudaimonia*.\(^\text{15}\) But it would be absurd for Aristotle to hold that deliberation about reasons is necessary for every moral decision. Therefore, Cooper claims that the virtuous person’s decision is made “as if” she had deliberated.\(^\text{16}\) This is

\(^{13}\) Cooper, 9.

\(^{14}\) Driver, 35-6.

\(^{15}\) Cooper, 9.

\(^{16}\) Cooper, 10.
why she is able to give reasons after the fact. However, it is necessary for her decision to be grounded in *phronēsis*. For if not, why does she reliably act in the right way?

Cooper’s view is similar to Driver’s in that reasons are not necessary for motivation. But his view sounds suspicious because, as Driver notes, it is unclear why reasons matter in the first place.\(^{17}\) There is something right about Cooper’s view, but it needs to be fleshed-out by looking back at Aristotle. In this section, I should be clear that I am assuming a kind of internalism. This is the view that the moral value is determined by things internal, rather than external, to agency. Moreover, it is a very intellectualist kind of internalism. This is a controversial assumption, which Driver rejects. My goal in this paper is to provide Aristotelians with the resources to respond to Driver’s challenge. So I assume internalism, an admittedly controversial assumption, because it is a view that Aristotelians accept. Yet, I also think it is a plausible view.

For Aristotle, reasons are necessary in the sense that they are necessary in moral development. That is, reasons are not conceptually necessary to reliably act in the right way. However, when we look at the way the virtues are developed, it would be extremely odd if one developed virtue but was unable to give reasons for her actions. This is because developing the virtues involves reflecting on the shape of the virtues. We can see this dynamic in both developing and developed virtue.

On Aristotle’s view, reasons play a crucial role in determining one’s character. According to Aristotle, a virtue is a set of dispositions which are, in part, induced by proper habituation (*EN*1105b25-26). M.F. Burnyeat, for example, argues that Aristotle’s model of moral development is very cognitive. He states:

\(^{17}\) Driver, 35-6.
I may be told, and I may believe, that such and such actions are just and noble, but I have not really learned for myself (taken to heart, made second nature to me) that they have this intrinsic value until I have learned to value (love) them for it, with the consequence that I take pleasure in doing them. To understand and appreciate the value that makes them enjoyable in themselves I must learn for myself to enjoy them, and that does take time and practice – in short, habituation.\(^\text{18}\)

During our early stages of moral development, we do things because we are told to. As Aristotle famously emphasizes, good upbringing plays a crucial role in enabling one to make the right decisions (\textit{EN}1095a1-10). Our parents, for example, tell us what is right and wrong. As we grow older, we start to internalize this knowledge about which actions are right and wrong. This stage involves explicitly reflecting on the shape of the virtues. That is, we start to connect the reasons why some actions are right and others are wrong (\textit{EN}1147a21-22). Eventually we learn that virtuous actions are right, in part, because of these right reasons (\textit{EN}1106b20-24).

To illustrate, consider the role reason plays in developing courage. Properly habituating oneself, in part, requires self-control to temper one’s emotions. For example, proper habituation with respect to courage would involve overcoming certain fears. At first, the child must force himself to experience some fears, and through repeated experiences, the fears will dissipate. At some point, the child no longer needs to entertain the thought of overcoming her fear. Through proper habituation, the child exercises less active deliberation to fulfill the character trait. In particular cases, such as impulsive courage, sometimes it is not necessary to deliberate about reasons. Yet, how we develop the virtues requires explicit recognition of the virtue in development.

For example, parents tell their children stories about heroism which acquaints them with courage. Take the example of Disney movies, such as \textit{The Lion King} (1994).

\(^{18}\) Burnyeat,78.
Early on in the movie, just after singing “I Just Can’t Wait to be King,” Simba imprudently wanders into the dangerous elephant graveyard. After saving Simba from the hyenas in the graveyard, Mufasa scolds him and explains the difference between foolhardiness and courage.

**Simba:** I was just trying to be brave like you.
**Mufasa:** I’m only brave when I have to be. Simba, being brave doesn’t mean you go looking for trouble.
**Simba:** But you’re not scared of anything.
**Mufasa:** I was today.
**Simba:** You were?
**Mufasa:** Yes, I thought I might lose you.
**Simba:** Oh, I guess even kings get scared, huh?

We also see Simba’s courage develop throughout the movie. Later, when he is living with Timon and Pumbaa, he learns that his evil uncle, Scar, has turned the Pride Lands into a barren wasteland. At first, Simba refuses to return home to challenge Scar’s reign. But Simba eventually decides that returning is the courageous thing to do. When children watch *The Lion King*, they explicitly recognize courage and the story invites them to reflect on it. They think about which actions are foolhardy, which actions are cowardly, and of course, which actions are courageous. So at a very early age, children are already thinking about the shapes of the virtues and how to be virtuous. Note that this is not scientific evidence that virtue is actually developed in this way, but, I think, it is compelling nonetheless.

We also reflect on the shape of the virtues after they have been developed. According to Aristotle, impulsive courage comes from characteristic courage. He states:

> Bravery in unforeseen danger springs more from character, as there is less time for preparation; one might resolve to face a danger one can foresee, from calculation and on principle, but only a fixed disposition of courage will enable one to face sudden peril. (*EN*1117a17-22)
Impulsive courage comes from a fixed character trait, courage, which in turn, comes from moral development. Moral development involves reflecting on the virtues. Because of the role of *phronēsis* in moral development, the courageous person is not ignorant of her courage. To take an example of developed courage, in the movie *Braveheart*, Mel Gibson’s character, William Wallace, gives a moving speech urging his troops to be courageous. His troops reflect on courage before they fight. But when his troops are actually fighting, they are acting impulsively – they are not actively deliberating in any particular instance. This example is fictional, but recognizable when one considers bravery in times of war. In this sense, some knowledge is necessary for moral decision-making, though deliberation from that knowledge is not necessary. This is because knowledge plays a role in fixing the character trait.

We can now see that moral development, in part, requires self-knowledge. The small-souled person would not act as courageously as the great-souled person. She does not realize that she can help. This is, in part, because she does not realize that she is a courageous person. So when faced with a burning building, she will pause and wonder whether she can really help instead of running into the building immediately. By contrast, the vain person may run into burning buildings foolishly, because she is looking for danger, like Simba’s foolhardy venture into the elephant graveyard. However, the great-souled person knows that she is courageous. Even if a firefighter acts courageously on an impulse, for example, it would be odd for her not to know that she is courageous. This is, in part, because she developed the character trait by thinking explicitly about it, and, in part, because she continues to think about it now that it is developed. Surely, she developed courage partially though self-knowledge. At some point, perhaps when she
was considering whether to be a firefighter, she must have considered whether she is the type of person that would risk her life, without thinking, to save a child from a burning building. She must have reflected on the shape of the virtue, and considered which course of action would be courageous in these kinds of situations. Although she is unlikely to deliberate when running into the burning building, knowing that she is courageous, and knowing what courage requires in cases such as the one in which she finds herself, is one of the reasons she acts.

Therefore, ignorance of inferential facts is not fatal to the Aristotelian conception of virtue. Greatness of soul enhances the possession of the other virtues because self-knowledge spurs one into action. In the case of impulsive courage, Driver argues that ignorance of inferential facts is necessary. But in order to meet Aristotle’s knowledge condition, the virtuous person need not pause to make inferences. Impulsive actions can be virtuous, but such actions come from the virtues, the development of which requires knowledge.

Although I have argued that active deliberation is not necessary in every virtuous act on the Aristotelian conception of virtue, Driver seems to hold that virtuous actions can be ignorant in an even stronger sense. That is, she seems to hold that they may be irrational in the sense that they are not justified for the agent. But surely we would not accept that one who does not have justification for her actions is courageous. One who acts in a way we are tempted to call courageous is revealed as foolhardy when we realize that she had no idea what justified the action for her. For example, imagine that a person dives into the water and saves another who is drowning. But imagine she does not know why she dives into the water. Perhaps she is crazy or ‘just did it’ for no reason. Even if a
rescue is thereby achieved, surely we would not call this action courageous. If she does not know why she is doing it, then we do not think she is courageous. Rather, it is a case of foolhardiness that just so happened to work out well. The would-be rescuer acted stupidly. For example, we would think that nothing would prevent her from jumping in the water when she really should not jump into the water. If the agent has, in principle, no access to what justifies her actions, it seems obvious that the actions are not justified.

V. Greatness of Soul and Modesty

Although Driver may concede the point in the impulsive courage case, it is not clear that the same argument works in the modesty case. This is because, according to Driver, modesty involves both propositional and inferential ignorance. On her view, a modest person is ignorant of propositional facts because she is ignorant of her self-worth. She is thereby also inferentially ignorant. To respond to Driver’s challenge fully, an Aristotelian must argue that there are no virtues of ignorance. One strategy is to argue that Driver’s so-called virtues of ignorance are not virtues in the first place. But Driver has a strong intuitive case, which I think is right – we really believe that modesty, blind trust, charity, impulsive courage, and forgiving and forgetting are virtues. Another strategy is to argue that what Driver regards as virtues of ignorance do not, in fact, require ignorance. If this is right, then Driver poses no challenge to the Aristotelian conception of virtue.

My reason for discussing greatness of soul is to formulate a response to Driver’s virtues of ignorance. I have already explained why self-knowledge is important to virtue for three reasons: the role it plays in obtaining the value of external goods, how it
enhances the possession of the other virtues, and the role it plays in moral development. I have also explained how the great-souled person can possess impulsive courage. Now I am going to turn to modesty and ask whether the great-souled person can be modest. On its face, this question sounds odd, at best. One might suppose that the great-souled person cannot be modest because she has a very lofty, albeit accurate, estimation of herself. Modesty seems to be the most difficult of Driver’s virtues of ignorance for the Aristotelian to explain.

Modesty consists, at least in part, in not overestimating oneself. This is because overestimating oneself is boastful. Driver, however, argues that the modest person must also underestimate herself. This underestimation is an epistemic defect. Recall Driver’s example of the person who claims “(1) I am modest.”\(^{19}\) Driver states:

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(1) \text{ seems to be oddly self-defeating. If I were to utter (1), charitable persons would think that I was joking. Others would think that I was being nonsensical.}\(^{20}\)
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According to Driver, a successful account of modesty should explain the oddity of (1). For most virtues, claiming that one possesses a virtue does not undermine that virtue. For example, a courageous person may claim ‘I am courageous’ without undermining her courage. Rather, claiming that one possesses a virtue seems to be immodest in itself. We may believe that the courageous person is courageous, but if she claims “I am courageous” we do not believe that she is modest. So a statement like (1) seems to be unique to modesty.\(^{21}\)

We might think that modesty, therefore, consists entirely in how one presents oneself. This is because it does not sound as odd for one to believe (1), and not declare it.

\(^{19}\) Driver, 17.
\(^{20}\) Driver, 17.
\(^{21}\) Smith.
If this is the case, perhaps modesty consists in understating oneself. Yet, Driver argues that such an understatement account is flawed because it does not give resources for distinguishing between genuine modesty and false modesty. For example, a person may pretend to be modest in front of others while secretly believing that she is better than they are. Therefore, Driver concludes that understatement is not sufficient for modesty – an epistemic defect is also necessary.

Driver’s view has been widely criticized. Owen Flanagan argues for a non-overestimation account. According to Flanagan, modesty does not involve a presentation condition because it is purely cognitive. G.F. Schueler argues that a modest person is indifferent to her own accomplishments. That is, she has an accurate estimation but does not care. Michael Ridge argues that one must be disposed to present oneself modestly. But this disposition must be, in part, in virtue of non-overestimation. Nicholas D. Smith also argues that a modest person may have an accurate estimation of herself, but she puts the estimation into the right context. Rosalind Hursthouse looks to an *Oxford English Dictionary* definition of modesty, and suggests that “[m]odesty involves correctly estimating oneself as moderately worthy.”

One strategy for Aristotelians responding to Driver’s challenge is to argue that modesty does not require an epistemic defect. That is, modesty consists in an accurate estimation of oneself, and, perhaps, presenting oneself modestly. If modesty involves an accurate estimation of oneself, then it seems that it is no challenge to the Aristotelian conception of virtue. Driver might respond that such an account does not really capture

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22 Hursthouse, 103.
modesty. Such a person may still hold a very high opinion of herself, even if it is correct, but merely behave modestly.

Yet, if we accept Driver’s account of modesty, then we have an inconsistent triad of greatness of soul, modesty, and the reciprocity of the virtues. If we accept that the virtues are unified, at least in a limited way, and if we accept that modesty requires ignorance, then it seems that modesty cannot be a virtue. This is because the great-souled person possesses all of the virtues and excellent self-knowledge.

These considerations force us to ask whether the great-souled person can be truly modest. I don’t know what modesty is, and accounting for its necessary and sufficient conditions lies outside the scope of this paper. So in order to answer this question, I will examine greatness of soul under two accounts of modesty: an Aristotelian account, broadly construed, which does not require ignorance, and Driver’s account, which does. While it is unclear whether the great-souled person can be truly modest on an Aristotelian account, I argue, she cannot be modest on Driver’s account. Yet, on either account she will possess something like modesty. She will tend to behave modestly, but she will not possess any of the negative qualities that we associate with false modesty. I also argue that an Aristotelian may well hold that modesty is a kind of virtue – although the great-souled person might not possess it, it is an important character trait for developing the virtues.

If modesty does not require ignorance, then it seems that the great-souled person can still be modest. As Crisp argues, greatness of soul enhances the other virtues not only because knowledge is action-spurring, but also because greatness of soul aestheticizes
Consider the following picture of moral development. In the early stages, one begins to acquire virtues, such as courage. Recall that the virtues are also unified, in a limited sense, because they are grounded in *phronēsis*. As a result, she starts to develop the other virtues as well because she exercises *phronēsis*. Eventually she develops an approximation of all the virtues. If she is aware of this, then she possesses proper ambition. That is, she accurately estimates herself because she claims what she deserves – but she is not yet great-souled because she does not deserve and claim much *(EN1123b4)*. Recall Aristotle’s analogy that a person with a small body may have proportional beauty, but her body must have a requisite size in order to be truly beautiful *(EN1123b5)*. As her moral development continues, however, she comes to possess all of the virtues fully. If she is aware of this, then greatness of soul emerges out of the other virtues and her self-knowledge.

At this high level of excellence, the great-souled person fine-tunes her life. The great-souled person possesses excellent self-knowledge and all of the other virtues. This aestheticizes her *eudaimonia*. By way of analogy, consider Tiger Woods. He is an excellent golf player. He has an excellent swing. But he nonetheless practices his swing. At his level of excellence, Tiger practices to fine-tune his game. So too, at her level of excellence, the great-souled person fine-tunes her life.

The picture I have painted is especially congenial with Smith’s account of modesty. That is, a modest person can have a high, correct estimation of herself as long as she puts her self-knowledge into the right context. Tiger Woods is perhaps the greatest golfer in history, which he probably realizes. Yet, he continues to practice his swing. Even at such a high level, there is still room for improvement. He knows that he can be

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23 See Crisp 167, 174-177.
better. Although he knows that he can make the hole one or two strokes under par, he also knows that if he practices he can hit the ball a few feet closer to the hole on his drive. So, he continues to practice his drive. He fine-tunes his game because he realizes that he can always be better. By contrast, I practice my swing because there is a lot of room for improvement. I am not fine-tuning. Rather, I am at the lowest level of development, struggling to grasp the fundamentals, such as how to hold the club. The great-souled person fine-tunes her life in the sense that Tiger fine-tunes his golf game. She possesses all of the virtues, but she puts her self-knowledge into context and realizes that there is still room to improve.

This picture of greatness of soul, however, is perhaps inaccurate because it is not clear that the great-souled person can improve. If this is right, then Smith’s account of modesty might not be consistent with my interpretation of greatness of soul. This is because it seems that the great-souled person fully possesses all of the virtues. So at her level of excellence, there may actually be no room left for improvement. If Tiger Woods made a hole-in-one every time, then it would be impossible to improve his game. Smith’s account of modesty involves putting one’s self-knowledge into some broader perspective. Yet, Daniel Statman argues that a truly excellent person will be judged as truly excellent from any perspective. So it does not seem like she would be modest even if she puts her self-knowledge into the right context. Smith’s response to Statman is that the modest person correctly assesses herself, but applies “aspirational standards.” And applying these standards is highly contextual. Although Tiger Woods is an excellent golfer, he still aspires to be better. But in the case of the great-souled person, it seems that she cannot

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24 Statman, 427.
apply aspirational standards to the possession of her virtues. Rather, possessing the virtues seems to be an objective achievement standard, which is not contextual.

So can the great-souled person be truly modest on an Aristotelian account of modesty? This is unclear. Consider how Smith’s account of modesty emphasizes the role of aspirational standards. Modesty involves contextualizing one’s accomplishments in light of these standards. Because of this emphasis, it would seem that these aspirational standards might be necessary for modesty. But it is not clear that this is a necessary condition on Smith’s account. Smith also places emphasis on appreciating moral luck. For example, the great-souled person would appreciate the role her parents had in her moral education. If simply recognizing the role luck plays, for example, is sufficient, then aspirational standards are not necessary. And if this is the case, then it seems that the great-souled person can be truly modest. I should note that, according to Aristotle, the great-souled person seems to appreciate the role of luck. He states that the great-souled person must “observe due measure with respect to wealth, power, and good and bad fortune in general, as they may befall him” (EN1124a14). Therefore, Smith may yet have resources to argue that modesty is a true Aristotelian virtue.

Even if aspirational standards are necessary, however, an Aristotelian may still argue that modesty is kind of virtue. This is because modesty is crucial for virtuous people who are less than great-souled. When a person possesses ordinary virtue and realizes it, she has proper ambition. She accurately estimates herself, but she is not yet great-souled. At this level of moral development, it is very important to put one’s self-estimation into context. For if she overestimates herself, then she is vain, and if she underestimates herself, she is small-souled. But if she correctly estimates herself, then
she knows that there is room left to improve. On Smith’s account, she would be modest. So, modesty is a kind of virtue that is important to have when one undergoes moral development. Yet, modesty might not be a true virtue, in the Aristotelian sense, because it is not clear that it is a virtue the great-souled person possesses.

There is also evidence to suggest that Aristotle himself holds that modesty is a kind of virtue. He claims the great-souled person is medial with respect to the vain person, who claims much but deserves little, and the small-souled person, who claims little but deserves much (EN1123b12-13). However, the person who correctly claims what is deserved, but does not claim and deserve much, is sōphrōn – this person possesses proper ambition, but not greatness of soul (EN1123b4). Note that this character trait is the mean between excess and deficiency. It is also crucial for those who fall short of greatness of soul. We should also note that this is all we have in the actual world because we all fall short.

What if Driver is right, that modesty requires ignorance? If modesty requires ignorance, then the great-souled person cannot be modest. Rather, the great-souled person possesses, at best, what Driver regards as false modesty. That is, the great-souled person presents herself modestly despite her high self-estimation.

Consider Aristotle’s discussion of the virtue of sincerity, which is the mean between boastfulness and self-deprecation (ENIV.7). In this discussion, he claims that the sincere person tends to understate the truth. This is because understatement is more aesthetically pleasing than bluntness or exaggeration. Aristotle states:

Such sincerity may be esteemed a moral excellence; for the lover of truth, who is truthful even when nothing depends on it, will a fortiori be truthful when some interest is at stake, since having all along avoided falsehood for its own sake, he will assuredly avoid it when it is morally base; and
this is a disposition that we praise. The sincere man will diverge from the truth, if at all, in the direction of understatement rather than exaggeration; since this appears in better taste, as all excess is offensive. (EN1127b8-9)

Aestheticizing, in this sense, is different from fine-tuning. The truly virtuous person is disposed to behave in ways that are more aesthetically pleasing, though this disposition does not improve the virtues. Consider another sports analogy. Some professional basketball players, like Shawn Marion and Peja Stojakovic, are very good shooters. They both have a high field goal, free throw and three point percentages. But they have the ugliest shots! Most good shooters, like Ray Allen and Steve Nash, tend to have beautiful shots. A basketball player does not need to shoot in an aesthetically pleasing way in order to make the shot, but most good shooters nonetheless aim to aestheticize their shooting form.

Note that the sincere person does not understate the truth for moral reasons. That is, understatement is not necessary for telling the truth. Because she can tell the truth bluntly, understatement does not serve some moral end. Rather, she understates the truth for aesthetic reasons. So too, we could argue, the great-souled person would behave modestly for aesthetic reasons, not moral reasons. In other words, the great-souled person tends to behave modestly because it is more aesthetically pleasing than behaving boastfully. She is modest insofar as she is disposed to understate herself.

Recall that Driver holds that such understatement accounts of modesty are insufficient because they lack the resources for distinguishing between genuine and false modesty. Although the great-souled person does not possess genuine modesty on Driver’s account, she also does not possess the negative qualities that we associate with false

25 Marion releases the ball from chest-level; Stojakovic jacks the ball behind his head.  
26 Also, note that for Aristotle there is not a clear distinction between moral and non-moral.
modesty. The great-souled person believes that she is better than others because she really is, but she also possesses all of the other virtues. Secretly believing that one is better than others may be seen as scornful. But the great-souled person would not scorn others because she possesses the virtue of kindness and thereby treats others kindly. Sometimes people feign modesty because they are fishing for compliments. But the great-souled person would not because she cares little for the opinions of others. Caring little for the opinions of others is, perhaps, one of the reasons why she is disposed to understate herself. Perhaps the most negative quality associated with false modesty is dishonesty. We think a falsely modest person is lying because she presents herself modestly while believing that she is great. But the great-souled person is not dishonest because she possesses the virtue of sincerity. Rather, she is merely disposed to understate the truth for aesthetic reasons. Surely she can understate the truth without being dishonest. Yet, if she were forced to choose between understatement and honesty, she would choose honesty because she is sincere. So her modest behavior can hardly be described as false. Therefore, even if Driver’s account is right, the great-souled person possesses something like modesty without being epistemically defective.

We can now see why it is unclear whether the great-souled person can be truly modest on an Aristotelian account, and why she cannot be modest on Driver’s account. On Smith’s account, for example, she seems to fall short of modesty because it is impossible for her to apply aspirational standards. Yet, Smith may argue that she reaches true modesty by appreciating the role moral luck plays in her excellence. On Driver’s account, the great-souled person falls short because she has no epistemic defect. Yet, on either account, the great-souled person possesses something like modesty without being
epistemically defective – she behaves modestly for aesthetic reasons. Although modesty might not be a true virtue in the Aristotelian sense, because the great-souled person might not possess it, it is nonetheless a crucial character trait for developing the virtues.

VI. Conclusion

On the one hand, Aristotle argues that the virtues require knowledge. On the other, Julia Driver argues that some virtues require ignorance. Virtues of ignorance challenge the Aristotle’s knowledge condition. As a result we might wonder, what is so valuable about Aristotle’s knowledge condition in the first place. To answer this question, I have looked at Aristotle’s discussion of greatness of soul. The great-souled person is virtuous because she possesses self-knowledge, which broadly includes knowledge of her self-worth, virtues, accomplishments, friendships, and so on. I have argued that her right disposition towards external goods requires self-knowledge and produces good indicators of that self-knowledge. I have also argued that her self-knowledge is an excellent exercise of *phronēsis* which enhances the other virtues because it spurs her into action.

Driver’s virtue of impulsive courage is a virtue that involves inferential ignorance. By examining the role of knowledge in moral development, I have argued that inferential ignorance is not a problem for Aristotle’s knowledge condition. Modesty, however, seems to be a harder case to explain because Driver claims that it involves propositional and inferential ignorance. Although I concede that the great-souled person might not be truly modest, I have given resources for an Aristotelian to explain our intuitions that modesty is a virtue. And I am hopeful that these same strategies can be used to explain Driver’s other virtues of ignorance: blind trust, charity, and forgiving and forgetting.
Even on Aristotle’s account, modesty plays a crucial role in moral development. Also, while the great-souled person cannot be truly modest on Driver’s account, this is not so counterintuitive. She still behaves modestly, and she does not possess any of the negative qualities we associate with false modesty. This, I hope, is the beginning of a way for an Aristotelian to respond to Driver’s challenge.

**Bibliography**


Greatness of Soul and Virtues of Ignorance


