

P401 Hume Paper

Both Hume and Aristotle discuss a virtue called “Greatness of Mind” (or, rather, aptly translated as such in Aristotle’s case). What are some of the most important differences between this virtue on Hume’s account, vs. on Aristotle’s account? Given the differences between the two accounts, why did Hume name the virtue “greatness of mind”—knowing, as he must have, that this would have reminded readers of Aristotle’s megalopsychia? Finally, explain why this trait (as Hume understands it) qualifies as a virtue on Hume’s criterion of virtue, why it qualifies as a virtue on Aristotle’s account of virtue, and offer a view about which of the two has the better account of “greatness of mind”.

Though Hume and Aristotle both talk about “Greatness of the Mind,” they differ in important ways. Hume's “Greatness of Mind” does not follow the metaphysical teleology of Aristotle's philosophy of ethics. Hume's “Greatness of Mind” is grounded in his version of the passions and emphasizes the role of sympathy in our judgements. Hume names the virtue “Greatness of Mind” to contrast it with Aristotle's version of “Greatness of Mind” and show that his explanation is more appropriate for describing the virtue.

According to Aristotle's notions of the virtuous person and the Doctrine of the Mean, Aristotle explains that the “Greatness of Mind” is to have the appropriate amount of honor and pride with all the other virtues in their perfected form. When a man exercises the “Greatness of Mind,” it is in due proportion with other virtues and based on practical wisdom. He does not exercise it excessively or in inappropriate situations, and he is not deficient in exercising it nor abstain from it when appropriate. This person believes himself to be worthy of such great things. Hume wanted to provide his own explanation of this trait that was more appropriate than Aristotle's. His version of “Greatness of Mind” could be seen as the same character trait, pride, but Hume emphasizes that sympathy gives us the means of understanding others, and, since emotion is part of the reasoning faculty of the human mind, we obtain the grounds to make

judgements about others from these faculties. The Humean “Greatness of Mind” still involves pride, but Hume extends the “Greatness of Mind” to mean strength of the mind in pursuit of virtue such that a person is so “constantly possess'd of this virtue, as never on any occasion to yield to the solicitations of passion and desire” (II.3.3). This could mean acting a certain way against our personal interests or against our passions and desires. Because it is grounded in Hume's “Greatness of Mind” is grounded in his sympathy-based reasoning, we understand how “Greatness of the Mind” effects people through those sentiments that we may agree or disagree with. Hume believes this is a more appropriate way to describe the virtue given his understanding of the way the minds works, namely, the psychological philosophy, and works while taking into account our sympathy.

This “Greatness of Mind” is a virtue under Hume's account because, when a person exercises it in interaction with others, it does not leave either the person or the others left wanting on account of the person having the virtue. When one shows this pride when interacting with others, he or she knows that others do not want him to lower himself nor show more confidence, and those same people are satisfied with his or her behavior. Under Aristotle's account, “greatness of mind” would lead a person to have pride in the appropriate amount and in appropriate situations. When one does an act of goodness, he or she should be proud in a moderate amount, regardless of the nature of his or her fortune in these acts. He or she must do so in a way that the virtue is in due proportion with other virtues in leading oneself towards the virtuous person.

Hume has the better account of this virtue since Aristotle's account of the virtue does not account for the sympathetic understanding of the mind that Hume describes. This can be

illustrated in how Aristotle's definition leads to absurd conclusions in the behavior of “great-minded” people, such as how he describes that, “It is also characteristic of the great-souled man never to ask help from others, or only with reluctance, but to render aid willingly” (NE 1124b). When someone requests help from others, he/she is struggling with something, and this struggle would show an imperfection in the independent “great-souled” person. The person's “reluctance” comes from this desire to not have any imperfections at all. However, when one is trying to become a “great-minded” person, then it might be possible for him/her to ask for help from others, since he/she is not yet in the state of the “great-minded” person. Because it is possible, it is possible for the person to ask for help, there may be situations in which the person struggles with something, and, therefore, it is necessary for him/her to ask for help. In this way, if a person wants to become a “great-minded” person, then he/she must act in the way the “great-minded” person does not, and it would be impossible to achieve the “great-mindedness.” It would make sense if one should not let this desire to not have imperfections in the way of asking for help from others.

One might object that it is still possible for someone who is not “great-souled” to desire to become “great-souled” and ask for help from others because he/she is not doing what the “great-souled” person would do in his/her situation, but, rather, doing what he/she should do in order to become “great-souled.” But, according to Aristotle's idea of the virtuous person, one's acts of virtues should be those acts that a virtuous person would do in that situation. The “great-minded” person would do the same thing in order to exercise all virtues in appropriate amounts and situations. The person desiring to be “great-souled” would also do what the “great-souled” person would do in his/her situation.

Hume's version of the “strength of mind” may account for this “reluctance” to ask for help as simply a passion we should ignore. Asking help from others should not be seen as something a “great-minded” person would do reluctantly since it requires an appropriate amount of honor and self-conceit to do so. One should ask for help from others in order to understand how to keep him or herself at the appropriate level of pride when dealing with others. This level should be determined by how you and others are “left-wanting” or not when in interaction with them. Under Hume's account, when someone is asking for help from others with “great-mindedness”, then he wouldn't be “left-wanting” anything more from others. By accounting for how others are “left-wanting” or not, one is pursuing the virtue. When we ask for help from others, we may be “reluctant” to do so because we fear our own imperfections, but our own imperfections would make others “left-wanting” in situations with us. Because of this, our sympathetic reasoning might lead us to believe the act of asking for help from others is honorably virtuous. The strength of the mind comes from knowing this act being appropriate to develop an appropriate amount of pride. The help specifically comes from the others in the interaction, so it should leave the person satisfied in this situation.