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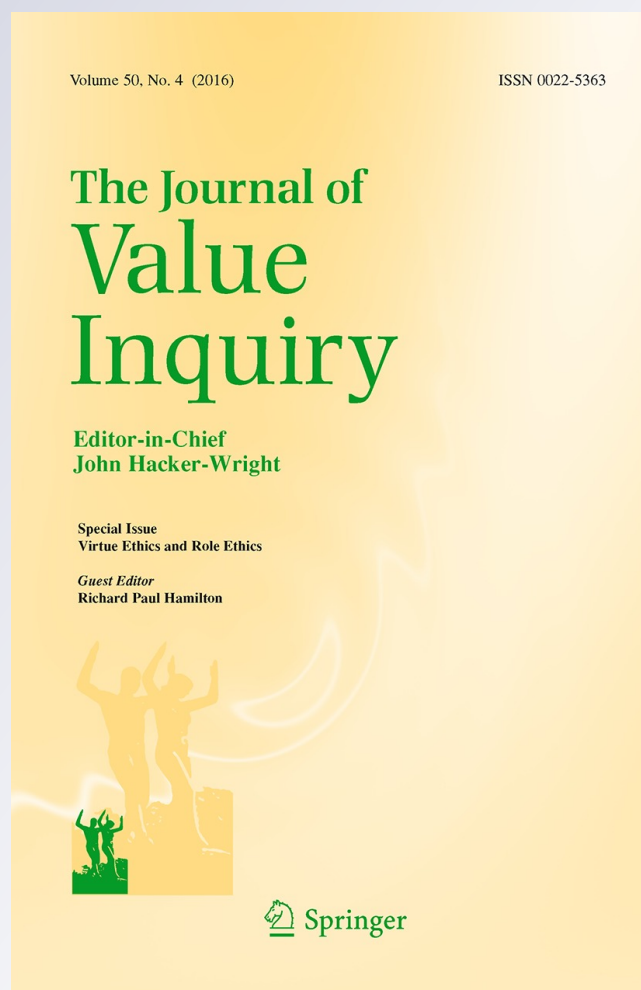
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A Defence of the Aristotelian Virtue of Magnificence

Nafsika Athanassoulis¹

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The Aristotelian virtue of magnificence is concerned with the giving of large amounts of money, usually for projects that benefit a large number of people in the form of the state. It is closely associated with liberality, the virtue of giving and receiving money, with many commentators accepting that the difference between the two virtues is one of scale – liberality is concerned with small amounts of wealth, magnificence with large ones.¹ While liberality is a reasonable virtue, in that we can find some place for it in our conception of the good life for human beings, magnificence is a source of contention. For critics it is a prime example, along with Aristotle's objectionable remarks on slaves and women, of the cultural relativity of Aristotle's conception of the virtues. Even for proponents of Aristotelian ethics magnificence is a virtue at best brushed over and forgotten as a historical hiccup; it seems that in listing magnificence as a virtue Aristotle showed that even the best of us make mistakes.

These concerns with the possibility of magnificence as a virtue are based on a particular, rather shallow, understanding of the concept. In this paper I will argue for a more nuanced understanding of magnificence, one which makes sense of it as a virtue within the wider Aristotelian context and justifies its proper place as one of the virtues constitutive of the eudaimon life. Furthermore, I will argue that there is a

¹ For examples of this conception of the relationship between liberality and magnificence see Curzer H.J., *Aristotle and the Virtues*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2012 p. 85; or Mcaleer S., "An Aristotelian account of virtue ethics: an essay in moral taxonomy", *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, 88(2), 2007, 208–225. A different interpretation of the relationship between the two virtues is offered by Young C.M., "Aristotle on liberality", *Proceedings of the 1994 Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy*, Cleary J.J. and Wiens W.C. (eds), 19, 1996: 313–334.

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place for magnificence in modern views of virtue and that it helps us understand the role of the virtuous person as a philanthropist, as someone who has specific obligations to others with respect to the giving of large sums of money.

I will start with a brief outline of the objections raised against magnificence, objections which are based on a shallow understanding of the concept as an exaggerated version of liberality, then I will expand on our proper understanding of the virtue within its original Aristotelian theory, and finally I will conclude with a discussion of the importance of interpreting this virtue within a particular context and explain how this context is of relevance today.

1 Objections Against the Virtue of Magnificence

The claim of magnificence as a virtue raises four main objections:

- a. Magnificence forms part of an elitist theory of the virtues, since only those who have vast amounts of money can partake in its exercise
- b. it goes against the idea of fairness in the moral sphere, the idea that we are praised and blamed for actions that are under our control since the level of our wealth is generally not under our control
- c. it glorifies wealth acquisition in a way that is particularly at odds with other values, for example the Christian conceptions of humility and benevolence, and
- d. the spending of large wealth captures the political process and subverts it from the hands of the many to the hands of the few.

The first objection is part of a wider concern, namely that Aristotle's theory of the virtues is elitist. This objection suggests that Aristotelian theory is structured around a particular conception of the Athenian citizen; privileged, through both wealth and social status, belonging to an exclusive club and therefore creating a very culturally subjective picture of what counts as a virtue. Bertrand Russell goes as far as to claim that the *Nicomachean Ethics* is designed to be used by the 'respectable middle-aged' to suppress the young and, in a parallel argument to objections about magnificence, concludes that whatever the merits of the magnanimous man might be, there can't be many of them.² Magnanimity is seen as the 'virtue' of arrogance and correspondingly magnificence is the 'virtue' of vulgar shows of wealth – both casting doubt on Aristotle's very conception of what constitutes a virtue.

A closely related concern is the idea that our moral endeavours should be a matter under our control and we should be praised and blamed for what we chose to do and who we chose to be. The vagaries of fate that have given some of us vast amounts of money leave the exercise of the virtue of magnificence hostage to fortune and therefore exclude the vast majority of us from the eudaimon life.

This idea, that the Aristotelian moral life is sometimes hostage to fate, is raised frequently in the literature. For example, the virtuous friendship at the heart of

² See Russell B., 1946, *History of Western Philosophy*, London: Routledge, 1946: 185, 188. Many of the criticisms Russell brings against the virtue of magnanimity can, by extension, be applied to the virtue of magnificence.

living a eudaimon life is only possible to those of us lucky enough to come across appropriate friends. The standard response to this concern is to embrace it, acknowledging that human endeavours are vulnerable and fragile, but pointing out that at the same time it is these very characteristics that give human endeavours their value and importance. However, even in light of this kind of response the requirement for vast amounts of wealth to support one's virtue still seems particularly crude and inappropriate. It is not clear how the requirement to have large amounts of money could add to the distinctive vulnerability of the human condition in such a way as to enrich our moral experience.

The third objection claims that the virtue of magnificence is at odds with other virtues such as the Christian conception of humility as well as the value we place on sentiments of genuine benevolence. Russell remarks on magnanimity, another virtue that has received frequent criticism, that given Aristotle's conception of the *virtue* "[o]ne shudders to think what a vain man [the vice] would be like".³ One could make a similar point about the apparent unpleasantness of the magnificent, a man who accumulates wealth in vast amounts and condescendingly hands it out as and when he feels like it. Compared to the Christian conception of humility, which subjugates one's pride to others, which counsels that the poor are blessed in spirit (Matthew 5:3), and which warns that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for the rich to enter the Kingdom of God (Matthew 19:24), magnificence seems grossly misplaced.

There is a wider objection as well here, one that charges Aristotle with being unmoved by the sufferings of mankind, with failing to have a place for benevolence in his theory.⁴ As a variant of this objection Ward contends that the aim of magnificence is wrong: the virtue is not exercised for the benefit of the recipient, as one would presumably expect from true philanthropy and beneficence, but for the sake of the noble.⁵

Finally, the fourth objection raises the substantive worry that the more we rely on the wealthy for contributing to the state's needs, the more likely they are to take control of the state's function and subvert its purpose to their own aims and for their own benefit.

In the remainder of this paper I will argue that these objections miss the point of the Aristotelian virtue of magnificence. They misunderstand Aristotle's conception of the virtue and fail to appreciate that his theory is contextualised in such a way that magnificence can only be understood within the context within which it was developed.

2 Defining Magnificence

The virtue of liberality is concerned with giving and receiving money. The vice of excess is prodigality, which involves both spending too much and not receiving enough money, while the vice of deficiency is illiberality, which involves both

³ See Russel, op. cit., p. 188.

⁴ See Russell, op. cit., p.195.

⁵ See Ward A., "Pride and the ethics of Aristotle", online <http://www.cpsa-acsp.ca/papers-2013/Ward-Ann.pdf>, accessed 07 May 2014, 2013: p. 8.

accruing too much money and not spending enough of it. Magnificence, by contrast, only involves outlays of money. The vice of excess is tastelessness or vulgarity, which involves spending large sums on the wrong things, and the vice of deficiency is pettiness, which still involves spending large amounts of money but in a grudging, miserly or inappropriate manner. It is interesting to note that the option of having large amounts of money and not spending them on the common good is not part of Aristotle's analysis here. Magnificence does not have a vice of excess spending and another of deficient spending, rather both vices are concerned with spending in the wrong way. It is tempting to conclude that Aristotle simply could not contemplate the option of having large amounts of wealth and not spending it on the good of the state, but of course without any textual evidence it is difficult to know either way.

The objects of magnificence are those that fulfil public spirited ambitions, such as liturgies, which include *choregia*, the training and equipment of a chorus for a dramatic or musical performance, *trierarchia*, the command, maintenance and repair of a warship, *architheoria*, the leadership of a delegation to a foreign festival and *hestiasis*, the provision of a banquet for one's friends.⁶ In addition, large sums of money may be appropriately spent on events that excite the interest of the whole community such as weddings or entertaining foreign guests.⁷ As a rough guide to the level of commitment involved in liturgies, scholars estimate that in the 4th century there were about a hundred annual non-military liturgies alone (festivals, athletic and musical training, public feasts), and a much larger of smaller liturgies at a more local level.⁸ There appears to have been plenty of opportunities for exercising magnificence around the time Aristotle was writing.

However not all spending of wealth is necessarily the virtue of magnificence. A number of clarificatory points are relevant for the concept of magnificence as a virtue. In the same way that not any instance of courageous behaviour qualifies as the *virtue* of courage, not every instance of spending of large amounts of money qualifies as the *virtue* of magnificence. Firstly, considering whether an instance of spending is magnificent or not is independent of how the wealth was acquired in the first place and whether this acquisition was merited and just or unmerited and unfair, or even whether the resulting distribution of wealth is fair or unfair. This does not mean that such questions regarding the fair acquisition and distribution of wealth are of no interest to Aristotle, but rather that they are not relevant as part of *this* discussion.

Here we need to make a detour to consider the role of wealth in general. Aristotle clearly accepts that in getting money one should take "from the right source", and he even has some thoughts on what the right sources might be.⁹ Briefly, Aristotle sees the acquisition of property as an appropriate part of household management, as neither life nor the eudaimon life are possible without a minimum supply of external

⁶ See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Thomson J.A.K. (trans), 1976, London: Penguin Books, 1122b 2-3.

⁷ See NE 1123a 1-5.

⁸ See Liddel P., *Civic Obligation and Individual Liberty in Ancient Athens*, USA: Oxford University Press, 2007.

⁹ See NE 1120a 34.

goods.¹⁰ The acquisition of wealth is purposeful in this account; it contributes towards living a eudaimon life and is to be distinguished from the acquisition of wealth through trade, for trade is not really productive of goods, but merely productive of wealth through the exchange of goods.¹¹ Furthermore this latter type of wealth acquisition – through trade – is problematic because it is limitless. The end of household management has a limit, that is, to acquire goods that one can use, so what one can use sets limits to what one should acquire. By contrast the end of trade is the possession of wealth, which has no limit.¹² Finally this kind of acquisition, wealth for its own sake through trade, risks turning all skills into wealth acquisition skills and making wealth the final end for which all else is carried out.¹³ This very brief account of Aristotle's views on wealth acquisition makes it clear that the production of wealth for its own sake is not an appropriate target (likewise for the spending of wealth, as we shall see below). Finally, Aristotle does not view poverty as a fault, so by extension one could argue that he could not view the inability to be magnificent as a fault. Poverty is a misfortune, not something we are responsible for, therefore lack of funds to be magnificent with would also be a misfortune not a vice—similarly to how lack of suitable friends to carry out perfect friendships with is a misfortune not a vice.¹⁴ As an extreme example the bad luck of Priam in losing all the external goods necessary for the eudaimon life is a misfortune not a vice. So far then this would suggest that lack of opportunity for magnificence is, at least, not a vice, although we have yet to examine the proper role of magnificence in the eudaimon life (we will consider this later on).

One could argue against the specifics of Aristotle's account of justice in acquisition, or one could challenge the entire conception of the good life as dependent on external goods, arguing instead in favour of a conception of the good life as free from all material considerations along with a shift of focus from the importance of this life to the importance of the after-life, however all this is beside the point for the purposes of our discussion. For the purposes of discussing magnificence it is clear that the charge of elitism is *partly* unjustified. In order to judge a particular wealth allocation as elitist one would have to argue the merits of the distributive system that led to it; this is not the mandate of the virtue of magnificence.

The second clarificatory point about magnificence as a virtue is that it is concerned with wealth spending, and wealth is the kind of thing that can be put to good or bad uses. The virtue here is to know what is a good use for wealth, when to give, who to give to and how much it is appropriate to give in each situation.¹⁵ Given this “[t]here is nothing in the principles which found Aristotle's ethics to prevent one from acquiring and keeping wealth *provided it is put in service of*

¹⁰ See Aristotle, *The Politics*, Sinclair T.A. (trans), 1992, London: Penguin Books, 1253b 23-24.

¹¹ See *Politics*, 1257b 17ff.

¹² See *Politics*, 1257b 27ff.

¹³ See *Politics*, 1258a 12-13.

¹⁴ See NE 1155a 11.

¹⁵ Aristotle makes these points in NE 1120a 4ff with respect to liberality but they apply equally to magnificence.

higher goods".¹⁶ The art of wealth management is in spending money wisely and this informs the acquisition of wealth, because wealth should be acquired to the extent to which it needs to be spent.¹⁷ This leads Aristotle to conclude that household management and statesmanship are the arts of *distributing* goods not of *acquiring* them, because while acquisition is part of household management it must be informed by the appropriate targets for spending money.¹⁸ Acquisition is conditional on what money needs to be spent on, rather than on the accumulation of money as such, so distribution needs shape acquisition requirements.

3 Magnificence and the Noble and the Good

The third clarificatory point applies to all virtues; all virtuous activity is targeted towards the noble and the good, and the same is true of magnificence. The Doctrine of the Mean makes this point on behalf of all the virtues, namely: virtue is not just action, it is appropriate, targeted action, and the two vices associated with each virtue are either excessive or deficient with respect to what is appropriate. In the case of magnificence while there is an element of large scale expenditure, the greatness of the expenditure comes essentially from the object it is targeted at rather than the amount of money as such.¹⁹ Greatness in expenditure differs from greatness in effect and magnificence requires both great expenditure and great effect:

And since the greatness of any expenditure depends upon the kind of object for which it was incurred; and while the most magnificent expenditure generally is that which is great and applied to a great object, in each given case it is that which is great relatively to that case; and the greatness in the effect produced is different from greatness in the expenditure (because a really fine ball or cup is magnificent as a present for a child, although its value is slight and unworthy of a liberal person): it is therefore the mark of the magnificent man, whatever kind of result he is producing to produce it magnificently (because such a result is not easily surpassed), and to make it worth of what he spent on it.²⁰

¹⁶ Hadreas P., "Aristotle on the vices and virtue of wealth", *Journal of Business Ethics*, 39, 2002: 371.

¹⁷ See Hare J., "Elephtheriotes in Aristotle's ethics", *Ancient Philosophy*, 8, 1988: p. 21.

¹⁸ See *Politics*, 1258a 19ff.

¹⁹ See NE 1123a 10-19.

²⁰ NE 1123a 11ff. Some commentators point to this example of a gift to a child which is not expensive but still has a great effect as an example that magnificence need not necessarily involve large sums of money (see Pakaluk M., 2002, "On an alleged contradiction in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*", *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 2022, 2002: pp. 208–289 and Young op. cit., p. 317). However I don't think this is the correct interpretation of this passage. This is not an example of magnificence with small expenditure, rather an example of how in some general cases greatness in expenditure differs from greatness in effect. A problematic case with respect to magnificence would be one where the expenditure was great but the effect small, presumably the vice of tastelessness.

This point is also evident in the discussion of the two vices associated with magnificence: the tasteless man may well be spending a lot of money but he will be doing so towards the wrong things, he is excessive in how he uses his wealth, spending more than is appropriate for the target and aiming to show off his wealth.²¹ The petty man may also spend a lot of money but still fall short of what is appropriate through miserly feeling, so that what he does is spoilt by the details of how he does it.²² A virtuous act should be pleasant, neither boastful nor painful and the same is true of virtuous acts involving the spending of money.²³ Rather fetchingly Aristotle describes the magnificent man as a sort of artist, a connoisseur of what is fitting and in good taste.²⁴

The appropriateness of spending of wealth is coloured by the appropriateness of its target:

...every item in a person's hierarchy of choices takes its value from the highest point in the hierarchy. Thus, if in one person's system virtue is for the sake of wealth, virtue is only a useful good, not a noble one, because wealth is something merely useful. If, in another person's value system, wealth is for the sake of virtue, then wealth too acquires the nobility which virtue has.²⁵

The same point has been made with respect to other virtues. The person who puts his fearlessness to evil ends has only a superficial resemblance to the virtue of courage. Courage as a virtue must be targeted towards the noble, as the virtue of courage is the appropriate amount of fear displayed in the right situation and towards the right end, not an appropriate amount of fear displayed in any kind of situation and towards any kind of end indiscriminately. And even though magnificence is concerned with the spending of large amounts of money there is still an upper limit on the wealth appropriate to this virtue; the upper limit is set by what is necessary to share in the activities of human excellence, that is, the spending of the wealth is determined by the requirements of virtue.²⁶

The following quote by Aristotle captures all the points we have made so far:

...it is not by means of external goods that men acquire and keep the virtues, but the other way round; and to live happily, whether men suppose it to consist in enjoyment or in virtue or in both, does in fact accrue more to those who are outstandingly well-equipped in character and intellect, and only moderately so in the possession of externally acquired goods – more, that is, than to those who have more goods than they need but are deficient in the other qualities...External goods, being like a collection of tools each useful for some purpose, have a limit: one can have too many of them, and that is bound to be of no benefit, or even a positive injury, to their possessors. It is quite

²¹ See NE 1123a 20-26.

²² See NE 1123a 26-34.

²³ See NE 1120a 24-27.

²⁴ See NE 1122a 39-b 1.

²⁵ Kenny A., *Aristotle on the Perfect Life*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992, p. 15.

²⁶ See *Politics*, 1323b 10.

otherwise with the goods of the soul: the more there is of each the more useful each will be (if indeed one ought to apply to these the term 'useful', as well as 'admirable')...Hence as the soul is a more previous thing (both absolutely and relatively to ourselves) than both property and the body, its best condition too will necessarily show a proportionate relationship to that of each of the others [externally acquired goods]. Moreover, it is for the sake of our souls that these things are to be desired, and all right-minded persons ought to desire them; it would be wrong to reverse this priority.²⁷

This understanding of the virtue of magnificence allows us to cast light on the role of the magnificent person as a philanthropist. Large expenditures to the right causes, at the right time, for the right recipients and with the right feeling are the expression of the virtue of magnificence, and large wealth is one of the resources that facilitates participation in the actions that virtue calls for. Swanson summarizes a number of reasons the liberal may have for giving his wealth to others according to Aristotle and the same could be applied to the magnificent:

- poverty causes crime, civil conflict and revolution which affects the cooperation of others needed to acquire wealth;
- wanting to lead a reasoned life requires other reasonable human beings, so by giving away wealth we help others live more virtuously;
- moderation is a good attitude when faced with an abundance of wealth;
- too much wealth leads to too great a burden to safeguard and manage it;
- there is a pleasure in giving which generates feelings of friendship.²⁸

However, the most important point is that at the heart of magnificence is the recognition of the need to give wealth to support the public good. It is evident from Aristotle's examples of magnificent support of liturgies that the object of the virtue is the support of activities that have been identified as necessary for the orderly running of the state.

4 The Objections Revisited

We will now return to the objections raised at the start of the paper and see how this understanding of magnificence as a virtue can counter them.

Ward (2011) presents a version of the third objection, he argues that:

- firstly, the object of magnificence is the noble, not the true benefit of the recipient so it's contrary to benevolence and misunderstands the point of giving to benefit others; and,
- secondly, the object of the magnificent is to have his own greatness acknowledged by others so he's self-centred and not truly altruistic in giving.

²⁷ NE 1323a 40ff.

²⁸ Swanson J.A., "Aristotle on liberality", *Polity*, 27(1): 3–23, 1994, pp. 7–8.

We will consider these two versions of the third objection first.

The object of all the virtues is the noble and the good; which is the final end and that for which all else is done. That doesn't mean, however, that the magnificent man's giving has a target other than the benefit of the receiver. The noble and the good is what is appropriate as determined by the right reason and the right desire, and differs according to the particular circumstances of the situation. What is appropriate when kindness is required is whatever is the kind response in that particular situation, carried out with kind feelings and the kind person's reason for behaving in this way is that this is the kind thing to do. Acting for the sake of the noble and the good is having a particular sensitivity to the moral demands of a situation, so that when the situation demands a kind response, one is kind. The virtue of magnificence is the benevolent giving of money in cases where monetary support is required by the particulars of the situation. If the situation requires that one acts for the benefit of the participant, the virtuous response is to do so.

The magnificent man should act for three purposes: he should act for the sake of the recipient of his wealth, he should act for the sake of the action because good actions are an end in themselves, and he should act for the sake of the noble. However these purposes are not competing but complementary accounts of what it means to act virtuously. Acting for the sake of the noble is acting because one recognises the moral character of the act in question and is perfectly compatible with acting to benefit others.²⁹

Ward is also concerned that:

The magnificent person, therefore, spends large sums on public goods in the noblest way possible because he is concerned with his own greatness and nobility, and wants this to be reflected in and recognized by his own community. That magnificence is contained not simply within the action and its product but is intended to be reflected in the person performing the action, leads Aristotle to claim that magnificence is suited 'to those who are wellborn, of good repute...for all these things possess greatness and worthiness' (NE 1122b31-32)...Moreover, these wealthy private individuals would be acting not primarily to benefit the citizenry, but to benefit themselves by achieving and making manifest their own greatness and superiority to that community.³⁰

The magnificent person may act in order to benefit others and at the same time for the sake of the noble, but that does not mean he is acting out of concern for his own nobility. He is not acting so as to *appear* noble, he is so acting because he *is* noble. Furthermore, a natural consequence of being noble is that one's nobility is recognised by others and a proper appreciation of one's worth requires that one is aware of one's nobility and the admiration that is due to one because of it – none of which implies though that the virtuous person's motivation is to promote herself, that would be inconsistent with acting for the sake of the noble.

²⁹ These points are made on behalf of virtue ethics with much greater detail and degree of persuasion by authors such as McDowell, J., "Virtue and reason", *The Monist*, 62(3), 1979, pp. 331–350 and Korsgaard C., "From duty and for the sake of the noble", in Engstrom S. and Whiting J., *Aristotle, Kant and the Stoics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

³⁰ Ward, "Generosity and inequality in Aristotle's ethics", *Polis*, 28(2), 2011, p. 275.

The Aristotelian passage Ward partly quotes above should be looked at in full to properly understand its meaning:

But in every case (as we have said) the expenditure is related to the position and resources of the agent; because it must be worthy of these, and appropriate not only to the result produced but also to the man who produces it. Hence a poor man cannot be magnificent, because he has not the means to meet heavy expenses suitably; and anyone who attempts to do so is foolish, because he is spending more than is due and right, and to be virtuous an act must be done in the correct way. But such expenditure benefits those who have appropriate resources, acquired either by themselves or from ancestors or connections, and persons of noble birth or great reputation or other such qualities, because these all involve grandeur and distinction.³¹

Aristotle is not critical of those whose position and resources preclude them from magnificent actions, there is no cause for moral blame here. He is critical of those whose expenditure exceeds their position as that is inappropriate action, action that does not proceed from or reflect the particulars of the situation as relative to the agent. The prodigal is not criticised for his lack of wealth, he is criticised for spending more than he acquires; for spending more than the situation, relative to his circumstances, demands of him. For Aristotle the availability or not of external goods is a matter of good or bad fortune, no man can be fully eudaimon without the goods that support virtue, but the presence of these goods is not under our control nor something that we can be praised or blamed for. Equally virtue is different from good fortune in acquiring material goods, one is not just or temperate as a result of fortune, but as a result of effort.³² The existence of the wealth may be a matter of good fortune, but the exercise of the virtue of magnificence is not.

Ward also presents a version of the fourth objection, that is, that the spending of large wealth captures the political process and subverts it from the hands of the many to the hands of the few. For Ward magnificence requires a “capture of the community in private hands...[which] could reduce the city, ‘a political partnership’, to a private partnership similar to the family”.³³ Magnificence would make the state dependent on a few wealthy individuals for basic goods and services, while the magnificent few would take on the role of a parent, making decisions on behalf of other citizens not as equals but as dependent children. Part of this concern is not merely the financial dependence of the many to the few but the motives of the magnificent which Ward feels are suspect as they are more concerned with the city as a “platform to reveal their greatness” than a political partnership.³⁴

Clearly, in one respect, such concerns are justified. Great wealth may give unscrupulous individuals the means to control others and subvert the political process, but whether they do so or not will depend on the motives of the individual. The magnificent displays a virtue in his actions, his reasoning is informed by the

³¹ NE 1122b 23ff.

³² See *Politics*, 1323b 5-8.

³³ Ward, 2011, op. cit., p. 275.

³⁴ Ward, 2011, op. cit., p. 276.

noble and the good, that is the end for which all else is done, and using wealth to control others is incompatible with magnificence *as a virtue*. Wealth may be misused, Aristotle clearly accepts that possibility and sets out how we should understand the misuse and proper use of wealth as we saw above. Similarly as we saw with the virtue of courage proper and the display of distorted courage, magnificence may also be distorted, so the use of wealth to hijack the political process is a distortion of magnificence and not the virtue itself.

Aristotle dismisses the idea that either the mass of people or the rich or one man should rule over all.³⁵ In the ideal state, the state whose virtue mirrors that of individual virtue, correctly established laws are sovereign. It is this conception of laws in light of the noble and the good that determines the needs of the state and it is these appropriate needs that the magnificent man seeks to fulfil with his liturgies. “In the state, the good aimed at is justice; and that means what is for the benefit of the whole community”³⁶ – this conception of the state will inform the magnificent man’s choices for he is motivated to give to what is appropriate, not what will be self-serving. In a parallel argument to the one about the relationship between external goods and virtue, Aristotle argues that the wealthy are necessary for a state but they do not constitute an ideal state:

Hence those of noble birth or who are free or have wealth are quite right to lay claim to honours, since the members of the state must be free and must have taxable property (you could no more make a state out of paupers than out of slaves). But obviously something more is needed besides: I mean justice, and the virtue that is proper to citizens. For without these additions it is not possible for the state to be managed. More exactly, whereas without free population and wealth there cannot be a state at all, without justice and virtue it cannot be managed well.³⁷

According to Aristotle the requirement for citizenship is the participation in ruling and being ruled – not wealth – and the best state is the one where those who chose to rule and be ruled do so in accordance with virtue.³⁸ This conception of the citizen, the participation in the ruling process, is common to them all, but in the same way that all sailors can be described as being part of the ship’s crew while also being correctly described in having particular roles as rower, helmsman and look-out, citizens may also be described with consistency as having particular roles.³⁹ And the particular role of the rich is to give large amounts of wealth in appropriate ways, which is entirely compatible with the wider role of all citizens, i.e. to rule and to be ruled.

Finally the motivation of the magnanimous man can and should include benevolent feelings towards others. All the activities that are involved in the civilized pursuits of a life lived together, all the connections that take place between

³⁵ See *Politics*, 1281a.

³⁶ *Politics*, 1282b 16-17.

³⁷ *Politics*, 1283a 16ff.

³⁸ See *Politics*, 1283b 39ff.

³⁹ See *Politics*, 1276b 20ff.

citizens, are the product of feelings of affection, the affection for others that leads us to live together. The object of this affection is to enable others to live well, to live the best life for a human being, the eudaimon life.⁴⁰ This type of benevolence though is not a blanket entitlement to assistance, it is a targeted response to specific needs, needs which are understood within the framework of the noble and the good. So Aristotle does have an interesting and vibrant understanding of benevolence, but it has to be understood within his wider conception of the eudaimon life and the pursuit of the noble and the good for its own sake. Far from lacking feelings for one's fellow man, Aristotle saw the desire to give as arising from the needs of others, but appropriately, rather than blindly, targeted. He also saw the entire enterprise of giving as part of his conception of one's proper role in relation to the people we live with. Magnificence is a part of what it is to be wealthy, so giving and caring for others is a part of what it is to be wealthy; all understood within a conception of wealth as measured by the uses we put it to, not by its mere acquisition.

We have now responded to the third and fourth objections. The Aristotelian conception of magnificence does not glorify wealth for its own sake nor wealth acquisition; it is not incompatible with humility, nor contrary to beneficence, nor is the magnificent man aiming to subvert the political process for his own gain. We now need to address the first two objections, namely that magnificence is an elitist virtue of the few and subject to the vagaries of fate rather than under our control.

5 Understanding the Importance of Context

It seems that even Aristotelians may have qualms about magnificence as it is perceived as a marginal virtue not merely by its detractors but also by the proponents of virtue theory. Commentators see it as marginal to Aristotle's list of virtues, and in addition they see it as a partial exception to many of the ways we should understand the virtues in general.⁴¹ For example, Cooper, while discussing the importance of external goods and the context within which virtues are exercised, points to a significant feature of the virtues:

...each of them equips a person to deal effectively, correctly, and with discrimination and moral sensitivity, with a very wide variety of circumstances and conditions of life. The temperate person knows the proper value to place on food, drink, and sex and the associated pleasure, in comparison with other values. This means that whatever circumstances he finds himself in (whether in conditions of plenty or of deprivation, whether by spending time eating and drinking he will or won't affect significantly other things he values) he will act temperately so far as the use of food and drink go. And likewise for courage, and justice, and good temper, and liberality, and most of the rest (it is true that certain virtues on Aristotle's list, most notably the virtue of

⁴⁰ See *Politics*, 1280b 29ff.

⁴¹ See Hadreas op. cit., p. 369.

magnificence are less broadly based – but the essential point is little affected by such partial exceptions).⁴²

However, magnificence in such an account is not a partial exception, it is a complete exception, an anomaly that commentators gloss over rather than come to terms with. I think that Cooper is right in identifying two ways in which context is crucial to the virtues; the virtues are sensitive responses to particular contexts and Aristotle's conception of virtue involves making the best of the circumstances one finds oneself in. However there is even more to the relationship between virtue and context than Cooper makes out and this is shown by the case of magnificence. Magnificence illustrates a deeper claim about the relationship between virtues and context, namely that some virtues are completely dependent on circumstances. Magnificence can only be understood within a world containing wealthy and poor people and only when questioning the appropriate role for rich people within such a world.

To see why this is we need to go back to Aristotle's conception of the state. The state may serve many functions such as preventing its members from committing injustices against each other, or promoting trade, however none of these features are fundamental. The state is a state by virtue of being "an association intended to enable its members, in their households and the kinships, to live *well*; its purpose is a perfect and self-sufficient life".⁴³ The magnificent man's role is understood within such a state, a collection of individuals whose aim is to live a eudaimon life, one illuminated by the noble and the good, and what reason dictates as magnificent in each situation is informed not only by the needs of the recipient but also by the suitability of the agent. Aristotle gives us the example of Themistocles' mission to Olympia which was judged unfitting for him due to his low station, but which would have been fitting for someone of higher station such as Cimon.⁴⁴ Cimon was a member of the influential Philiad clan, contributing both to athletic and military achievements, while Themistocles had been disinherited by his father for living recklessly and squandering the family estate – grave ills within Aristotle's conception of the duties of the household manager. So it's not just a case of giving large amounts of wealth, or giving them to the right causes, but also magnificence as a virtue originates from the right person.

One might be concerned though that this full picture of magnificence as a virtue looks even more elitist than ever before. For now we should place emphasis on the right person who is the only one who can be magnificent, but surely this excludes everyone else. However, whether this exclusion of everyone else from magnificence is problematic or not depends on our understanding of the right person. Liddel mentions the example of Demosthenes' appeal to an Athenian jury to recover his property. Demosthenes argues that if the jury chooses to return his property to him,

⁴² Cooper J.M., 1999, *Reason and Emotion: essays on ancient moral psychology and ethical theory*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999, p. 303.

⁴³ *Politics*, 1280b 30-31.

⁴⁴ Aristotle, *Eudaimian Ethics*, Rackham H., (trans), 1996, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1233b 8-14.

his proper sense of gratitude will lead him to undertake public services, unlike his opponent who intends to do nothing of the kind. Liddel concludes that:

[t]he success of Demosthenes' plea relies upon the audience's reception of the claim that he will be inspired to perform liturgies through a sense of reciprocity, and in this he captures the essence of many of the accounts of financial obligations that are encountered in Attic oratory.⁴⁵

Liddel argues that the original meaning of the term 'liturgy' referred to a financial expenditure of the citizen on behalf of the state, its metaphorical use referred to the wider idea of contributing something to the state performed in response to a largely moral feeling of obligation.⁴⁶ We can extrapolate from this to conclude that the right person from whom magnificence as a virtue should originate in is he who has the appropriate conception of his obligations towards the state and spends his wealth in light of this conception.

Only some people then will be the right people, in the right circumstances, able to make the right expenditure for magnificence. Is this problematic? On the one hand, if it is problematic, it is problematic for the whole of Aristotelian theory, as in times of privation, temperance may be impossible; in times of calm, uneventful, lucky circumstances, courage may be impossible; in times of plenty, charity may be impossible and so on. I cannot address this point fully here, but my feeling is that this is not a problem for Aristotelian theory as the theory does not present a list of exhaustive virtues everyone must possess in order to live a eudaimon life, but rather a list of indicative virtues, suited to particular circumstances that meet individual instantiations of the eudaimon life. What is certain is that to be the right person, at the right time, with the right means to meet the right need and to *not* share one's wealth is *not* virtuous.

6 Magnificence in a Modern Context

We can now apply this conception of magnificence as a virtue to modern contexts. Does magnificence have any relevance for us today? It is indisputable that we live in a world with extreme differences in wealth and highly probable that at least some of these differences are due to inequalities incompatible with justice. Considering the sources of one's wealth and what justice may demand in terms of global wealth redistribution are very interesting questions, and perhaps questions to which the Aristotelian theory of justice can help us give some answers to, however, as we have seen they are not relevant to magnificence. Magnificence becomes relevant if we assume that at least some people have acquired their wealth legitimately and, given this assumption, the virtue allows us to understand the obligations of *these* people with respect to spending their wealth. In this sense, it is a very relevant virtue for present times. Admittedly there can't be many magnificent men, but as we have seen this is not a moral problem. Being poor is a misfortune, not a vice, being

⁴⁵ Liddel, op. cit., p. 263.

⁴⁶ See Liddel, op. cit., p. 263.

wealthy is an opportunity to exercise the virtue of magnificence, not a virtue in itself. The important requirement is to respond with magnificence when magnificence is demanded by the context, not to expect magnificence from anyone, at any time. Furthermore the acquisition of wealth is not something to be pursued for its own sake, but is determined by its use, appropriate uses being household management and spending to benefit the state. Should wealth accrue to us accidentally, either through inheritance, or a financial windfall, or whatever other means, this is not a source of pride or distinction in itself, but merely an opportunity for the exercise of magnificence.

Magnificence is a central virtue for Aristotle, and this is consistent with it being a virtue that can only be exercised by the few. The reason for its central importance is that it is an expression of a citizen's obligations to others within a state. The state is conceived as a collection of individuals leading eudaimon lives and one's obligations towards the state are informed by the noble and the good. Magnificence informs us about the obligations of the rich to spend their wealth within a view of themselves as citizens of a state whose collective aim is for everyone to live well and whose appropriate targets are the noble and the good. One's status as a magnificent person is not purely about the level of one's wealth but about the appropriate conception of oneself as part of a wider community.

The shape of these obligations in particular circumstances will be determined by the context. For example, the support of artistic and educational causes seems to be in common between Aristotle's *choregia* and the needs of modern states. The Aristotelian *trierarchia* maintenance duties seem redundant nowadays, however combating global poverty or supporting environmental causes are much more relevant to modern needs. We are not looking to replicate Aristotle's examples, but to follow his advice that the targets of the virtue are shaped by what is appropriate given the circumstances. The targets of our giving should reflect the circumstances and needs of the world around us.

All of which deliberations suggest that perhaps magnificence had a larger and more central role to play in Aristotle's theory than modern commentators assume, and perhaps it should be accorded a similar importance in modern contexts as it sheds light on the particular role rich people have to play in our society.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ I am grateful to Richard Hamilton, Jonathan Webber and an anonymous referee for very useful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.