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HONOR, ANGER, AND BELITTLEMENT IN ARISTOTLE'S ETHICS

Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, as well as his other ethical writings, offer both a phenomenology and an ontology of human moral action. In these writings Aristotle shows us how ethical phenomena present themselves in our experience of human conduct, but he also shows how these various ethical dispositions and performances activate the human being. The *Nicomachean Ethics* does not simply provide moral guidelines; it is also a philosophical anthropology. It shows what we are as human beings, and how we are at our best and worst. We cannot understand what we are as human beings unless we also appreciate how we should and should not be: that is, how we succeed or fail as human beings, or how we achieve or fail to achieve happiness. Our *eidōs* and *telos* are inseparable. We cannot understand the one without understanding the other. Our form as human beings is simply the potential for our end or *telos* and it is not intelligible apart from it.

One way of commenting on the *Ethics* is to examine the large-scale categories of human conduct, such as virtue, vice, pleasure, pain, and happiness. Another is to delve into the fine grain of ethical phenomena. This second approach has much to recommend it, and it will be followed in this essay. The small scale of things is often the more realistic because it is more concrete and hence more verifiable. If we get down to very detailed phenomena, we can be more easily convinced that what we are talking about is truly there. For example, in *Nicomachean Ethics* VII, 7, Aristotle discusses various kinds of what is often called incontinence or lack of self-restraint (*akrasia*). The topic of incontinence has been extensively discussed in recent decades of scholarly writing on Aristotle's ethics and in moral philosophy generally. The incontinent agent is the one who reasons

correctly in regard to ethical issues but is not able to resist his emotions and desires. Consequently, he does what he does not really want to do. He thinks and even knows he should not do something and yet, in the presence of the thing, he does it anyway. His moral reason is overcome by his desires or aversions.

But Aristotle does not stop with this rather general description. He fine-tunes his analysis of incontinence. At the end of chapter 7 (1150b19–28) he divides incontinence into two kinds: weakness (*astheneia*) and impetuosity (*propeteia*). The weak are people who carry out practical thinking and come to a decision, but their reason is so feeble or “sickly” that it is not able to withstand the force of their emotions. They do exercise their reason, they think, know, and deliberate, and may even come to a conclusion; but they cannot hold their ground when their emotions kick in. The impetuous, in contrast, suffer from a deficiency in their moral reasoning itself. Their problem is not that their moral thinking gives way after arriving at a decision; rather, their reason is inconclusive or even fails to get started. Aristotle brings out the phenomenon of impetuosity by further distinguishing it into two subcategories, the keen (*hoi oxeis*) and the excitable (*hoi melancholikai*). Keen people think too much and they think too quickly; their reason is flighty; it flutters around, going here and there, making too many distinctions; it’s too smart for its own good (“Maybe I’ll do this; no, I’ll do that; no, wait a minute, maybe this other thing; etc. etc. etc.”). Finally, emotion just takes over and the person behaves incontinently. The excitable, in contrast, do not think at all; their emotion is so strong and fast—it is choleric, explosive—that in a practical situation it surges up before they begin to deliberate. Their reason is overcome before it gets started. In both cases reason is not so much conquered as pre-empted.

Aristotle, therefore, does not just define incontinence and leave it at that; he divides and subdivides it, and these analytical descriptions serve to verify his theorizing of moral action. He gets down to particular kinds of people that we can easily recognize in our own experience of moral agents and that we can contrast with other kinds. The detail of his distinctions guarantees the truth of what he says. The very fact that he can make these distinctions and subdistinctions shows that what he is talking about is real.

Honor and Human Happiness

I wish to consider the phenomenon of honor (*timē*) in this manner: to examine Aristotle's description of it and its role in ethical and political life, and to appreciate what he has to say about it. The study of honor will be our major concern in this essay, but it leads naturally to two related phenomena, anger (*orgē*) and belittlement or contempt (*oligōria*). Examining them will help us define honor more precisely.

Honor appears early in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Aristotle begins the work by reminding us that all human actions and activities are geared toward some good. Most of the good things we act for are in turn ordered to other goods, but by the logic of goods there must be some end (*telos*) that does not point beyond itself toward yet a further good. There must be something for which all actions are done, something we are looking for in everything that we do. Nothing would be good if there were not an anchor for all the derivative goods. What could this be? Since it is the most comprehensive human good, it will be sought in the most comprehensive human community and by the most comprehensive human knowledge and art, which, he says, is the political. These thoughts about goods and ends are expressed in chapters 1 and 2 of book I, which are followed by a chapter on the precision we can expect in moral thinking and the need for experience if we are to engage in it.

In chapter 4 he returns to the question of the good. He says that most people agree about the name of this good beyond which there is no other (*onomati men oun schedon hupo tōn pleistōn homologeitai*): both “the many” (*hoi polloi*) and “the better people” (*hoi charientes*) call it *eudaimonia* or happiness (1095a17–19). The fact that there is a name used by practically everyone to designate this good is important. It shows that somehow almost everyone has a sense that there is a point to life; they even use the same word for it. The linguistic fact has an anthropological significance; it is not trivial that there is a name for what everyone is ultimately looking for. Aristotle says, however, that although most people agree on the name, and even agree on a verbal definition—they take it to mean “to live well and to do well (*to d' eu zēn kai to eu prattein*)”—they disagree on what *eudaimonia* is (*peri de tēs eudaimonias ti esti amphibētousi*).

The contrast between agreement on the name and its verbal definition and disagreement on what the named thing is deserves consideration. People in general use a name in common to designate what life is all about, and they can even agree on an abstract paraphrase of what they mean by it;

but what they concretely take it to be differs. Words should adhere to what they name, but in this instance the name and the thing fall apart. Aristotle immediately goes on to spell out this difference in understanding by distinguishing two groups of human beings: “the many” (*hoi polloi*) do not give the same account as “the wise” (*hoi sophoi*). The many, he says, take the good to be something that is obvious and easy to see, something tangible right in front of us, such as pleasure or wealth or honor (*hēdonēn hē plouton hē timēn*). These people will often marvel when they are told about “something big” (*mega ti*) and “beyond them” (*kai hyper autous*), precisely because their own tangible candidates for the substance of the happy life—pleasure, wealth, honor—are so variable, multiple, and unreliable: we want health when we are sick and wealth when we are poor. The others, “the wise,” in contrast, take it to be something else; in fact, he says that these people speak about a good that is somehow beyond the many goods that we can easily identify (*para ta polla tauta agatha*); they say it is simply good in itself (*allo ti kath’ hauto*) and the cause of all the diverse goods.

This passage in chapter 4 contains the first mention of honor in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Honor is introduced, along with pleasure and wealth, as one of the obvious candidates that people propose as the substance of human happiness. At this point Aristotle does not define what he means by honor; he assumes that we have an idea of what it is from our normal experience of life. He will define it, not in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, but in the *Rhetoric*. The *Ethics* remains with ordinary language and its understandings.

In the next chapter of the *Ethics*, chapter 5, he says that “the many” generally choose to live a life like that of cattle.¹ However, a certain kind of people—those who are gentlemen and who are active, that is, those who get important things done (*hoi de charientes kai praktikoi*)—choose honor, and, he says, honor is pretty much the *telos* of political life, the life that is led in the most comprehensive human community. For political actors,

¹ The relationships in the text between “the many” (*hoi polloi*) and “the better people” (*hoi charientes*) are confusing. In chapter 4 the many are first distinguished from the better people, and Aristotle says that both groups use the word *eudaimonia* to name the final good, and that both define it as living well and doing well. But then he distinguishes the many from the wise, and says that the many place happiness in obvious things such as pleasure, wealth, and honor. Thus, when Aristotle mentions honor for the first time, he does so while saying that it is the many who consider it as a final good (he does not mention the better people here). In chapter 5, however, he says that in general the many live for vulgar and bodily pleasures, while the better and active people seek honor.

honor seems to be the good beyond which nothing better or greater can be wished for. This brief introduction of honor as the terminal human good is, however, followed by a quick and elegant refutation of that opinion. Aristotle criticizes the understanding that the better and active people have, and in a few concise sentences he undermines honor as the final human good. He does not do his to disparage honor; he just shows, by the simple logic of the thing, that there must be something better. He unfolds the way honor is, the properties that it has, and thereby shows that it cannot be the good beyond which there is no other. He sharpens ordinary language and the opinions embedded in it.

He gives two reasons why honor cannot be the ultimate human good. First, honor depends on other people, and therefore it is not truly our own; it exists more in those who honor and not in those who are honored. Certainly our greatest good should be something that is our very own (*oikeion ti*) and not easily taken away. If it depends on others it could hardly be the thing that makes us happy. We would be held hostage by others and their changing opinions. Second, people seem to seek honor (*eoikasi tēn timēn diōkein*) so that they can believe that they are good (*hina pisteusōsin heautous agathous einai*). The honor reassures them that they are indeed good (hence that their lives are worth while and that they have achieved happiness). We might say that the bestowal of an honor on someone allows him to construct a syllogism that demonstrates even to himself his goodness and success in life: if we are being honored, we must be good. We seem to need the approval of others to prove to ourselves that we are happy; we do not seem able to know this through our own evidencing.

For this reason, Aristotle says, we seek to be honored (a) by those who have practical wisdom (*hupo tōn phronimōn*), (b) in the presence of those by whom we are known (*par' hois ginōskontai*), and (c) on the basis of our virtue (*kai ep' aretēi*). The triplet in this sentence is exquisitely concise and leads to a climax. Even the three prepositions build tension in the sentence: *hupo, para, epi*: by, before, upon. Honor depends on others, but not on any others. Serious honor—as opposed to celebrity—must come from those who have moral intelligence. Next, the honor is given to us in the presence of people by whom we are known, people who can recognize and applaud the honor. It is not bestowed in solitude or before strangers; who would want to be honored in the presence of people who do not know him? And finally honor is appropriate only if we truly have the virtue that is being recognized; otherwise we would be frauds and shamed rather than

honored.² Honor is, therefore, essentially directed beyond itself toward an excellence that calls forth the honor. Aristotle said that we seek honor so that we can believe that we are good; this very need for assurance shows that we already know implicitly that our virtue is a greater good than the honor itself. This analysis of the properties of honor—the predicates that belong essentially to it but not as its definition—is both metaphysical and phenomenological. Honor is the acknowledgment of virtue and it would not exist without it, and so, consequently, virtue is a greater good than honor, that on which honor depends. Honor depends both on other people and on our own virtue. It is penultimate and not ultimate.

We should observe that in Aristotle's analysis virtue becomes a candidate for being the final good, not by itself, but only through honor. Virtue is not one of the standard things that people propose as the substance of happiness; Aristotle brings virtue into his argument, not on the basis of pleasure or wealth, the other two things that people spontaneously recognize, but through honor, the third thing they acknowledge and the most noble of the three. We might have thought that virtue could have been mentioned in the original list of obvious goods—pleasure, wealth, honor, and virtue—but it was not. It came into view only by contrast with honor, not by its own evidence. The very non-finality of honor allows virtue to emerge as that which enables honor to be good.

Therefore, Aristotle says, virtue seems to be the telos of political life and not honor. But even virtue seems incomplete, because it needs to be exercised and we may lack the opportunity, and it may be accompanied by great misfortunes and suffering. He then alludes cryptically to the theoretic life and says he will consider it later. He concludes the chapter by turning to the life dedicated to wealth and says that it could not be the happy life; wealth is not the good that we are looking for (*to zētoumenon agathon*) because it obviously is for the sake of something else. The point does not need an argument, as honor did. He says finally that the other things we just spoke about—honor and virtue, presumably, and perhaps pleasure—seem rather to be the ends of human life in contrast with wealth, because they are in fact loved for themselves whereas wealth obviously is not. But even they seem insufficient. The question about the final human good is

² Honor is given by people who have moral intelligence (*phronimoi*) but celebrity can be bestowed by people who have perverse reasons to make us famous. Honor is given in the presence of people who know us but celebrity wants to be recognized by everyone and anyone, anywhere. And honor is an acknowledgment of virtue whereas celebrity is an empty suit, a fabricated appearance with no substance inside.

left dangling in book I. In this book Aristotle simply raises questions that will be dealt with in the rest of the work.

The Definition of Honor

In *NE* I, 5, Aristotle describes some of the properties of honor but he does not yet define it. The definition is given in book I chapter 5 of the *Rhetoric*. What is the context for it? Aristotle understands rhetoric as skill in using the available means of persuasion. He distinguishes three kinds of rhetoric: the political, which deals with deliberation about what is to be done; the forensic or legal, which deals with judgments about things that have been done; and the epideictic or ceremonial, which deals with praising and censuring persons and events. Political rhetoric deals with the future, forensic with the past, and epideictic with the present.

Aristotle presents his definition of honor during his treatment of political rhetoric. He says that political rhetoric deals with things that are to be done, and the speaker or rhetor must know how to address an assembly as it deliberates about what to do then and there, in the situation in which the community finds itself. To do this effectively, the speaker must show that he understands human goods in general. To help him acquire such knowledge, Aristotle restates his claim about happiness as the good that everyone is seeking, and he lists fourteen or fifteen component parts (*merē*) of happiness (1360b19–24), things such as good birth, many friends, good friends, wealth, good children, many children, old age, and the like. The final three in the list of components are honor, good luck (*eutuchia*), and virtue. Again, virtue has the dignity of coming last, beyond honor, but the presence of good luck between them is noteworthy. Aristotle then goes on to discuss each of these components. When he reaches honor (1361a27–28), which comes right after good reputation (*eudoxia*), he gives his definition. He says, “Honor is a sign (*timē d’ esti men sēmeion*) of fame for great service (*euergetikēs doxēs*).” It is a sign that people believe that you have done something important and beneficent. It is not just a sign that you have in fact done something good; it is, rather, a sign that you are known and famed for having done the good and great deed: the word *doxa* has the sense of public manifestation and reputation, the sense of glory. If people honor you, they do something that indicates that they recognize that you have done great service. There is, therefore, a double intentionality in this definition. The first intentionality is located in the sign that is performed, the *sēmeion*: the sign indicates the opinion people have of you. The second

intentionality is in the *doxa* itself, which is directed toward what you have done.

Aristotle goes on to say that usually and most justly honor is given to people who have already done their noble service (*hoi euergetēkotes*), but it is sometimes given on the basis of the potential of doing good in the future (*kai ho dunamenos euergetein*). In the latter case, a man would be honored because of what he seems capable of doing when he is appointed to do it. To illustrate these two cases, we might think, first, of a retirement banquet when a person concludes a career in a position of responsibility and everyone agrees that he has done a good job; and, second, a banquet held when a talented and respected person is newly appointed to an office and people expect him to do well. Both the *energeia* and the *dunamis* are recognized and honored.

Aristotle lists some of the achievements for which people are honored. He mentions first of all things “related to protection (*eis sōtērian*),” especially preservation of the very existence (*hosa aitia tou einai*) of those bestowing the honor; this would certainly include heroism or success in defense of a community. He also lists some components (*merē*) of honor (1361a34), the kinds of signs that serve to honor someone: religious sacrifices, written memorials in poetry or prose, privileges, pieces of land, front seats, public burial, statues, and public support. He says that among the barbarians prostrations (*proskunēseis*) and standing aside (*ekstasis*) are used as signs of honor; he seems to take them as excessive and demeaning. He concludes the list by saying that in all nations gifts (*dōra*) are a suitable way of honoring people, because they are both honorific and useful to the recipient. These are wonderfully exact descriptions of things that are still done and always will be done to honor people so long as we retain our humanity; we might think of solemn military funerals, medals, encomia, portraits, and public pensions.

When Aristotle says that honor is a sign that the recipient is known for having done some service, he gives the definition of honor. This predicate is not one more property, like the three that were examined in *NE* I, 5. The properties are not on a par with the defining feature; rather, they “flow from” it. Because honor is by definition a sign, there must be someone who signals the honor by performing the sign, and in the *Ethics* Aristotle says that you want people who have moral intelligence (*hoi phronimoi*) to bestow the honor, that is, to make the sign that you are recognized for having done some service. If you are being honored for heroism, it is appropriate that you have a reputable official with the proper authority to bestow the

medal on you. The nature of the person who bestows the honor does not define what honor is, but it is a property that flows from the definition and it is essential, not accidental. Likewise, if you are being honored it should be in the presence of people by whom you are known, so that they can understand the sign appropriately. They are the ones to whom your deeds are known. And finally, you should be honored on the basis of your virtue, which enabled you to perform the service for which you are known and honored. You should, for example, not be honored simply because the ruler is your father. These three features are properties of honor. They are not accidental to it, and we can understand their necessity by seeing how they flow from the definition of honor as a sign of service rendered.

Honor Compared with Friendship

We have examined the introductory remarks Aristotle makes about honor in *NE* I, 4–5, where he relates it to the final human good. He also speaks about honor in an unexpected context, during his treatment of friendship in books VIII and IX. What he says about it there is meant to clarify the nature of friendship but it illuminates honor as well.

The first half of *NE* VIII, 8 (1159a12–b1) is devoted to the question whether it is better to be befriended (*phileisthai*) or to befriend (*philein*). Most people (*hoi polloi*), Aristotle says, wish more to be befriended than to befriend, and they wish this because of the love of honor (*dia philotimian*) or ambition.³ He then compares both being befriended and being honored with being flattered; this is, we might observe, a rather unflattering comparison, since flattery deals with untruth and pretense. The comparison degrades both being befriended and being honored. A flatterer, he says, presents himself as a friend in an inferior position (*huperechomenos gar philos ho kolax*) who wants more to befriend than to be loved. This sudden introduction of the flatterer is quite interesting; the flatterer turns out to be a parody of both friendship and honor. He unifies both within himself and vitiates them. He presents himself as a subordinate friend and in his words he pretends to honor his target, but in both dimensions he is not what he seems to be. Aristotle concludes this sentence by saying that being befriended is like being honored, and this is what the many want, but he also

³ The use of the word “wish” (*boulesthai*, *boulēsis*) in this passage is noteworthy. As Aristotle points out in III, 2, we can wish for three things: for impossibilities; for things that can be done only by other people; and for things that we ourselves can do but not here and now, only through deliberation and choice. Wishes are always for something that lies at a distance.

implies that the many are not good judges in these matters, as he will show in what comes next.

In the next stage in his argument, Aristotle spells out his understanding of honor and its logic at greater length (1159a17–27). He talks about how the many (*hoi polloi*) seek honor; they do not seek it for itself (*di' auto*) but only incidentally (*kata sumbebēkos*). They want honor for something that is attached to it. Specifically, they want honor from people who are in powerful positions (*hupo tōn en tais exousias*), because such honor gives its recipient hope (*dia tēn elipda*) that he will get good things from these important people. The honor becomes, says Aristotle, a sign (*sēmion*) of benefits to come. Here, honor is no longer a sign that we have done something good for the community, as it was in *NE I, 5*; it is now a sign that we hope to get something good for ourselves out of the community. This is how the many look at honor; they want it for their own advantage. We might note that Aristotle did not discuss how the many viewed honor when he treated it in *NE I, 5*. There he only described how the better and active people considered it.

Next in *NE VIII, 8*, Aristotle turns away from the many and speaks about people who want honor, not from the powerful, but from people who are better (*hupo tōn epieikōn*) and knowing (*kai eidotōn*), and they want such honor in order to strengthen their own opinion about themselves. They too do not want honor for its own sake, but for something attached to it; in this case they do not want favors from the powerful, but they want reassurance about themselves. They rejoice in the fact that they are good (*chairousi dē, hoti eisi agathoi*), believing in the judgment (*pisteuontes tēi krisēi*) of those who speak about them. This second point is basically the same as Aristotle's analysis of the role and logic of honor in *NE I, 5*, where he discusses the way in which the "better and practical" people seek honor.

No more is said about honor in the section of *NE VIII, 8* that we are discussing. After the material we have considered, Aristotle returns to the theme of friendship. He says that although people want honor for reasons beyond the honor itself, they delight in being befriended or being loved for its own sake, not for anything beyond it. It is interesting to note that Aristotle does not say that being loved somehow confirms our own opinion of ourselves or our own goodness; he simply says that we want it for its own sake and it is desirable in itself. Being befriended, he says, shows up as "stronger (*kreitton*: mightier, more powerful) than being honored (*tou timasthai*)."¹ It seems, therefore, to be like a final good. But then Aristotle drops the contrast with honor entirely, and recalibrates his argument by

focusing simply on the contrast between being befriended and actively befriending.

His argument now takes a different turn; he appeals to an instance of *philia* that shows that active befriending is more of a perfection than being befriended. He uses the example of mothers who love their children and are willing to give them up to be raised by others, and so long as they see the children prospering, do not want to be loved in return. This is the single argument Aristotle provides, and as edifying as it might be, it seems rather particular in contrast with the other more general arguments he gave in regard to honor. It seems strange that on the basis of this single example he can come to the conclusion of this issue. And yet, this is such a pure instance of active *philein* without any *phileisthai*, and it is so universally and easily understandable, since almost all of us know the nature of a mother's love, and it is so contrary to what Plato presents in his description of the common possession of children in the *Republic*, that it does have a certain power to show the difference between loving and being loved and to reveal the superiority of the former. Aristotle says, finally, that since the substance of friendship lies more in the befriending (*mallon de tēs philias ousēs en tōi philein*), and since those who love their friends are praised, it seems clear that befriending is *the* virtue of friends (*philōn aretē to philein eoiken*; 1159a33–35). The strongest instance of friendship, its highest human excellence and its highest exercise of reason, lies in befriending rather than in being befriended.

Anger, Belittlement, and Dishonor

We have examined Aristotle's treatment of honor in *NE* I, in the *Rhetoric*, and in *NE* VIII. We now turn to his most extensive treatment of honor, which is found in *NE* IV. Aristotle defines virtue in *NE* II and then discusses human action and responsibility in the first five chapters of book III. Then he goes through the various virtues and vices in the rest of book III and in book IV. In *NE* III he treats courage (chapters 6–9) and temperance (chapters 10–12). These are the two foundational virtues; they deal with establishing ourselves as agents pure and simple, with ordering our desires and aversions and enabling us to be there at all as entities that are capable of human action. They deal, respectively, with the painful and the pleasant. It is noteworthy that courage comes first; just to stand forth as human beings we need to overcome opposition, danger, and affliction; even to stand upright we need to overcome the pull of gravity. We must be

disposed to stand fast; being so disposed is being courageous. Once we are on our feet, however, we also need to moderate our desires and pleasures, so that we are not disordered in the way we move outward in our engagements with things. Courage needs to be complemented by temperance. Aristotle says that temperance deals specifically with bodily desires and pleasures, with eating and drinking and with reproduction, that is, with bodily preservation and procreation, with staying alive: maintaining our own identity and replicating it in offspring. Temperance is the specific virtue of the rational *animal*. It brings our animal nature into a human condition. Courage and temperance are, therefore, the elementary human virtues. They are treated in book III.

In the nine chapters of *NE IV* Aristotle deals with eight other virtues and with shame. All these dimensions of human agency are built upon and presuppose the courage and temperance of *NE III*. They move to a higher and more complex level in *NE IV*. The first two virtues, generosity and magnificence, deal with wealth. Generosity shows how we can be virtuous with wealth on a more ordinary scale, while magnificence involves great wealth and great expenditures. The third and fourth chapters deal with honor, and here the scale is reversed. In contrast with his treatment of the virtues dealing with wealth, Aristotle discusses the virtues of large-scale honors first and ordinary-scale honors second. Thus, chapter 3 deals with *megalopsuchia* or greatness of soul and chapter 4 deals with *philotimia* or love of honor. *Philotimia* is often translated as ambition and *ho philotimos* as the ambitious man. The translations are not inaccurate, but they are deficient in that the English terms “ambition” and “ambitious” lose the explicit reference to honor that is found in the Greek *philotimia*. I should also recall Aristotle’s remark in *NE I*, 4, in his initial discussion of human happiness and the final good, where he said that most people think that happiness is found in something obvious and tangible, such as pleasure, wealth, or honor. This sequence appears again here in his more complete treatment of the virtues, where the discussion of temperance, which deals with pleasure, is followed by his discussion of generosity and magnificence, which deal with wealth, which in turn is followed by the discussion of *megalopsuchia* and ambition, which deal with honor. Both the great-souled man and the ambitious man are concerned directly with honor, which Aristotle in chapter 3 calls the greatest of the external goods (*megiston tōn ektos agathōn*; 1123b20–21). In fact, the *megalopsuchos* is beyond honor; he is so confident of his own virtue and superiority that honor seems like an unnecessary supplement. He does not need the reassurance that most people derive from

being honored. He is, Aristotle says, somewhat pleased by great honors given by good men, but looks down on tributes from ordinary people. For a recent historical example of such a personage one might think of Charles de Gaulle.

I would like, however, to move on to chapter 5, in which Aristotle deals with the passion of anger and with the virtue of good temper. This chapter and this discussion are something of an anomaly in *NE IV*. All the other virtues in this book are presented in pairs or triplets, but this one stands alone (it also stands alone in the brief list of virtues in *Nicomachean Ethics I*, 7). Thus, Aristotle treats generosity and magnificence in chapters 1–2, greatness of soul and love of honor in chapters 3–4, good temper in chapter 5, and finally the triplet of amiability, truthfulness, and ready wit in chapters 6–9. The virtue of good temper, which deals with anger, is not joined with any other virtue. One might ask why it is not linked with the two that precede it, because in a way this virtue also deals with honor. Exploring this question will allow us to discuss several interesting and detailed points in Aristotle's treatment of honor.

For a definition of anger we must again turn to the *Rhetoric*, as we did for the definition of honor. Aristotle's definition of anger, however, cannot be treated just by itself. It needs to be complemented by a discussion of one of its components, namely, *oligōria*, the activity of belittling, slighting, or holding in contempt, the definition of which is also given in the *Rhetoric*. We will, therefore, need to present this analysis of anger in two stages, corresponding to the two definitions, of anger and of belittling. For purposes of clarity, I will textually isolate the two definitions, and then I will discuss the two of them jointly.

1. Aristotle defines anger in *Rhetoric II*, 2 (1378a31–33), as follows: “Let anger be (*estō dē orgē*): a desire accompanied by pain (*orexis meta lupēs*) for a manifested retribution (*timōrias phainomenēs*) for a manifested belittlement (*dia phainomenēn oligōrian*) of things affecting oneself or one's own (*tōn eis auton hē tōn autou*), done by someone who has no business to belittle them (*tou oligōrein mē prosēkontos*).” This is a marvelous definition. Anger is a response, not to the hurt, but to being belittled or slighted, to the implication that you are insignificant; we resent, not the injury, but the insult enclosed in it. Anger is a response to something like a moral annihilation. I would also draw attention to the double use of *phainomenon* here, the Greek term for appearing or manifestation. The belittlement shows up; it is not held secret in someone's heart. The offender displays his offense, and the person offended wants a manifest restitution.

I should also mention that some English translations make the text say that the slight is directed toward “oneself or one’s friends,” but “friends” is not mentioned in the Greek.⁴ The belittlement might be directed to oneself or to anything of one’s own; this can include one’s friends, but it could also include other things, such as one’s nationality, one’s favorite sports team, or one’s attempt at painting a landscape, and the like. You might belittle “me or mine,” anything of my own, not just “me or my friends.” If you show me a painting you have done and I start giggling, or if I ridicule the school you attended, I belittle something of yours.

2. Most English translations use “slight” and “to slight” as the translations for *oligōria* and *oligōrein*, but these words are not strong enough to convey what is described here. It would be better to use “holding in contempt” or “belittlement.” The Greek words contain the term *oligos*, which signifies few, little, or small, and hence “belittle” is especially appropriate, while “contempt” conveys the force of the action. We have looked at Aristotle’s definition of anger; let us now look at his definition of *oligōria*, “belittlement,” “contempt,” or “slighting,” which he gives a few lines after his definition of anger (1378b10–11). It is a remarkable definition. He says, “Holding in contempt is (*epei d’ hē oligōria estin*) the actualizing of an opinion (*energeia doxēs*) about something that shows up as being worth nothing (*peri to mēdenos axion phainomenon*).” He goes on to say that both good things and bad things are taken seriously; we respect them; but “things that are just nothing or trifling (*hosa de mēden ti hē mikron*) we take to be worthy of nothing (*oudenos axia hupolambanomen*).” If I slight you or hold you in contempt, I show you up as being worth nothing to me. Being able to make you seem like nothing is a unique human possibility, and anger is the distinctive human reaction. Belittling someone is like erasing him as a respected human agent. It is even worse than dishonor.

There is a phrase in Aristotle definition of belittlement that I wish to hold up for admiration. It is the phrase *energeia doxēs*, the actualizing of an opinion. This expression is a wonderful mixture of metaphysics and moral philosophy. It signifies what occurs when an opinion that I have, one that has been lying dormant in me, suddenly bursts into existential actuality. The opinion is enacted. I do something that actualizes or expresses the *doxa* lying within me. What had been latent in *dunamis* now exists in *ener-*

⁴ For example, the Loeb translation reads “for a real or apparent slight affecting a man himself or one of his friends,” and the W. Rhys Roberts translation has “to slight oneself or one’s friends.”

geia. Because it is an opinion that gravely concerns you, this enactment reverberates between you and me and everyone around us. This is what I have been thinking about you (or your skill as a painter) all this time. I activate my opinion that you (or your artistic product) are worthless; that is how you show up to me. I do something or I say something that shows actively what I think of you, and I display this for all to see. The metaphysics of *dunamis* and *energeia* reveals here its great power to explain things philosophically. Furthermore, as Aristotle states in his definition of anger, I have no business doing this. I am not obliged at the moment to evaluate you or your work; I am not, for example, a person who has been commissioned to give you a grade for your performance or to put a price on your landscape. I do it just because I want to. I perform a gesture that reduces you to zero or something close to it, and I do it for its own sake. Would you not be angry with me for having done this, and would you not want to have the contempt avenged? Would you not want the justice of retribution, not simply in private but conspicuously, just as the contempt was open and public? This is, furthermore, a highly personal event, and in following up on his definition of anger Aristotle says, “The angered man must be angered (*anagkē ton orgizomenon orgizesthai*) always toward a particular individual (*aiei tōn kath' hekaston tini*), such as Cleon and not man (*hoion Kleōni all' ouk anthrōpōi*; 1378a34–35).” It was Cleon who activated this opinion, and it is with Cleon that the aggrieved person is angry, not with humanity at large. Aristotle's phenomenology of anger is a masterpiece of philosophical writing.

He goes still further in his analysis. He takes the act of belittling as a genus and distinguishes three forms (*eidē*) within it. Contempt does not occur in the abstract; it occurs in three particular ways (1378b13–31). This subdivision resembles the specifications of *akrasia* that we considered at the beginning of this essay.

The first kind of slighting or contempt is disdain (*kataphronēsis*), which has the sense of looking down or “thinking down” on someone (*kata, phronein*), of understanding them to be lowly and insignificant. In disdain we do not perform a full-blown action; we merely show what our opinion is by the attitude we take, our tone of voice, or the pose we strike. We show that you appear in a certain way to us but we do not do anything to you. The second kind of belittlement is spite (*epēreasmōs*), which Aristotle defines as putting obstacles in the way of the other person's wishes, that is, preventing him from obtaining what he wants, and doing so not for any advantage of one's own, but simply to thwart him, just for the fun of it.

If I spite you, Aristotle says, I show that I am not afraid that you will be able to do anything about it; that is, I show that I think you are insignificant and helpless, practically nothing (*mēden ti hē mikron*, from his definition of contempt). I also show my low opinion of you by implying that you are so insignificant that you could not possibly be of any use to me, for if you could be helpful at some time, I would not alienate you in this way. Spite is more active than disdain because it involves doing something that thwarts you, whereas disdain is more a matter of an attitude, expressed perhaps simply in my demeanor or in what I fail to do. The third kind of contempt is *hubris*, insult, and it is a still more affirmative action. Spite merely keeps you from getting what you want, but *hubris* positively inflicts injury or pain (*blaptein kai lupein*), but of a kind that involves disgrace (*aischunē*) to the recipient. I do not just injure you; I do so in a way that belittles you. This is done, moreover, not for any advantage to the doer, nor even as revenge for something done previously, but simply for the pleasure of disgracing the target. Aristotle says that people do this in order to show, by doing harm, that they are superior (*autous huperechein mallon*), and he says that the young and the rich insult others in this way (*hoi neoi kai hoi plousioi hubristai*). As an illustration of this on a small scale, one might think of bicyclists who force pedestrians to scamper out of the way, just to show who is superior (and the pedestrians react with anger).

Chapter 2 of Book II of the *Rhetoric* is very long and it gets into the fine grain of *oligōria* or belittlement and the anger that responds to it. Aristotle says, for example, that we get angry at people who speak badly about and disdain (*kakōs legousi kai kataphronousi*; 1379a33) things that we take very seriously, such as philosophy if we fancy ourselves to be philosophers, and we get all the more angry if we are unsure of our proficiency in it; if we are confident of our ability we will be less irritated. We get angry with people who used to honor us but no longer do so. When we are deprived of something that we need and want (we may be in bad health, or indigent), we become angry with people who will not help us or who disturb us in other ways. We are angered when we are in dead earnest about certain things and others treat it with irony, “for irony is something disdainful (*kataphronētikon gar hē eirōneia*; 1379b31–32).” We might get angry even if people forget our name, because such forgetfulness (*lēthē*; 1379b36) seems to indicate contempt. In these and many other descriptions Aristotle verifies his analysis of honor, belittlement, and anger. It is noteworthy that these descriptions are carried out in the *Rhetoric*. Aristotle is not telling us what anger feels like or how we can manage it, but describing

how it shows up in human discourse and how it can be used when we speak with others in our deliberation about what to do. His analysis is done for the rhetor, not the psychologist, but it can be helpful to the latter as well.

How is all this related to honor? We saw in *NE* IV, 3 and 4, that the great-souled and the ambitious man both deal with honor that they either possess already or hope to acquire, but here in IV, 5, in the treatment of anger, honor comes into play by its absence or its deprivation. If we belittle others, we take away their honor or prevent them from having any, and we make a public show of it. It would not be disdain, spite, or an insult if it were not manifest. We show that in our opinion they are not worthy of any sign of recognition that they have done some service. Aristotle uses not the positive term honor but the negative term dishonor (*atimia*) in his discussion of anger and contempt. After speaking of the hubris of the young and the rich, he says “Dishonoring belongs to hubris (*hubreōs de atimia*), and someone who dishonors holds another in contempt (*ho d’ atimazōn oligōrei*), for that which is worthy of nothing (*to gar mēdenos axion*) has no honor (*oudemian echei timēn*), whether as good or as bad (*out’ agathou oute kakou*; 1378b29–31).” Honor is present precisely in its absence. It is specifically what is taken away or withheld from the one who is slighted. Holding in contempt is not, strictly speaking, shaming someone; it is not as though we expected better from him and he failed to perform or performed badly. It is more negative than that; the opinion is enacted (*energeia doxēs*) that we do not expect him to be able to perform at all. He is openly registered as a cipher, not even a negative number. Aristotle shows that the very absence of honor can illuminate what it is.

Conclusion

Two final points can be made about Aristotle's treatment of honor. In *NE* VIII, 14, he makes an interesting remark about the relationship between honor and wealth. We recall that when he discussed happiness at the start of the *Ethics*, he said that pleasure, wealth, and honor were the three popular candidates for the final human good. Now, in VIII, 14, he discusses friendships between unequal persons. He says that despite their difference in status, a kind of equality comes about among such friends; each obtains something different from the friendship, but each gets what is appropriate. The superior acquires honor, which he deserves, while the inferior obtains assistance, which he needs. Aristotle says, “For honor is

the award for virtue and benefaction (*tēs men gar aretēs kai tēs euergesias hē timē geras*), whereas aid is the gain appropriate to need (*tēs d' endeias epikouria to kerdos*; 1163b3–5).⁵ He goes on to say that an analogous reciprocity can occur in political communities (*en tais politeiais*). Honor is not given to a man who does nothing for the common life (*ou gar timatai ho mēden agathon tōi koinōi porizōn*), but it is bestowed “on the man who does good for the common (*tōi to koinon euergetounti*; 1163b7).” Aristotle then makes an interesting remark about the kind of goods a person can obtain from the political community. He says, “For you cannot simultaneously become enriched from the community and be honored by it (*ou gar estin hama chrēmatisesthai apo tōn koinōn kai timasthai*; 1163b8–9).” If you serve the community but acquire wealth by doing so, you have your reward and you therefore have no claim to honor. The reason Aristotle gives for this is that no one wants to have the smaller share in all respects: if someone loses wealth by serving, he is given honor, and if he accepts gifts or bribes, wealth is what he gets (*tōi dōrodokōi chrēmata*) but not honor. This sort of equalization of dissimilars, he says, “preserves the friendship (*sōizei tēn philian*; 1163b12).” These remarks spell out how wealth and honor interact in human affairs. It is also interesting that pleasure, the third popular candidate for the final good, is not mentioned as one of the awards that the political community can give. It is not a public good.

The other point to be made is that honor can be the object of *akrasia* or incontinence. In *NE VII*, 4, Aristotle distinguishes between a simply incontinent person (*tis haplōs akratēs*) and one who is incontinent “in part” (*kata meros*) or in a qualified way (1147b20–21). A simply akratic person is such in regard to food and sexuality, that is, in regard to bodily needs and their pleasures and pains. Such things are involved in the maintenance of bodily life; they are necessary for life (*ta anagkaia*; 1147b24) but there is no nobility in them. They are not sought in themselves. Other goods, such as victory, honor, and wealth, can be sought for themselves, and yet it is possible that people will pursue them in excess and beyond right reason (*para ton orthon logon huperballontas*; 1147b32). We do not call such people simply incontinent (*haplōs men ou legomen akrateis*); rather, we add a qualifier (*prostithentes*) and we call them “incontinent in regard to riches and gain and honor and anger (*chrēmātōn akrateis kai kerdous kai*

⁵ I used the translation by Bartlett & Collins for the last part of this sentence. See *Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Robert C. Bartlett and Susan D. Collins (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), *ad loc.*

timēs kai thumou), but not simply (*haplōs d' ou*; 1147b33–34).” When Aristotle says that we call such people by these names (*legomen*), he is not just adverting to linguistic usage; he is saying that people exist in this manner and we use these names to identify them as such. The vocabulary is brought forth in response to the being of things. We should also note that this form of excess is incontinence; it is not the same as the vices described in *NE IV*. The man who is incontinent in regard to wealth, for example, is not the same as the avaricious man of *NE IV*, 1, nor is the one who is incontinent in regard to honor the same as the excessively ambitious man of *NE IV*, 4, or the vain man of *NE IV*, 3. Even in such cases, presumably, the incontinent person regrets his actions when the immediate situation has been cleared away, whereas the vicious man does not. The akratic man acts more under impulse than by deliberation and choice. As Aristotle says a bit further on, “These choose, those do not choose (*hoi men proairountai hoi d' ou proairountai*; 1148a17).”⁶

Our study of honor has shown how densely interwoven Aristotle's ethical theory is. The examination of a single topic, honor, illuminates such diverse things as the human good; political life and friendship; virtue, vice, and incontinence; flattery, and wealth and pleasure. It even shows how the metaphysical principles of *dunamis* and *energeia* are at work in human affairs. It treats the passion of anger as well as the moral attitude of contempt that provokes it, and it situates both within the study of rhetoric. Aristotle's philosophy displays the richness of both being and human being.

It is appropriate to discuss honor in a volume dedicated to Jude P. Dougherty. These essays have been written to acknowledge the virtue (*aretē*) and works (*erga*) that mark the life he devoted to the School of Philosophy and The Catholic University of America, as well as to the discipline of philosophy and the intellectual heritage of the Catholic Church. In keeping with Aristotle's definition of honor, they are a sign that he is recognized for having done great service for these communities and fields of knowledge. They are also an expression of personal friendship and gratitude.

⁶ We might also note that in *NE VII*, 6, Aristotle provides an extended treatment of incontinence in regard to anger. It would be an interesting project to compare that chapter with his treatment of anger and belittlement in the *Rhetoric*.

**HONOR, ANGER, AND BELITTLEMENT
IN ARISTOTLE'S ETHICS**

SUMMARY

The author considers the phenomenon of honor (*timē*) by examining Aristotle's description of it and its role in ethical and political life. His study of honor leads him to two related phenomena, anger (*orgē*) and belittlement or contempt (*oligōria*); examining them helps him define honor more precisely. With his examination of honor the author shows how densely interwoven Aristotle's ethical theory is; he illuminates such diverse things as the human good, political life and friendship, virtue, vice, incontinence, flattery, wealth and pleasure; he shows how the metaphysical principles of *dunamis* and *energeia* are at work in human affairs; he treats the passion of anger as well as the moral attitude of contempt that provokes it, and he situates both within the study of rhetoric.

KEYWORDS: Aristotle, honor, ethics, politics, anger, belittlement, contempt, friendship, virtue, vice, incontinence, flattery, wealth, pleasure, rhetoric.