

Common Characteristics of Great Souls



Abstract

Eleven Common Characteristics of Great Souls

- They do not take small risks, and are not devoted to risk taking, but they will take big risks, without regard for their life, because a worse life is worth less than a great life. Indeed they do few things, and are slow to start on things, unless there is great honour involved.
- They do not esteem what is popularly esteemed, nor what others are good at. They take few things seriously, and are not anxious.
- They gladly do favours but are ashamed to receive them, being apt to forget a favour from another, or to do a greater one in return. They are pleased to hear discussion about the favours they have done for others, but not about favours done for them.
- They are apt to act more high handedly to a person of high station than a person of middle or low standing, which would be below them.
- They are frank in expressing opinions and open about what they hate and love. Not to be so would be due to fear, or the esteem one has of other's opinions over your own.
- They lead life as they choose and not as suits others, which would be slave-like.
- They are not given to wonder, for nothing seems great to them.
- Because they expect others to be lesser, and are not overly concerned with their praise, they are not apt to bear grudges, they are not apt to gossip, and they are not even interested in speaking ill of enemies, except to insult them.
- They are not apt to complain about necessities or small matters, nor to ask for help, not wanting to imply that such things are important to them.
- They tend to possess beautiful and useless things, rather than productive ones.
- They tend to move slowly and speak with a deep steady voice, rather than being hasty or shrill which would be due to anxiety.



Aristotle on the Great Souls

From *Nicomachean Ethics*, in: *Aristotle in 23 Volumes*, Vol. 19, translated by Harris Rackham. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press; London, William Heinemann Ltd., 1934.

[1123b] Now a person is thought to be great-souled if he claims much and deserves much; he who claims much without deserving it is foolish, but no one of moral excellence is foolish or senseless. The great-souled man is then as we have described. He who deserves little and claims little is modest or temperate, but not great-souled, since to be great-souled involves greatness just as handsomeness involves size: small people may be neat and well-made, but not handsome. He that claims much but does not deserve much is vain; though not everybody who claims more than he deserves is vain.¹ He that claims less than he deserves is small-souled, whether his deserts be great or only moderate, or even though he deserves little, if he claims still less. The most small-souled of all would seem to be the man who claims less than he deserves when his deserts are great; for what would he have done had he not deserved so much?

Though therefore in regard to the greatness of his claim the great-souled man is an extreme,² by reason of its rightness he stands at the mean point, for he claims what he deserves; while the vain and the small-souled err by excess and defect respectively.

If then the great-souled man claims and is worthy of great things and most of all the greatest things, Greatness of Soul must be concerned with someone object especially. "Worthy" is a term of relation: it denotes having a claim to goods external to oneself. Now the greatest external good we should assume to be the thing which we offer as a tribute to the gods, and which is most coveted by men of high station, and is the prize awarded for the noblest deeds; and such a thing is honour, for honour is clearly the greatest of external goods. Therefore the great-souled man is he who has the right disposition in relation to honours and disgraces. And even without argument it is evident that honour is the object with which the great-souled are concerned, since it is honour above all else which great men claim and deserve.

The small-souled man³ falls short both as judged by his own deserts and in comparison with the claim of the great-souled man; the vain man on the other hand exceeds as judged by his own standard, but does not however exceed the great-souled man.¹

¹ The term *xalvovs* does not apply to a man who deserves much but claims even more, nor to one who claims little but deserves even less.

² Cf. 2.6.17.

³ 3.12,13 should properly follow 3.8.

And inasmuch as the great-souled man deserves most, he must be the best of men; for the better a man is the more he deserves, and he that is best deserves most. Therefore the truly great-souled man must be a good man. Indeed greatness in each of the virtues would seem to go with greatness of soul. For instance, one cannot imagine the great-souled man running at full speed when retreating in battle,² nor acting dishonestly; since what motive for base conduct has a man to whom nothing is great?³ Considering all the virtues in turn, we shall feel it quite ridiculous to picture the great-souled man as other than a good man. Moreover, if he were bad, he would not be worthy of honour, since honour is the prize of virtue, and the tribute that we pay to the good.

[1124a] Greatness of Soul seems therefore to be as it were a crowning ornament of the virtues: it enhances their greatness, and it cannot exist without them. Hence it is hard to be truly great souled,⁴ for greatness of soul is impossible without moral nobility.

Honour and dishonour then are the objects with which the great-souled man is especially concerned. Great honours accorded by persons of worth will afford him pleasure in a moderate degree: he will feel he is receiving only what belongs to him, or even less, for no honour can be adequate to the merits of perfect virtue, yet all the same he will deign to accept their honours, because they have no greater tribute to offer him. Honour rendered by common people and on trivial grounds he will utterly despise, for this is not what he merits. He will also despise dishonour, for no dishonour can justly attach to him. The great-souled man then, as has been said, is especially concerned with honour; but he will also observe due measure in respect to wealth, power, and good and bad fortune in general, as they may befall him; he will not rejoice overmuch in prosperity, nor grieve overmuch at adversity. For he does not care much even about honour, which is the greatest of external goods⁵ (since power and wealth are desirable only for the honour they bring, at least their possessors wish to be honoured for their sake); he therefore to whom even honour is a small thing will be indifferent to other things as well. Hence great-souled men are thought to be haughty.

But it is thought that the gifts of fortune also conduce to greatness of soul; for the high-born and those who are powerful or wealthy are esteemed worthy of honour, because they are superior to their fellows, and that which is superior in something good is always held in higher honour; so that even these gifts of fortune make men

¹ That is, the small-souled man claims less than he deserves and less than the great-souled man deserves and claims; the vain man claims more than he deserves, but not more than the great-souled man deserves and claims.

² Literally, “fleeing swinging his arms at his side,” *i.e.* deficient in the virtue of Courage. If this be the meaning, the phrase recalls by contrast the leisurely retirement of Socrates from the stricken field of Delium (Plato, *Plat. Sym.* 221a). But the words have been taken with what follows, as illustrating the lack of Justice or Honesty, and the whole translated either “outstripping an opponent in a race by flinging the arms backward [which was considered unsportsmanlike], nor fouling,” or else “being prosecuted on a charge of blackmailing, nor cheating in business.” Emendation would give a buried verse-quotation, “To swing his arms in flight, nor in pursuit.”

³ *i.e.*, nothing is of much value in his eyes *cf.* 3.30, 34, so that gain, which is a motive to dishonesty with others, is no temptation to him.

⁴ An echo of a line of Simonides, *ἀνδρ' ἀγαθὸν μὲν ἀλαθέως γενέσθαι χαλεπὸν*, *cf.* 1.10.11 note.

⁵ The Ms. reading gives “For even honour he does not feel to be of the greatest importance.”

more great-souled, because their possessors are honoured by some people. But in reality only the good man ought to be honoured, although he that has both virtue and fortune is esteemed still more worthy of honour; whereas those who possess the goods of fortune without virtue are not justified in claiming high worth, and cannot correctly be styled great-souled, since true worth and greatness of soul cannot exist without complete virtue. It is true that even those who merely possess the goods of fortune may be haughty and insolent; because without virtue it is not easy to bear good fortune becomingly, [1124b] and such men, being unable to carry their prosperity, and thinking themselves superior to the rest of mankind, despise other people, although their own conduct is no better than another's. The fact is that they try to imitate the great-souled man without being really like him, and only copy him in what they can, reproducing his contempt for others but not his virtuous conduct. For the great-souled man is justified in despising other people — his estimates are correct; but most proud men have no good ground for their pride.

The great-souled man does not run into danger for trifling reasons, and is not a lover of danger, because there are few things he values; but he will face danger in a great cause, and when so doing will be ready to sacrifice his life, since he holds that life is not worth having at every price.

He is fond of conferring benefits, but ashamed to receive them, because the former is a mark of superiority and the latter of inferiority. He returns a service done to him with interest, since this will put the original benefactor into his debt in turn, and make him the party benefited. The great-souled are thought to have a good memory for any benefit they have conferred, but a bad memory for those which they have received (since the recipient of a benefit is the inferior of his benefactor, whereas they desire to be superior); and to enjoy being reminded of the former but to dislike being reminded of the latter: this is why the poet makes Thetis¹ not specify her services to Zeus; nor did the Spartans treating with the Athenians² recall the occasions when Sparta had aided Athens, but those on which Athens had aided Sparta.

It is also characteristic of the great-souled man never to ask help from others, or only with reluctance, but to render aid willingly; and to be haughty towards men of position and fortune, but courteous towards those of moderate station, because it is difficult and distinguished to be superior to the great, but easy to outdo the lowly, and to adopt a high manner with the former is not ill-bred, but it is vulgar to lord it over humble people: it is like putting forth one's strength against the weak. He will not compete for the common objects of ambition, or go where other people take the first place; and he will be idle and slow to act, except when pursuing some high honour or achievement; and will not engage in many undertakings, but only in such as are important and distinguished. He must be open both in love and in hate, since concealment shows timidity; and care more for the truth than for what people will think; and speak and act openly, since as he despises other men he is outspoken and frank, ex-

¹ An incorrect recollection of Homer, *Iliad* 1.393 ff., & 1.503 f.; there Achilles says that his mother has often reminded Zeus how she rescued him when the other gods wished to put him in chains; and Thetis goes to Zeus and reminds him of her services in general terms.

² The reference is uncertain.

cept when speaking with ironical self-depreciation,¹ as he does to common people. He will be incapable of living at the will of another, unless a friend, [1125a] since to do so is slavish, and hence flatterers are always servile, and humble people flatterers. He is not prone to admiration, since nothing is great to him. He does not bear a grudge, for it is not a mark of greatness of soul to recall things against people, especially the wrongs they have done you, but rather to overlook them. He is no gossip, for he will not talk either about himself or about another, as he neither wants to receive compliments nor to hear other people run down (nor is he lavish of praise either); and so he is not given to speaking evil himself, even of his enemies, except when he deliberately intends to give offence. In troubles that cannot be avoided or trifling mishaps he will never cry out or ask for help, since to do so would imply that he took them to heart. He likes to own beautiful and useless things, rather than useful things that bring in a return, since the former show his independence more.

Other traits generally attributed to the great-souled man are a slow gait, a deep voice, and a deliberate utterance; to speak in shrill tones and walk fast denotes an excitable and nervous temperament, which does not belong to one who cares for few things and thinks nothing great.

Such then being the Great-souled man, the corresponding character on the side of deficiency is the Small-souled man, and on that of excess the Vain man. These also² are not thought to be actually vicious, since they do no harm, but rather mistaken. The small-souled man deprives himself of the good things that he deserves; and his failure to claim good things makes it seem that he has something bad about him [and also that he does not know himself],³ for (people argue), if he deserved any good, he would try to obtain it. Not that such persons are considered foolish, but rather too retiring; yet this estimate of them is thought to make them still worse, for men's ambitions show what they are worth, and if they hold aloof from noble enterprises and pursuits, and forgo the good things of life, presumably they think they are not worthy of them.

The vain on the other hand are foolish persons, who are deficient in self-knowledge and expose their defect: they undertake honourable responsibilities of which they are not worthy, and then are found out. They are ostentatious in dress, manner and so on. They want people to know how well off they are, and talk about it,⁴ imagining that this will make them respected.

Smallness of Soul is more opposed than Vanity to Greatness of Soul, being both more prevalent and worse.

Greatness of Soul then, as we have said, is concerned with great honours.

¹ See note on 2.7.12.

² Cf. 2.22.

³ These words seem to be interpolated. The small-souled man does not claim his deserts, but he may know what they are; he is not charged with ignorance of self, as is the vain man, 3.36.

⁴ A variant reading is "talk about themselves."

[1125b] It appears however that honour also,¹ as was said in the first part of this work, has a certain virtue concerned with it, which may be held to bear the same relation to Greatness of Soul that Liberality bears to Magnificence. This virtue as well as Liberality is without the element of greatness, but causes us to be rightly disposed towards moderate and small honours as Liberality does towards moderate and small amounts of money; and just as there is a mean and also excess and deficiency in getting and in giving money, so also it is possible to pursue honour more or less than is right and also to seek it from the right source and in the right way. We blame a man as ambitious if he seeks honour more than is right, or from wrong sources; we blame him as unambitious if he does not care about receiving honour even on noble grounds. But at another time we praise the ambitious man as manly and a lover of what is noble, or praise the unambitious man as modest and temperate, as we said in the first part of this work.² The fact is that the expression “fond of” so-and-so is ambiguous, and we do not always apply the word “fond of honour” (ambitious) to the same thing; when we use it as a term of praise, we mean “more fond of honour than most men,” but when as a reproach, “more than is right.” As the observance of the mean has no name, the two extremes dispute as it were for the unclaimed estate. But where there is excess and deficiency there must also be a mean. Now men do seek honour both more and less than is right; it must therefore be possible also to do so rightly. It is therefore this nameless middle disposition in regard to honour that we really praise. Compared with ambition it appears unambitiousness, and compared with unambitiousness it appears ambition: compared with both, it appears in a sense to be both. This seems to be true of the other virtues also; but in the present case the extremes appear to be opposed only to one another, because the middle character has no name.



¹ *i.e.*, honour as well as wealth is the object of both a major and a minor virtue: see 2.7.8.

² See 2.7.8.