

Chapter 10

Why Aristotle's Virtuous Agent Won't Forgive: Aristotle on *Sungnōmē*, *Praotēs*, and *Megalopsychia*



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Abstract For Aristotle, some wrongdoers do not deserve blame, and the virtuous judge should extend *sungnōmē*, a correct judgment about what is equitable, under the appropriate excusing circumstances. Aristotle's virtuous judge, however, does not forgive; the wrongdoer is excused from blame in the first place, rather than being forgiven precisely because she is blameworthy. Additionally, the judge does not fail to blame because she wishes to be merciful or from natural feeling, but instead, because that is the equitable action to take under the circumstances. Moreover, while Aristotle does claim in his discussions of the virtues of *megalopsychia* and *praotēs* that the virtuous person will sometimes fail to become angry at blameworthy wrongdoers, Aristotle's reasons for repudiating anger or forestalling blame have little to do with the sorts of reasons that one would or could be forgiving for. Although an Aristotelian virtuous agent does let go of anger for her own reasons, she does not forgive. As a result, I argue that since Aristotle's account of equity entails that forgiveness is positively vicious, forgivingness is not merely a virtue left out of Aristotle's account, but is in fact incompatible with his account.

10.1 Introduction

In Aristotle's analysis of the action conditions for moral responsibility, he lays out a series of nuanced and complicated conditions that explain why some wrongdoers are blamed while others are not. Since there is a close connection between blame and forgiveness (forgiving is the usual reason that a wronged agent gives up blaming a blameworthy wrongdoer), it is not surprising that there have been recent explicit defenses of the assumption that Aristotle's discussion of action, responsibility, and blame contains an account of forgiveness. On this interpretation, Aristotle's

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discussion of action types and blame provide necessary and sufficient conditions for forgiveness practices.¹

Additionally, another place some have found forgiveness in Aristotle's account is in his character virtues of *praotēs* and *megalopsychia*.² If these virtues do provide support for the practice of forgiveness, this would suggest not only that the virtuous person forgives in some circumstances but also that cultivating the disposition to be forgiving is itself virtuous by Aristotle's own lights. On each of these interpretations, Aristotle offers a recognizably-modern account of forgiveness.

I will argue here, however, that Aristotle not only fails to offer an explicit account of forgiveness but also that the virtuous Aristotelian agent does not forgive wrongdoers because forgiveness is incompatible with Aristotelian virtue.³ In other words, forgiving wrongdoers not only fails to be virtuous behavior, it is also positively vicious according to Aristotle's ethical account.

To see why, I begin by briefly outlining what characterizes forgiveness as a practice before examining Aristotle's justification for the removal of blame and its relationship to anger and desert. While Aristotle does explain when blame is to be repudiated, Aristotle's reasons for rejecting blame have little to do with the sorts of reasons involved in forgiveness. Thus, there is a significant difference between Aristotle's rejection of blame and blame given up through forgiveness, showing that although a virtuous Aristotelian agent does let go of anger for her own reasons, she won't forgive.

10.2 Forgiveness

Forgiveness, as paradigmatically understood, consists in an injured or wronged agent forswearing blaming attitudes and responses toward the person who wronged her, including retributive reactive attitudes (e.g., feelings of anger and resentment) and attempts at revenge.⁴ On the standard view of forgiveness, the wrongdoer is blameworthy for the wrong he has done to the wronged agent, so letting go of resentment and other retributive feelings and actions occurs even though the wrongdoer is properly judged to be blameworthy.⁵ When the agent who has been wronged forgives the wrongdoer, the wrongdoer is not excused or exculpated from blame

¹ See Sadler 2008 and Carter 2018.

² As Curzer 2012 does.

³ Konstan 2010 and Phillips-Garrett 2017 have previously argued for the claim that Aristotle lacks an account of forgiveness. What I defend here goes further: not only does Aristotle lack an account of forgiveness, but forgiveness is positively vicious on his account.

⁴ As with many other conceptual definitions, alternative definitions have been proposed. Here, though, I rely on the most paradigmatic ways of understanding forgiveness. My definition bears a close definition to the one given in Hughes 2015.

⁵ Recent claims that this represents "the standard view" include Murphy 2001, 561; Darwall 2006, 72; Kekes 2009, 488–490; Westlund 2009, 507; Zaibert 2009, 388; and Warmke 2013, 915.

based on what would be just under the circumstances, but instead the forgiving agent gives up endorsing blaming attitudes towards a blameworthy wrongdoer for moral or personal motivations, such as reasons of mercy or compassion. Since compassion and mercy are often reasons to go beyond what justice demands, a forgiver can appropriately forgive even when the wrongdoer does not (or could never) deserve forgiveness.⁶ But if the wrongdoer were not blameworthy, forgiveness would neither be necessary nor appropriate since he would not deserve blame in the first place and hence should be excused, not forgiven. Since morally permissible forgiveness does not require that the wrongdoer deserve it, while excusing a wrongdoer requires justification rooted in desert, an important distinction between forgiveness and excuse is the role of equity or fairness.

In giving up her rightful claim to continued resentment and blaming attitudes toward the wrongdoer, the forgiver commits to changing her feelings, intentions, and actions toward the forgiven person so that their relational status changes as well.⁷ Though this need not mean that the forgiver wishes to reconcile with the forgiven wrongdoer, it does mean that she commits to transforming her cognitive and emotional attitudes so that her judgment that the forgiven agent committed a blameworthy wrong does not entail that she continues to blame and resent him for the wrong.⁸ Since the explanation for what justifies the removal of blame is important for understanding the relationship that forgiveness plays on Aristotle's ethical account, I turn in the next section to explaining the relationship between virtue, blame, and fairness on Aristotle's account.

10.3 Virtue and Blame

Aristotle's account of blame is connected intimately with his theory of virtue, since it is vices that deserve blame and virtues that deserve praise [*Nicomachean Ethics* (*NE*) II.5, 1106a1-2; *Eudemian Ethics* (*EE*) II.6, 1223a10-12]. The virtuous agent not only knows what virtue is and then does it, but she also desires to act in accordance with virtue. In the standard case of virtuous action, the agent deliberates about what she ought to do, judges what the right action to take is, desires to act in accordance with her judgment, and then does the action that she desires to do (*NE* III.3, 1113a10-13). In addition, she must know that she is doing a virtuous action

⁶That the forgiver may forgive rightly even when the wrongdoer does not deserve it is precisely what some object to about standard views of forgiveness. Some critics (e.g., see Griswold 2007, 121–122 and Konstan 2010, 5–14) do contend that the wrongdoer must take steps to show that he is committed to restoration, but this does not mean that he thereby deserves forgiveness on this view, only that he is a viable candidate for it. Even on these views, however, such a wrongdoer cannot be said to deserve the wronged party's forgiveness, who does nothing wrong if she elects to withhold forgiveness.

⁷Hughes 2015. See also Griswold 2007, 7; MacLachlan 2008, 57–58; and Morton 2012, 7–8.

⁸For more on this, see MacLachlan 2008, 57–58 and Morton 2012, 7–8.

and she must do the action from a stable disposition that is firmly oriented at virtue (*NE* II.4, 1105a31-35).

To act habitually in this way, her feelings and attitudes must be virtuous as well, and this includes not only what motivates her to act, but also how she feels about doing the right action. It is only when her desires are aimed at the good and in harmony with the judgments given by reason that she is fully virtuous, and it is that virtuous state that is paradigmatically praiseworthy. Conversely, the paradigmatic case of blameworthiness is a vicious agent whose judgments, desires, and actions are unconnected from one another and in conflict with aiming at virtue.

When the agent's action originates in her (that is, it is "up to her"), then she should be praised or blamed for her action; conversely, if an action does not originate in the agent, then praise and blame are not fitting (*EE* II.6, 1223a10-14 and II.8, 1224a8-12; *NE* III.1, 1111a23-24; *NE* V.8=*EE* IV.8, 1135a24-31). Since we do not usually have access to an agent's internal feelings and judgments, however, determinations of blameworthiness and punishment often focus on our actions, not our internal states. Nevertheless, properly speaking, it is the agent's decision or choice (*prohairesis*) that is deserving of blame or praise, rather than an agent's feelings or actions, and hence whether he is actually deserving of praise or blame will depend on his internal states (*EE* II.11, 1228a12-18). In some cases, even though an agent has acted wrongly, his internal state is such that he is not blameworthy. To show why blame is made impermissible in these cases, I will next explain what makes blame inappropriate on Aristotle's account.

10.4 Blame and *Sungnōmē*

Though blame is generally warranted when an agent acts wrongly, there are some circumstances where an agent is not blameworthy, though she has done something that is wrong. Since she is not blameworthy and therefore does not deserve blame, blame is forestalled in these cases. Instead of blame, those are the conditions under which Aristotle says that wrongdoers should receive *sungnōmē* (*NE* III.1, 1109b32).⁹ In Classical Greek, *sungnōmē* has wide semantic scope, ranging from "forgiveness" to "excuse," so what *sungnōmē* means here is not immediately obvious without further analysis. This is not the only place that Aristotle discusses *sungnōmē*, however, so these other passages elsewhere in the Aristotelian corpus can be used to shed light on precisely why blame is sometimes inappropriate for wrongdoers. For example, in a passage in the *Rhetoric* (*Rhet.*), Aristotle explains explicitly that fairness or equity (*epieikeia*) provides the grounds for determining whether actions should be given *sungnōmē* or not:

⁹I use "wrongdoer" to refer to anyone who has done a wrong action (that is, an action that does not hit the mean and hence was not what an agent ought to do). However, as will become clear in my discussion of wrong action and wrongdoers, Aristotle does not think agents are always blameworthy for their wrong actions.

It is clear what kind of actions are fair [*epieikē*] and what are not fair and what kind of human beings are not fair: those actions that [another person] should *sungnōmē* are fair, and it is fair not to regard personal failings and mistakes as of equal seriousness with unjust actions ... And to be *sunginōskein* of human weakness is fair.¹⁰ (*Rhet.* I.13.15-17, 1374b2-11)

Sungnōmē is appropriate rather than blame in some cases because *sungnōmē* is the equitable response to the agent in this context. But what exactly does it mean to respond with *sungnōmē* toward a wrongdoer? *Sungnōmē*, as Aristotle explains amid a discussion of various intellectual virtues in *NE* VI.11 = *EE* V.11, is “judgement which discriminates what is equitable and does so correctly; and correct judgement is that which judges what is true” (1143a23-24).¹¹ This passage explains that the explicit connection between *sungnōmē* and equity is that *sungnōmē* is a judgment about whether it is equitable to blame a wrongdoer in a particular instance. The agent who correctly judges that *sungnōmē* applies to a wrongdoer possesses the ability to correctly judge whether blame would be deserved in this case or not, since this kind of judgment is the cognitive ability for agents to come to correct conclusions about what is equitable or just.

For Aristotle, equity is a sub-type of justice that is concerned with cases where rigidly applying usually-just laws would result in unjust punishment and blame for a wrongdoer. Legislators cannot foresee all circumstances, so the equitable judge recognizes that there are cases when following the letter of the law by punishing someone would undermine true justice, since the circumstances do not warrant punishment (*NE* V.10 = *EE* IV.10, 1137b12-1138a3; cf. *Rhet.* I.13, 1374a26-1374b1). The judge who possesses the ability to correctly utilize her faculty of *gnōmē* knows what is equitable. In cases where she judges that it would not be equitable to blame or punish a wrongdoer, the judge correctly assesses that correct judgment is on the side of the person under consideration (*NE* VI.11 = *EE* V.11, 1143a19; cf. *Rhet.* I.13, 1374b2-6). *Sungnōmē*, a combination of the prefix *sun-* (with) and *gnōmē* (judgment), has a literal meaning of “with judgment,” indicating that a judgment of *sungnōmē* is a judgment that is on the side of the individual being judged. In other words, to judge rightly that a wrongdoer deserves *sungnōmē* is simply to assess correctly that the wrongdoer deserves a favorable judgment (that is, that he is not blameworthy and does not deserve punishment).¹²

Knowledge of what is equitable enables the judge to see past the simple fact that a wrong action was done and look at the circumstances and context in which it was done to see if the wrongdoer is blameworthy. While there is a correct fact of the matter about what the wrongdoer deserves, knowing what this is in a particular case is not a simple matter since every case is different and the judge must include the context and wrongdoer's motivations in the assessment as well. An agent who has

¹⁰I utilize Kennedy's 2007 translation here. Kennedy's translation prefers “fairness” for the Greek *epieikeia*, but I will use equity and fairness interchangeably since (in my view) “equity” captures the flavor a bit more precisely, but “fairness” sounds a bit more congenial to modern ears.

¹¹This is a slightly revised version of Ross's 1984 translation.

¹²See Phillips-Garrett 2017 for a detailed defense of the claim that *sungnōmē* is a cognitive judgment of excuse and a more thorough discussion of *epieikeia* and its relationship to *sungnōmē*.

the capacity to judge fairly thus knows what it is that wrongdoers actually deserve, and on this basis, is able to make correct judgments about punishment or blame. When the wrongdoer is not deserving of blame (in spite of having done the wrong action), blaming the wrongdoer would not be equitable and so the wrongdoer deserves *sungnōmē*. Therefore, to judge that an agent deserves *sungnōmē* and not blame is a judgment that the conditions under which the wrongdoing agent acted are excusing conditions.

10.5 Action Classification and Blame

For Aristotle, when origin of the wrong action was outside of the wrongdoing agent, she will deserve *sungnōmē* and not blame and she will therefore be excused from blame and punishment. An otherwise responsible agent is not blameworthy for a wrong action when he was forced to perform an action or when he acted because of some specific kinds of ignorance since both of these conditions indicate that the origin was external to the wrongdoer, showing that though the action done was wrong, the agent's decision was not vicious.¹³

In the case of force, the action has an external origin and the agent contributes nothing (*NE* III.1, 1110b2-3, 16-17). Force, for Aristotle, is limited to cases where the agent has no control at all (such as when the wind pushes an agent over) where it is obvious that the origin was external to the wrongdoer. Cases in which an agent was under duress or threat are more complicated, and the particular circumstances will determine whether praise, blame, or excuse is appropriate. An agent doing the wrong thing in circumstances that strain human nature past the breaking point will not be blameworthy (*NE* III.1, 1110a5-26).¹⁴ For Aristotle, what human nature is capable of bearing is relevant to whether an action is up to an agent or not, and so a wrong action is not up to an agent if it was caused by circumstances that no person could endure (*EE* II.8, 1225a26-27).¹⁵ However, cases of duress where the cost of the loss threatened is not worse than the wrong action do not merit excuse—for example, Alcmaeon's excuse that he had to commit matricide or be cursed does not convince Aristotle since matricide is worse than being cursed (*NE* III.1, 1110a25-28).

¹³We usually expect adult human agents to be responsible, but some adults lack the capacity for decision altogether (e.g., those that Aristotle calls "bestial" in *NE* VII.5 = *EE* VI.5) or they may temporarily lack the capacity to choose (as Aristotle suggests happens with the agents who are overstrained in *NE* III.1, 1110a23-26).

¹⁴This brings to mind cases of tragic dilemmas, but seems to apply more broadly than just those cases. See also *Rhet.* I.13.16, 1374b4-6, where Aristotle extends *sungnōmē* to personal failings and mistakes since they are not the result of wickedness, but rather human weakness.

¹⁵It is also important to note that this does not simply let anyone off the hook for any emotions that might overwhelm her; the relevant passions are only those that are essential to human nature. Passions that are neither natural nor human do not justify excuse, as Aristotle explicitly states that ignorant actions that are caused by such passions are not to be offered *sungnōmē* (*NE* V.8 = *EE* IV.8, 1136a8-9).

In actions involving ignorance, some cases will be subject to praise and blame, while others will be eligible for neither. In determining whether a particular case of ignorance makes a wrongdoer morally accountable for her action, what matters is the type of ignorance, the reason for the ignorance, and the agent's response to her action afterward. For an agent to escape blame for a wrong action on the basis of ignorance, she must meet three conditions: her ignorance must be about a particular fact, not a general principle; her ignorance cannot be due to factors she is culpable for; and she must regret her action. On the first condition, the agent is not excused for general ignorance of moral principles such as "murder is wrong," but may be excused when her lack of knowledge is of particular facts about the circumstances (*NE* III.1, 1110b29-1111a7). For example, an agent might be in error about what a glass contains and give what she believes to be an elixir to her friend, when it is actually poison. In this case, the agent's ignorance involves the identity of the liquid itself, not whether or not she should give poison to an innocent person. Particular ignorance, however, can only be excusing when the ignorance is non-culpable; for example, if an agent's ignorance is due to negligence or unnatural passions, she is culpably ignorant (*NE* III.5, 1114a12; *EE* II.9, 1225b11-16). It is no excuse that I am just a careless or negligent sort of person, either, since I am responsible for becoming that sort of person in the first place (*NE* III.5, 1114a2-10). Finally, to be ineligible for blame, the agent must regret her action and feel pain as a result (*NE* III.1, 1110b19-24). If an agent is not distressed by her action, then she cannot claim it was mere ignorance that caused her to act as she did, since she does not regret the action once her ignorance is remedied (1110b29-1111a7).

In situations when all three conditions are met, ignorance may be grounds for excuse, but agents are appropriate targets for blame in all other cases of ignorance since the other cases are ones in which the agent acted *in ignorance* but not *because of ignorance*. When an agent's decision is caused by ignorance (she would not have chosen to do what she did except that she was non-culpably ignorant), this undercuts responsibility for her action since it is her decision (and not her action per se) that is properly blameworthy. When ignorance does not play this causal role, however, then she still would have chosen to act as she did even with full knowledge, and hence she is still blameworthy for her decision.

Aristotle's explanation of exactly when wrongdoing agents are and are not blameworthy thus provides a detailed justification of when a wrongdoer deserves *sungnōmē*. The justification for judging that an agent deserves *sungnōmē* and not blame is based on an appeal to equity; given the excusing conditions, the agent is not morally responsible for his actions since his decision was not blameworthy. If he was ignorant, he might be excused, but only when he was not culpable for his ignorance and when he feels pain and regret afterward, indicating that he acted as he did only because of ignorance. Likewise, force is excusing, precisely because the agent was not in control of his action and did not choose it, so he does not deserve blame for an action he did not contribute to. Thus, Aristotle's justification for forestalling blame in these cases is because it would be inequitable to blame the wrongdoer given the excusing conditions at play.

10.6 *Sungnōmē* and Forgiveness

This Aristotelian explanation of why blame should be forestalled on the grounds of excuse does not fit the practice of forgiving, however. First, *sungnōmē* is applicable in cases where the wrongdoer is *not* blameworthy, whereas forgiveness is only justified when the wrongdoer *is* blameworthy. Excusing (judging that *sungnōmē* is warranted and therefore that blame is not) presumes that an agent is not blameworthy for what she has done, even though the action is wrong, due to exculpating circumstances. *Sungnōmē* does not justify giving up blaming attitudes when an agent is blameworthy since that would not be justified on the grounds of justice, and so the *sungnōmonikon* agent only judges that a wrongdoer is not blameworthy when the wrong action was not up to him in the relevant way. Forgiveness, however, assumes that the wrongdoer *is* blameworthy, or else it would not be up to the wronged agent's discretion to decide whether to give up blame or not. It would be unfair to blame someone for a wrong he is not morally responsible for, and yet I might extend forgiveness even to someone who does deserve continued blame without being unfair. Since forgiveness can be withheld at the wronged agent's discretion or dispensed even when the wrongdoer has made no attempt to right the wrong, forgiveness applies only when the wrongdoer is actually blameworthy, while Aristotle claims that we should not blame the wrongdoer precisely because she is not blameworthy in the first place.

Second, the decision to forgive or not is up to the wronged individual precisely because it does not depend on what the wrongdoer deserves, while the *sungnōmonikon* judge is obligated to recognize all and only valid excusing circumstances since the justification against blaming is on the grounds of justice. If the wrongdoer is not blameworthy, it would not be fair to blame him still, and hence even a wronged agent is not justified in continuing to blame the wrongdoer, in spite of the fact that she was wronged. Moreover, in cases where the wrongdoer is blameworthy, fairness demands that the *sungnōmonikon* agent continues to blame the wrongdoer since that is what he deserves. Forgiveness, however, does not require a judgment of desert and the forgiver may give up on blame for reasons such as mercy for the wrongdoer or the harmed agent's own psychological well-being, even in cases where the wrongdoer does not and never could merit the lifting of blame. Forgiveness, unlike *sungnōmē*, does not give up on blame on the grounds that it would not be just to blame the wrongdoer or because he deserves anything from the harmed agent, and hence, forgiveness and *sungnōmē* are mutually exclusive since they apply in different circumstances. When the wrongdoer is not blameworthy, forgiveness is not needed (and indeed, not appropriate) since equity demands she is excused from blame. Likewise, the wrongdoer cannot claim justice demands the wronged agent give up blame when the wrongdoer is indeed blameworthy; while the wrongdoer may choose to do so on the basis of mercy or for other reasons of her own, she is not obligated by the demands of equity to do so.

10.7 Aristotelian Forgiveness

I have contended so far that Aristotle's ethical account not only does not justify the practice of forgiveness but is actually incompatible with forgiveness by examining the justification and nature of *sungnōmē*, which offers excuse rather than forgiveness. But this does not yet show that forgiveness is not found elsewhere in Aristotle's ethical account. Beyond the passages specifically referring to *sungnōmē*, there are other passages that have been seen as offering support for the claim that forgiveness is virtuous for Aristotle. Two particular virtues seem like they might be promising candidates on this score: first, the virtuous person is said to have the virtue of mildness or good temper (*praotēs*), which concerns the proper expression of anger, and second, the great-souled man (the *megalopsychos*), who is the exemplar of the virtue of *megalopsychia*, is said to overlook wrongs done to him. Even if extending *sungnōmē* to a wrongdoer is not equivalent to forgiving him, these passages may suggest that Aristotle does have an account of forgiveness. I will argue, however, that neither of these virtues offer evidence that forgiving is what a virtuous agent should do, so I turn to those virtues next.

10.8 *Praotēs* and Forgiveness

Aristotle's account of the virtue of mildness or good temper (*praotēs*) is sometimes seen as evidence that an Aristotelian agent should be forgiving.¹⁶ According to Aristotle, it is virtuous to be someone of good or even temper, who “gets angry about the things one should and with the people one should, and also as and when and for as long as one should,” and who thus avoids servility and irascibility, the vices of either extreme (*NE* IV.5, 1125b31-33).¹⁷ Additionally, the good tempered person is not revengeful, is disposed to recognize valid excuses, and errs more toward the deficiency of anger than toward its excess (1126a13).¹⁸ To be revengeful, as Aristotle indicates later in the passage, is to exact punishment above what is demanded by justice, and this is precisely what the excess of anger (irascibility) consists in (1126a25-27).¹⁹ Irascibility is not merely pursuing an excessive amount

¹⁶As suggested in Curzer 2012, 161n21.

¹⁷This and subsequent passages utilize Taylor's 2006 translation.

¹⁸Cf. *EE* II.5, 1222b1-4.

¹⁹It is not merely even revenge (an eye for an eye) that the irascible person seeks, but punishment over and beyond that. As Aristotle explains in *Rhet.* II.2, an agent is angry in response to a slight, which is a particular kind of perceived injustice. Reclaiming what one is owed (whether that is property, honor, or something else) may require punishment or blame, but the demands of rectificatory justice require that an agent receive precisely what would make her even, and not more than that (*NE* V.4, 1132a6-20). Thus, the agent who gets angry in the right amount, towards the right people, in the right situations, and for the correct length of time is just; she knows what she deserves, and she demands no more and no less. Since good temper concerns justice in relation to

of punishment, but may also involve pursuing it with excessive force, such as striking or verbally abusing a person in anger (*NE* V.1, 1129b22).²⁰

The appeasement and quieting of anger, as Aristotle explains, comes about in a variety of ways: when the wrongdoer did not intend to slight, when a wrongdoer humbles himself and begs or apologizes, when the wrongdoer has been sufficiently punished, and when the wronged agent owes a debt of kindness to the wrongdoer (*Rhet.* II.3, 1380a10-28). These are all cases in which the wronged agent is required to give up anger because justice has been fulfilled. Howard Curzer argues that this discussion about giving up anger shows that the good-tempered agent eschews anger, and in doing so, she forgives the wrongdoer.²¹ Not all are eligible for forgiveness on this reading of Aristotle, however, since the wronged agent does not let go of anger toward wrongdoers who do not apologize, who are not humbled, or who have not been sufficiently punished since they do not deserve forgiveness. Such wrongdoers are not eligible for the abatement of anger, and instead, the wronged agent will respond with anger and retaliation. Since rectificatory justice is concerned with compensating wrongdoers so that their losses are equalized and the good-tempered agent seeks to reclaim her losses through retaliation, Curzer argues that the principles of rectificatory justice dictate the “right rule” (*orthos logos*) of good temper. That this is so is demonstrated by the fact that the principles of rectificatory justice are exactly in accord with the grounds Aristotle provides for the giving up of anger: it is appropriate to do so when it is equitable to do so. Curzer concludes that although Aristotle does not support unconditional forgiveness (the view that it is always morally permissible to forgive), he does provide an account of conditional forgiveness.²²

But if, as Curzer argues, the principles of rectificatory justice really determine when the good-tempered agent should be angry and when she should not, then deciding when anger should be given up is not up to the agent’s own assessment of whether she is ready, but rather, it comes down to whether it is just to do so or not. Giving up anger in those circumstances thus does not fit the paradigmatic model of forgiveness, since forgiveness is voluntary and up to the agent. The forgiver is morally permitted to forgive whomever and whenever she sees fit to do so; she need not do so only when it is just to do so. The good-tempered agent, however, cannot do so since that would be servile and vicious, according to Aristotle. Moreover, this is borne out by Aristotle’s later claim that those who give up anger when it is not warranted on grounds of desert are slavish:

anger and retaliation, it concerns whether a wronged person’s anger and retaliatory strategies are proportional to the wrong suffered, so that the wronged person will receive both her property (or whatever else has been damaged or taken) and her honor back. She, however, does not additionally gain from the wrong done; she is merely recompensed. To gain additionally (through additional acts of revenge, for instance) would not be just, and this is what the irascible person seeks.

²⁰ Cf. *EE* III.3, 1231b5-27.

²¹ Curzer 2012, 160–161.

²² Curzer 2012, 158 and 161.

The deficiency, whether it is called unanger or whatever, incurs blame; for people who do not get angry over what they should seem silly, as do those who do not get angry as or when they should or with the people they should. They seem not to notice those things nor to be distressed by them, and as they do not get angry, they are not apt to defend themselves; but putting up with being dragged through the mud oneself and standing by watching it happen to people who belong to one is slavish. (*NE* IV.5, 1126a3-8)

Although the nameless defect is what the mild person will err toward, it is still erring to act in accordance with the defect, since it is a vice, and Aristotle here further describes such a person as unable to perceive that he is being harmed, insensitive to what should pain him, or unwilling to stand up for himself. To be unwilling to stand up for what he justly deserves is, in Aristotle's estimation, slavish behavior, since such a person fails to show the proper concern for his own status and worth.²³ By accepting diminished honor, he receives less than he deserves, and hence, allows himself to be treated unjustly. Thus, just as an appropriate judgment that a wrongdoer deserves *sungnōmē* depends on that judgment being equitable, so also the amount of anger and the extent to which retaliation should be pursued depends on how much is necessary to restore justice.

For Aristotle, honor and status play a significant role in determining what is virtuous to do. Anger is aroused for Aristotle on the grounds that the harmed person has been undeservedly slighted and not treated with an appropriate amount of respect (*Rhet.* II.2, 1378a30-31). Anger, then, is importantly connected to relative status: when one's honor has been impinged by someone perceived to be unworthy, then anger is felt. When an agent is harmed and thereby humiliated, his honor is damaged, and it must be restored before it is appropriate that he give up anger and blame.²⁴ Honor may be restored by the wrongdoer humbling himself before the wronged agent or by the wronged agent undertaking retaliatory actions against the wrongdoer, including anger, revenge, and official punishment. That honor and justice are connected in such a way to anger and retaliation depends on the assumption that when an agent is harmed, he loses his honor, and the act of retaliation is a way of restoring it.²⁵ Since justice demands that the wronged party receive back exactly what he has lost (not more or less), Aristotle agrees with Homer that it is unseemly to be angry at those who have died, since the offender has already received the ultimate amount of retribution, and so the harmed agent's honor has been restored already (*Rhet.* II.3.16, 1380b25-30).²⁶ This is also why the wrongdoer debasing himself and making restitution are also circumstances in which lifting blame is

²³ See also *Rhet.* I.9, 1367a19-20, where Aristotle says that it is noble (*kalon*) to avenge and not to come to terms with the one who has harmed you: "to retaliate is just, and the just is honorable, and not to be defeated is characteristic of a brave man." And in *EE* III.4, 1231b11-15, Aristotle says the servile person is one who is "abject in the face of insults."

²⁴ For others who agree with this underlying assumption, see Cairns 2003, 17, 39-40; Konstan 2010, 25; and Curzer 2012, 146-147 and 157-159.

²⁵ *Rhet.* II.3, esp. II.3.5-6, 1380a14-26 and II.3.14, 1380b13-15.

²⁶ See Homer, *Iliad* 24.54.

appropriate, since honor is also restored by public acknowledgment of wrongdoing. That one's own honor is so important for Aristotle's agent explains why the wrongdoer's self-abasement is such an effective strategy for eliminating anger. Since the honor one possesses is relative to the honor of others, a reduction in the wrongdoer's status (by abasing himself) increases and thus restores the status of the harmed agent.²⁷

However, since justice demands that everything the wronged agent has lost be restored before letting go of blame, it is only once this occurs (either through revenge, restitution, or the wrongdoer's self-abasement) that the wronged agent may then let go of anger and resentment, as well as a desire for revenge (*Rhet.* II.3.5-6, 1380b14-26).²⁸ To give it up before complete restoration would not be equitable, and, indeed, would indicate that the wronged agent was insufficiently concerned with his own honor.

But although forgiving agents *may* decide to wait to forgive for full restoration, forgiving is not contingent on a harm being fully repaired and having one's honor restored. Forgiveness is up to the agent who is forgiving; she may choose to forgive when she wishes, not only when equality has been restored. This is the real crux of the distinction between Aristotle's account of good temper and that of forgiveness: for Aristotle, it would be servile and hence downright vicious to forgive many actions that actually need forgiveness if anger and blame are to end, since it is only appropriate to forgive when certain conditions have been met. Unlike the good-tempered agent, the forgiving agent may give up anger and blame when she chooses, not only when it is fair to do so. It is up to her to decide that it is time to forgive, whereas on Aristotle's account, letting go of anger should be done when—and only when—the demands of justice have been met. Since anger is mollified, not on the basis of forgiveness and the wronged party's decision, but rather through revenge and reparations, Aristotle's virtue of good temper offers further support for my argument that Aristotle does not have an account of forgiveness. Curzer is right that since the virtue of good temper moderates the role of anger in traditional, Homeric virtuous life, good temper would be the prime place for an Aristotelian account of forgiveness. However, when it is appropriate to give up blame and anger for Aristotle is still determined by the demands of justice, not by a voluntary act, and thus Aristotle's account of good temper is not an account of forgiveness.

10.9 *Megalopsychia* and Forgiveness

An account of forgiveness is also though by some to be found in the Aristotelian virtue of *megalopsychia*. Aristotle's example of the *megalopsychos*, the great-souled man (or, more famously, the magnanimous man), shows the importance of honor's

²⁷ Konstan goes even further, claiming that the appeasing of anger in Aristotle's account is "focused entirely on relations of status and power" (2010, 25).

²⁸ Cf. Aristotle, *De Anima* 403a29ff.

restoration before anger and blame are justifiably given up. As Aristotle's discussion of good temper makes clear, the virtuous person will be concerned for his honor (to lack appropriate concern would be slavish and servile), and as honor is both the greatest of the external goods and fitting for his virtue, the *megalopsychos* is concerned with being appropriately honored (*NE* IV.3, 1124a4-7).²⁹ He is someone who knows what honor he deserves and is unwilling to ever be in debt to anyone else, though he is not loath to have others in debt to him.³⁰ This is because the *megalopsychos* recognizes that he is superior in virtue and honor and benefitting others is "the mark of the superior," but receiving benefit from someone else marks him as an inferior (1124b10).³¹

Since the *megalopsychos* is self-sufficient, needing only some goods of fortune, he does not need honor, and therefore he attaches little importance to it. As evidence of this claim, Curzer points to 1124a13-17, where Aristotle says that the *megalopsychos* will not be overjoyed even by honor.³² But while Curzer is surely right to push back against those critics who say the *megalopsychos* is obsessed with honor, the *megalopsychos*' connection to honor seems to be stronger than this. The self-sufficiency that the *megalopsychos* possesses is not self-sufficiency without other people. As Aristotle himself indicates, human beings are naturally political and so any person will not only be a member of her community but will also be shaped by it and its values (*NE* I.7, 1097b8-11).³³ Moreover, Aristotle shows the importance of honor to the *megalopsychos* by contrasting its importance to wealth and power in the exact passage that Curzer quotes as proof of the *megalopsychos*' self-sufficiency:

So the *megalopsychos* will, as we have said, be concerned above all with honour, but he will also have a moderate attitude to riches and power and all good and ill fortune, however it turns out, not being overjoyed in good fortune or especially cast down by ill fortune. For he will not even have these attitudes toward honor. (*NE* IV.3, 1124a12-17)

²⁹This, of course, does not mean that his life is aimed exclusively at honor (Aristotle rejects this as the best sort of life at 1095b23 and 1159a22-25), nor that honor is the central thing the *megalopsychos* aims at rather than virtue. Rather, the *megalopsychos* certainly values and seeks virtue for its own sake, but he also recognizes that honor is the greatest of the external goods (1123b20), and as such, is worth pursuing.

³⁰Along with these tendencies, Aristotle also describes the great-souled person as moving and speaking slowly and in a deep voice (1125a12-16), although it is hard to see directly why those characteristics are relevant. I suspect they are relevant because Aristotle is attempting to reconcile Homeric honor culture with his own theory of the virtues, and as a result, Aristotle is importing cultural values that were generally held then. My suggestion is not the stronger claim that Aristotle is simply importing cultural values without modification, but the weaker claim that Aristotle is attempting to combine what he sees as the good parts of those cultural factors with his own account of virtue.

³¹And more generally, 1124b9-15.

³²Curzer 2012, 124–125.

³³See Held 1993, 103.

Here Aristotle's claim is not that honor is unimportant to the *megalopsychos*, but rather that even being honored does not inspire in him great joy or sadness. Honor is contrasted with wealth and power, and since both are choiceworthy for the sake of honor, if anything were to bring great joy to the *megalopsychos*, it would be honor. That even honor does not do this is not primarily a point about honor, but rather, about the *megalopsychos*' certainty of his own goodness. That his disposition is not significantly overjoyed by honor, however, does not mean that he does not seek it; Aristotle says that he has the right concern for honor (1123b17-22) and that he is pleased to receive it since he deserves it (1124a5), indicating that it is important to him even though he rejects it when given for the wrong reasons or by the wrong people (1124a10-11). And this seems only as it should be, given the centrality of the virtue of justice for Aristotle. Since honor should be given on the basis of virtue and the *megalopsychos* is virtuous, he deserves to be honored (1123b22-24). Receiving what one deserves is precisely what justice demands, and thus, this is exactly what we should expect on Aristotle's account.

The *megalopsychos*' knowledge of his own worthiness of honor and his pleasure in receiving appropriate honor thus offers insight into Aristotle's statement that the *megalopsychos* will overlook wrongs:

Nor is he given to admiration for nothing is great in his eyes. Nor does he bear grudges, for it is not appropriate for a great-souled person to keep things, especially bad things, in mind, but rather to overlook them. (1125a3-5)

Curzer uses the fact that they overlook wrongs as evidence that *megalopsychos* is forgiving.³⁴ I contend, however, that in overlooking wrongs, the *megalopsychos* does not forgive. Rather, I agree with C. C. W. Taylor's commentary on this passage that keeping a grudge would be beneath the *megalopsychos* since counting a lesser person's insult as real harm would put him in an inferior position.³⁵ In other words, the concern for his own honor is precisely why the *megalopsychos* does not hold grudges: recognition of the wrong done as a harm would undercut his honor, since it would be unbecoming for a superior person to be harmed by an inferior person. That this is the correct interpretation of his motivation is indicated both by the immediate context (the preceding explanation of why the *megalopsychos* emphasizes his superiority in greatness in comparison to others as the reason why he avoids admiring, living at the disposal of others, flattering, and so on), by the passage's overall focus on the worthiness of the *megalopsychos*, and by the later comment that the *megalopsychos*, as he is concerned with great matters, does not complain about small things (1125a8-10).

³⁴Curzer 2012, 127n17 and 161n21. Curzer takes the category of forgiveness to be quite broad, but it is unclear what exactly he takes Aristotle to be sanctioning here, since he immediately follows this by noting that forgiving or excusing the unforgivable (presumably as laid out by Aristotle's conditions on *sungnōmē*) would be inirascible (the vice of deficiency in relation to good temper). This is in response to Griswold 2007, 8, who claims that the *megalopsychos* is not forgiving on the grounds that the *megalopsychos* has no need to be forgiven because he is morally perfect, and hence sees no role for forgiveness in an account of ethics.

³⁵Taylor 2006, 225.

It might be thought, however, that this ignores the issues of equity that are so central to Aristotle's account. If the *megalopsychos* truly is worthy of great honor and yet is dishonored, he does not get what he deserves and overlooking the offense seems to let the wrongdoer off the hook before equity is achieved. However, I suggest that equity is not at issue in these kinds of cases because it is clear to the *megalopsychos* and to everyone else around that the insulter is beneath contempt, and thus the insult does not impinge on the superior man's honor. Since the insulter does not actually harm the *megalopsychos*, neither is the insulter an appropriate target of forgiveness, either. While the *megalopsychos* may not bear grudges or get angry, he does not forgive or excuse the offender, either; rather, he overlooks the offense altogether. Just as the *megalopsychos* is indifferent to honor given for small achievements (1124a10-11), so, too, he will be indifferent to small offenses (or those from small, inferior people), since it would be unbecoming and petty for him to hold a grudge against someone less worthy than him. The act thus is beneath his contempt, in the same way a person might respond to an outrageous allegation by saying "I won't even dignify that with a response" and ignoring the action altogether.³⁶ In ignoring the insult, the *megalopsychos* is not choosing to do so on the basis of mercy or simply because it is the right time for him, as a person who forgives might; rather, the offense is too petty for him to take notice of at all and therefore there is no blame to be forgiven. The *megalopsychos*' emotional security and knowledge of his own virtue ensures that he has no need to worry about the (obviously false) claims of significantly inferior individuals.³⁷ His response is based on the evaluative norms of what is worthy of his notice, not on a voluntary act to forgive the offender, or a decision that changing his attitude toward the offender is desired. Thus, just as with good temper, Aristotle's account of the virtue of *megalopsychia* modifies traditional Homeric demands for honor at all costs, but nevertheless, the account he offers is not one of forgiveness.

10.10 Conclusion

Since blame is justified on the grounds of equity for Aristotle, it is right to blame only when it is fair to do so, and it is also unfair to forgive or lift blame when the wrongdoer does not deserve it. Thus, the virtuous Aristotelian agent blames wrongdoers when (and only when) they are blameworthy for their wrong actions. Since *sungnōmē* is appropriate only on the grounds of desert, whether praise, excuse, or blame applies in a particular circumstance depends on which of those would be fair. The virtuous agent will judge that a wrongdoer is the deserving recipient of a judgment of *sungnōmē* rather than blame on the basis of fairness alone and not because

³⁶ Griswold 2007, 8–9 and 16 suggests this type of response would be characteristic of the *megalopsychos* as well. See also Annas 1995, 119n239 on the indifference of the *megalopsychos* as well.

³⁷ Dover 1974, 195.

she wishes to lift blame for reasons of her own, such as mercy. Likewise, when someone exhibits the virtue of good temper, she does not get angry or blame easily, but she does blame when it is warranted. Failing to blame when a wrongdoer deserves it would be as unjust as blaming him when he does not deserve it, and so she does not choose to forgive him and stop blaming him unless he comes to deserve it. Furthermore, the virtuous agent may, at times, overlook attempted wrongs done against her, but not because she forgives the wrongdoer. Instead, in employing the virtue of *megalopsychia*, the virtuous person recognizes that the offender or the offense is too petty to take notice of. In each case, then, Aristotle's virtuous agent may refrain from blaming the wrongdoer, but she does not forgive him.

As the justification for the application and lifting of blame in the discussions of *sungnōmē*, *praotēs*, and *megalopsychia* show, the reason why the virtuous agent does not forgive is because in forgiving, the wronged agent is taken to accept and endorse a state of affairs where neither the wrongdoer nor the wronged party receive what they deserve. Given the centrality of justice to Aristotle's account of virtue, it is no surprise that fairness is a primary concern in blaming wrongdoers. Letting go of blame in cases where full restoration of the harm has not been accomplished would be unjust, since Aristotle's account of justice is deeply concerned with each individual getting what he or she deserves. But cases where nothing the wrongdoer has done or could do would bridge the gap and make the wronged individual whole again—the exact cases that never could be eligible for the removal of blame on Aristotle's account—are precisely the sorts of cases where forgiveness is most paradigmatically found. Therefore, it is not merely that forgiveness is a practice left out of Aristotle's ethical account, but instead that his account of blame is incompatible with forgiveness altogether.³⁸

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