
Liberating Moral Traditions: Saga Morality and Aristotle's "Megalopsychia"

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LIBERATING MORAL TRADITIONS: SAGA MORALITY AND
ARISTOTLE'S *MEGALOPSYCHIA*

ABSTRACT. It is a matter for both surprise and disappointment that so little has been written from a philosophical perspective about the moral tradition enshrined in Europe's oldest living literature, the Icelandic sagas. The main purpose of the present essay is to start to ameliorate this shortcoming by analysing and assessing the moral code bequeathed to us by the saga literature. To do so, I draw attention to the striking similarities between saga morality and what tends to be called an 'ancient moral outlook' (with special reference to Aristotle's much-maligned virtue of *megalopsychia*) and then try to defend the credentials of both outlooks in so far as they clash, or seem to clash, with certain aspects of a 'modern moral outlook.'

KEY WORDS: Aristotle's *megalopsychia*, humility, Icelandic sagas, moral luck, morality: ancient, modern, shame

1.

During the last quarter of a century, an ethical theory variously described as 'virtue ethics,' 'virtue-based ethics,' or even 'neo-Aristotelianism' (since it is seen as being derived from Aristotle) has come into vogue among moral philosophers as a potential rival to deontological and utilitarian theories. According to virtue ethics, an action is morally right if and only if it is what a virtuous person would do in the given circumstances; a virtuous person being defined as one who acts virtuously, i.e., who possesses and displays the virtues. Furthermore, to avoid circularity, the virtues are considered to be those character traits a human being needs to achieve *eudaimonia*: to flourish or live well.¹ While this new trend is commonly spoken of as a revival of an Aristotelian or, more generally, an ancient moral outlook (hereafter, for convenience of exposition, labelled *AMO*²), most

¹For a clear account of the formal and substantive framework of modern virtue theory and its relations to deontological and utilitarian theories, see Hursthouse, R., "Virtue Theory and Abortion," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 20 (1991), pp. 223–246.

²It may be controversial to what extent Aristotelianism can be equated with 'the ancient moral outlook,' for there are obviously ancient moral theories such as those of Plato and the Stoics which embody conceptions radically different from those of Aristotle (and arguably from those of most ordinary ancients), e.g., about the relationship between moral achievement and moral luck. For our present purposes, it can be left open to



modern virtue theorists seem to think that considerable progress has been made in our understanding of human flourishing since Aristotle. Thus, their classifications and substantive accounts of the virtues are often strikingly different from those of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. For instance, Aristotle's crown of the virtues, *megalopsychia* ('greatness of soul,' 'magnanimity'³), hardly gets a mention, and when it does, it is emphatically rejected.

Even more recently, however, a number of philosophers have challenged this progressivism and advanced a case for a purer form of *AMO* as a viable option in the modern moral arena. These 'purists' claim that "when we think most rigorously and realistically" – or when we distinguish "what we think from what we think that we think" – our deepest moral convictions are not so different from the ancients. Moreover, if and when these happen to clash, *AMO* may simply be "in better condition."⁴ As against that, other philosophers have objected that there still is a wide gulf between *AMO* and our modern moral outlook (hereafter: *MMO*), impregnated as the latter is with Christian and Kantian values even in those who pretend to have no truck with either Christian or Kantian ethics. Hence, endorsing a pure Aristotelian conception of the virtues may require a more radical abandonment of *MMO* than the purists have given us to believe.⁵ Such sceptical voices are undoubtedly right in that embracing *AMO* amounts to more than ridding ourselves of a few embarrassing delusions about what we think that we think. Nevertheless, the purists have achieved their primary goal of elevating a moral tradition from its previous status as an item of mere historical interest to that of a serious contender for our allegiance: an outlook to be judged on its own merits here and now, by reflective moral agents, as superior or inferior to its rivals.

the reader who is sceptical about the homogeneity of ancient moral points of view to understand *AMO* as referring to the 'Aristotelian,' rather than the 'ancient,' moral outlook.

³Throughout the essay, I shall refer to this virtue by its Greek name and to people possessing it as *megalopsychos* (sing.) and *megalopsychoi* (pl.), rather than using any of the available English translations which are either cumbersome or do not capture well the spirit of the virtue. I amend references to Terence Irwin's translation of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., Inc., 1985) accordingly.

⁴Casey, J., *Pagan Virtue* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), p. 226; Williams, B., *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 4, 91. See also Curzer, H. J., "Aristotle's Much Maligned *Megalopsychos*," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 69 (1991), pp. 131–151, where Curzer argues, among other things, that Aristotle's account of *megalopsychia* is not, as is commonly thought, at variance with Christian virtues.

⁵See Cordner, C., "Aristotelian Virtue and Its Limitations," *Philosophy* 69 (1994), pp. 291–316, esp. pp. 294–297.

Also in recent years, the moral tradition enshrined in northern Europe's oldest living literature, the *Icelandic Sagas* and the ethical testimony of *Hávamál*, has been paid renewed attention after having for a long time received more neglect than it deserves. Unfortunately, however, recent (as well as older) writings on this tradition have not been in the spirit of *philosophia perennis*, but rather that of an antiquarian reconstruction: the transference of bones from one graveyard to another. In other words, few if any attempts have been made to explore the relevance of the moral outlook of the sagas (hereafter *SMO*) to modern concerns. It is a matter for both surprise and disappointment that so little work has been done in a field where there is so much to do.

The main purpose of the present essay is to start to ameliorate this shortcoming, by analysing and assessing – as cursorily as is required by the limits of a journal article – the moral code bequeathed to us by the saga literature. To do so, I draw attention to the striking similarities between *SMO* and *AMO* and then try to defend the credentials of both outlooks in so far as they clash, or seem to clash, with certain aspects of *MMO*. More specifically, section II rehearses the essential framework of Aristotle's much-maligned virtue of *megalopsychia*, both because it holds the key to other important ingredients of *AMO* and because it is particularly germane to a comparison of *AMO* and *SMO*. Section III gives a brief overview of saga scholarship, relating to the morality of the sagas, and subsequently presents a model of the moral typology of saga characters. Section IV attends to those features of *AMO* and *SMO* which seem most foreign to *MMO*; the discussion of which then leads us (in section V) to conclusions about the moral viability of the former.

At this point, two caveats are in order. First, I am aware of possible reservations about whether the three very broad types of position distinguished (*AMO*, *SMO*, and *MMO*) are sufficiently clear formulations for us to be able to say anything useful or enlightening about them and their relationship. I shall try to specify what I mean by *SMO* in section III. However, as far as *AMO* and *MMO* are concerned, I simply take as my starting point the somewhat vague and streamlined conceptions abroad in recent philosophical literature on the moralities of 'ancients' and 'moderns.' I hope that some important conclusions about the aptness of these conceptions will gradually reveal themselves, during the course of my discussion, although my chief aim is to dig out substantive moral, rather than historical or conceptual, truths.

Second, to anticipate at once the reasonable objection that my aim is overly ambitious and that at least a book-length study is required to do justice to saga morality, let me repeat that my aim is to *start* a project rather

than to *finish* it – that is, to indicate the general form which a further debate about this issue must, I think, take and offer some suggestions as to its outcome. The most important question for the moment is how a highly interesting moral tradition can be liberated from its present state of academic mummification.

2.

In Aristotle's analysis of the moral virtues in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, the virtue of *megalopsychia* occupies a central position; a fact which, as mentioned before, has rarely been acknowledged during the recent revival of Aristotelian virtue ethics.

The most important characteristic of the *megalopsychos* – he who possesses the virtue of *megalopsychia* – is that he “thinks himself worthy of great things and is really worthy of them.” True to his famous architectonic of virtue as a mean between two extremes, the vices of excess and deficiency, Aristotle presents the *megalopsychos* as following the golden mean between two other character types: the *vain*, “who thinks he is worthy of great things when he is not,” and the *pusillanimous*, “who thinks he is worthy of less than he is worthy of.”⁶ The conditions of this virtue, and its respective extremes, thus appear as *greatness* and *self-knowledge*, that is, on the one hand the merits of a person and on the other the person's estimate (realistic or not) of those merits.

But then two problems turn up in trying to fit *megalopsychia* into the usual architectonic. Aristotle is himself aware of the first problem when he says that the *megalopsychos* “is at the extreme in so far as he makes great claims. But in so far as he makes them rightly, he is intermediate.” In other words: *megalopsychia* only presents a mean if we view it from the standpoint of one of its two conditions, self-knowledge, and there it actually coincides with the fourth character type: he who is temperate without *megalopsychia*, i.e., who “is worthy of little and thinks so.”⁷ However, viewed from the standpoint of the other condition, greatness, *megalopsychia* is in a certain sense an extreme: you cannot go further on the greatness continuum than being great. So the virtue of *megalopsychia* is obviously not as simple as, say, that of courage which fits snugly into the middle between rashness and cowardice. The other problem is that self-knowledge seems to be an *intellectual*, rather than a *moral*, virtue. However,

⁶Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, pp. 97–98 [1123b].

⁷*Ibid.*

megalopsychia is listed among the moral virtues, that is, as a mean of actions and passions.⁸ Perhaps both these problems rest on our insistence to look upon *megalopsychia* as any other moral virtue. Although it is classified as such in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle clearly points out its unique position as “a sort of adornment of the virtues.” *Megalopsychia* is a higher-order virtue which makes the other virtues greater and “does not arise without them.”⁹ This is made even more obvious by the fact that we have so far been able to speak, in turn, of *megalopsychia* as a ‘virtue’ and a ‘character type.’ Thus, it should be of no surprise that it does not fit into exactly the same architectonic as the other, subordinate, virtues.

Before proceeding further, it might be helpful to present a model of the relations between *megalopsychia* and the other character types:

		GREATNESS	
		<i>Worthy of much</i>	<i>Worthy of little</i>
SELF-KNOWLEDGE	<i>Thinks himself worthy of much</i>	The <i>megalopsychos</i>	The vain
	<i>Thinks himself worthy of little</i>	The pusillanimous	The temperate without <i>megalopsychia</i>

So far, everything sounds clear, but the question now arises why some people are worthy of great things and others of small. Aristotle says that the *megalopsychos* “has the right concern with honours and dishonours”; we can call those the external criteria of greatness. However, plainly, gaining external respect is not a sufficient condition of greatness. The main point is that the honour be deserved; and deserved honour is only “awarded to good people.” Hence, the true *megalopsychos* “must be good”: must possess “greatness in each virtue.”¹⁰ It is vital to keep in mind in the

⁸For a further discussion of this, see Curzer, H. J., “A Great Philosopher’s Not So Great Account of Great Virtue: Aristotle’s Treatment of ‘Greatness of Soul,’” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 20 (1990), pp. 517–538, p. 527.

⁹Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, p. 99 [1124a].

¹⁰*Ibid.*, pp. 98–99 [1123b].

following that the *megalopsychos* cultivates all the other virtues to a fault: he is great because of his own moral greatness.

Since deserved honour is an external criterion of greatness, the *megalopsychos* is concerned about gaining his merited respect:

And when he receives great honours from excellent people, he will be moderately pleased, thinking that he is getting what is proper to him, or even less. For there can be no honour worthy of complete virtue ... But if he is honoured by just anyone, or for something small, he will entirely disdain it; for that is not what he is worthy of. And similarly, he will disdain dishonour; for it will not be justly attached to him.¹¹

From this passage, and others following it, we might be tempted to conclude that *megalopsychia* actually has three main components rather than just two. In addition to the two above conditions: of greatness (which we now know means greatness of virtue) and self-knowledge, the *megalopsychos* is highly concerned with his own worthiness or respect, both in his own eyes and those of others. This concern reverberates throughout all his attitudes and conduct and makes him exude a certain ‘aura’ which cannot simply be reduced to (although fully compatible with) the two main conditions of the virtue.

Why has this crown of the virtues fallen into desuetude and disrepute? One of the reasons lies in some specific remarks made later in Aristotle’s discussion of *megalopsychia*, which tend to leave a nasty taste in readers’ mouths, such as that the *megalopsychos* is “inactive and lethargic except for some great honour and achievement,” and that he is ashamed of having to receive benefits from others, thus returning “more good than he has received; for in this way the original giver will be repaid, and will also have incurred a new debt to him.”¹² Holding these remarks in view, many people have been tempted to write the *megalopsychos* off as obsessed with honour, arrogant, unneighbourly and unable to form deep friendships. Howard Curzer has recently lessened the severity of such accusations by subjecting the apparently distasteful remarks to a more positive critical scrutiny in light of their textual context. We must not forget that the *megalopsychos* is *ex hypothesi* modest, as opposed to those who think “they are superior to other people” and “despise everyone else” – arrogant people being consigned to the category of the vain – nor that he has a self-sufficient, “moderate attitude to riches and power and every sort of good and bad fortune,” and even to honours bestowed upon him. Moreover, a person unwilling to stir a finger to help his neighbours and devoid of true friends

¹¹*Ibid.*, pp. 99–100 [1124a].

¹²*Ibid.*, pp. 101–102 [1124b].

would hardly be described as one who finds it proper to “help eagerly” and “cannot let anyone else, except a friend, determine his life.”¹³ Where everything else fails, Curzer can correctly point out that any repelling descriptions of the *megalopsychos*’ attitudes or practices must remain subordinate to the central condition of his possessing all the virtues.¹⁴

However, there is, I believe, a deeper reason why people tend to be disturbed by Aristotle’s description of *megalopsychia*, as well as that of some other related virtues such as magnificence. There are namely various elements in these descriptions which seem to contrast sharply with what I have already labelled as *MMO*. It may, in other words, be the totality of Aristotle’s account and its general background assumptions, rather than any specific scattered remarks, which make moderns so suspicious of it. I shall return to those general features in section IV, but prior to that, a survey of saga morality awaits us.

3.

The Icelandic sagas, most of which were written in the thirteenth century, deal with events which are supposed to have happened three hundred years earlier. Centuries of saga scholarship have produced a steadily growing mountain of studies on the sagas as literary works and historical artefacts. The recurring theme of these tales was once summed up, half-seriously, as that of ‘farmers fighting.’ In my view, many so-called accounts of saga morality have scarcely added much to that two-word description. The lack of serious engagement with the moral dimension of the sagas may partly be palliated by the fact that until the last decades of this century most studies were preoccupied with questions about *authorship* (who wrote which saga?) and *authenticity* (which persons really existed?; which events really took place?); not with questions about the evaluation of the behaviour of saga characters. However, it was precisely this emphasis which lent monumental tedium to much of saga scholarship and alienated many potential saga-lovers.

The approaches of those few who have given thought to *SMO* have traditionally fallen into two categories, both of which focus on the didactic intentions of saga writers and on their narratives as works of religious and moral edification. According to the *romantic* interpretation, the sagas exemplify the values of ‘Nordic heathendom’: a pagan, explicitly anti-

¹³*Ibid.*, pp. 101–102 [1124b–1125a].

¹⁴See Curzer, “Aristotle’s Much Maligned *Megalopsychos*.”

Christian cult and morality, glorifying pride and vengeance. By contrast, the *humanistic* interpretation understands the sagas as “Christian lessons about the well-deserved defeat of those who show excessive pride and arrogance.”¹⁵ The differences between these starkly opposed approaches thus turn on the question what kind of an example the actions of saga characters were meant to set to the readers.

Younger scholars tend to be sceptical of this very *Problemstellung*. They complain that both traditional approaches fail to recognize the social roots of saga morality – hagridden as these approaches are by wrestlings with the relative influence of heathendom and Christendom and, more generally, by presumptions about the necessary link between religious beliefs and moral conduct.¹⁶ What we are offered instead are Marxist and sociological interpretations. On the *Marxist* one, the moral ideals of the Icelandic Free State, depicted in the sagas, served the interests of the small upper class of wealthy farmers and chieftains. These people fuelled the spirit of heroism and fanned the flames of strife in order to make their subordinates more dependent on them as protectors and arbitrators.¹⁷ Less radical, but more widespread in recent years than this Marxist view, have been the insights of the *sociological* interpretation, perhaps best known internationally for its presentation in MacIntyre’s chapter on ‘heroic societies’ in *After Virtue*.¹⁸ There, MacIntyre claims that man in heroic society “has no hidden depths”; he is simply “what he does,” and to “judge a man therefore is to judge his actions”¹⁹ – actions which must be exclusively understood with regard to his societal background.

Other, more detailed, versions of the sociological approach follow basically the same pattern. The underlying outlook of the sagas “is not heroic, as has been often argued, but social”;²⁰ the actions of saga characters need to be understood “in terms of the cultural norms and sociomoral principles that were operating in the Icelandic Free State,” that is, “against

¹⁵Árnason, V., “Morality and Social Structure in the Icelandic Sagas,” *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 90 (1991), pp. 157–174, p. 159. I draw here on Árnason’s excellent analysis of the traditional theoretical approaches which he presents in this paper and an earlier one, “Saga og siðferði: Hugleiðingar um túlkun á siðfræði Íslendingasagna,” *Timarit Máls og menningar* 46 (1985), pp. 21–37.

¹⁶See especially Árnason, “Morality and Social Structure in the Icelandic Sagas,” pp. 157–161.

¹⁷See Karlsson, G., “Dyggðir og lestir í Þjóðfélagi Íslendingasagna,” *Timarit Máls og menningar* 46 (1985), pp. 9–19, esp. pp. 14–15.

¹⁸MacIntyre, A., *After Virtue* (London: Duckworth, 1981), ch. 10.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, p. 115.

²⁰Andersson, T. M., “The Icelandic Sagas,” in F. J. Oinas (ed.), *Heroic Epic and Saga* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), p. 157.

the social context of medieval Iceland"; for typically saga characters are bound to their social roles, accepting what they have to do and doing it "without moral reflection."²¹ The enormous power which, for instance, the duty of vengeance wielded over saga characters had nothing to do with official cults, or conscious moral beliefs, but was simply "an automatic reaction," arising directly from social conditions;²² the most important of those being that the loosely organized government (with only legislative and judicial bodies at the annual national assembly, the Althing, but no executive power) left the maintaining of order and enforcing of judicial decrees to concerned private parties.²³ Jesse Byock even suggests why saga scholarship has tried to "pry the sagas loose from their traditional social moorings" in the first place, namely, "in order to raise the status of these tales from bits and pieces of folklore and history to the realm of great literature."²⁴

I have on an earlier occasion tried to put a damper on MacIntyre's equation of saga morality with social structure, by arguing that saga characters do have 'hidden depths' and suggesting that the appearance to the contrary may come about through a misreading of the literary *style* of the sagas, where people's attitudes and feelings are never described 'from the inside' but must always be deduced from descriptions of their outward appearance: their countenance, clothes, kinship, the odd remarks they make, etc.²⁵ More generally, while being sympathetic to laments about the stridency and polarization of older approaches, I have two main reservations about the sociological interpretation. The first is that proponents of this new approach often fail to distinguish between a system of religious beliefs and one of moral beliefs;²⁶ because the effects of official cults seem to have been of little importance

²¹Árnason, "Morality and Social Structure in the Icelandic Sagas," p. 163.

²²Steblyn-Kamenskij, M. I., *The Saga Mind*, K. H. Ober, tr. (Odense: Odense University Press, 1973), p. 105.

²³Byock, J., *Feud in the Icelandic Saga* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982), p. 27.

²⁴*Ibid.*, p. 7. Three more recent works which make use of the sociological approach — Pálsson, G. (ed.), *From Sagas to Society: Comparative Approaches to Early Iceland* (Middlesex: Hisarlik Press, 1992), Miller, W. I., *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking: Feud, Law, and Society in Saga Iceland* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990) and Durrenberger, E. P., *The Dynamics of Medieval Iceland: Political Economy and Literature* (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 1992) — are analyzed and criticized by Richard Gaskins in "Félagsvísindamanna saga," *Skirnir* 171 (1997), pp. 237–259.

²⁵Kristjánsson, K., *Social Freedom: The Responsibility View* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 123.

²⁶Such a conflation mars, e.g., Steblyn-Kamenskij's discussion in *The Saga Mind*. Árnason is not completely free from it either, see his "Morality and Social Structure in the Icelandic sagas," pp. 162, 172.

for daily conduct (contrary to what older scholars supposed), the sociological interpretation concludes that saga characters could not consciously have cherished and acted upon any (non-religious) moral principles either — which is a *non-sequitur*. This leads to a second problem: the failure to take account of systematic moral beliefs expressed by saga characters, and to contentions — which seem to me to be blatantly wrong — about their lack of moral reflection. The hero Gunnar in *Njáls saga* (ch. 54) wonders “whether I am any less manly than other men because I am so much more reluctant to kill than they are.”²⁷ Indeed, saga characters are constantly reflecting upon, hesitating, rejoicing over or regretting their deeds. And in at least one area their moral ideas had profound metaphysical underpinnings, namely, in the upholding of a view about destiny and free will which I have elsewhere termed ‘Promethean Freedom,’ a kind of a Stoic fate-leads-the-willing-and-drags-the-reluctant attitude to their destiny. Although the major ‘outer’ events of a person’s life are predetermined, his freedom resides in his ‘inner’ adaptation to fate and his endeavours to bring about the greatest possible unfolding of his faculties inside the predetermined limits.²⁸ One wonders why a writer such as MacIntyre, who seems to grasp so well the depth of people’s consciousness of fate, and the importance of the desecrating of fate, in the sagas,²⁹ still upholds a thesis about the moral one-dimensionality of saga characters.

As a matter of fact, Árnason (tellingly the only professional philosopher, apart from MacIntyre, to have contributed to this debate) seems to concur with my reservations, in the second of his two insightful papers on saga morality. He admits there that the sociological interpretation “is not without problems of its own”; the most serious one being “its tendency to explain morality away and reduce it to a function of social processes.” Árnason now thinks that the ‘romantics’ were right in maintaining that a code of honour was basic to the moral structure of the sagas, but he sees this concession as being “fully consistent with a sociological perspective on

²⁷*Njáls saga*, as well as most of the major and many of the minor Icelandic sagas, is available in a number of English translations (of varying quality). Direct translations from the sagas in the present essay, while drawing on some of these, are my own, based on Bragi Halldórsson, Jón Torfason, Sverrir Tómasson, Örnólfur Thorsson (eds.), *Íslendingasögur og þættir* (Reykjavík: Svart á hvítu, 1986).

²⁸Kristjánsson, *Social Freedom*, ch. 5.4. See also Sveinsson, E. Ó., *Njáls Saga: A Literary Masterpiece*, P. Schach, tr. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1971), p. 193; and Van den Toorn, M. C., *Ethics and Moral in Icelandic Saga Literature* (Assen: Van Gorcum & Co., 1955), pp. 20–21.

²⁹MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 117.

saga morality.”³⁰ I doubt whether Árnason’s reconciliation of these two radically different interpretative approaches really works, but I shall not pursue that question further here. Let me instead emphasize the fact that none of the approaches described so far has anything to say about the viability of *SMO* as an atemporal, universal moral outlook, relevant to modern concerns. The sociological and Marxist interpretations imply a rejection of any transcultural moral truths, and the ‘romantics’ and ‘humanists’ have simply been more interested in reconstructions than moral evaluations, although some of the former have, in unguarded moments, not been able to hide their admiration of saga heroes as the most perfect creatures who have ever trodden on this earth.

What I want to do is to dive in at the deep end and consider *SMO* as a potential option in the modern world. Since I am not interested in questions about the intentions of saga writers, nor – in the spirit of ethnographic particularism – speculations about the genealogy of moral norms in the Icelandic Free State, I shall set the above-mentioned interpretative approaches aside and rely instead on a more ‘unsophisticated’ reading of the sagas themselves. We must not forget that during Iceland’s dark ages of natural disasters and colonial oppression, the sagas remained as the life and stock of Icelandic culture: the life-blood of the nation. People recounted them and believed in them as accurate historical documents. Gradually, there emerged a kind of a layman’s view of the sagas and the principles they embody; a reading which still prevails in the public consciousness. Árnason may be right in that this reading coincides substantially with the romantic interpretation,³¹ but it is less theoretical and more concerned with the conduct of saga characters than with the intentions of their creators. Let me make it clear that I do not believe we can avail ourselves of any ‘pure,’ ‘pre-theoretical’ interpretation, encompassing the ‘facts’ of the sagas as they lie unproblematically before our gaze. For one thing, saga writers make do with a very limited moral vocabulary; the same Icelandic words having radically different connotations depending on different contexts, thus making standardized translations of moral terms in the sagas into English literally impossible. This and other kinds of elusiveness of saga morality notwithstanding, I shall, for our present purposes, try to take the descriptions of moral conduct in the sagas at the same face value as most other general readers have, without being bothered about why it was described in this way or how it served the needs of saga society. By adopting

³⁰Árnason, “Morality and Social Structure in the Icelandic Sagas,” pp. 157, 167, 172, 173.

³¹*Ibid.*, p. 158.

this ‘layman’s view’ of the sagas, I underline that what I am assessing is not *SMO* as it ‘really was’ or ‘really was meant to look like’ but rather *SMO* as it has typically (at least outside academic circles) been taken to be. Also, I shall leave out of consideration any possible shades of difference between the morality of the sagas and the wisdom proselytized in *Hávamál*: that congeries of moral maxims, aphorism and proverbs which make up the longest of the *Edda* poems. Being much older in origin than the sagas, some scholars have found its message more rustic in nature than the heroic saga ideals.³² Others have, however, sided with the general layman’s view (as I shall do here) that there is no clear distinction to be drawn between the two.³³

In an article published almost seventy years ago, the Icelandic scholar and man of letters Guðmundur Finnbogason drew attention to the strong resemblance between the moral outlook of *Hávamál* and Aristotle’s ethical views, claiming that “exactly the same theory” is at work in both.³⁴ The theory Guðmundur had in mind was that of secular naturalism and as evidence he juxtaposed the emphasis of the two on good sense, friendship and on following the golden mean. *Hávamál* thus instructs us to train our wits – particularly each of us “who widely fareth” – so as not to become a “laughingstock ... among smart wits” (st. 5), and also because he who has to rely on “the wits and words of another” is oft “ill led” (st. 9). We need to learn to make sound choices, and they must be ours; a “shrewd head” on one’s own shoulders being the most “faithful friend” one can find (st. 6). This does not mean that anyone can be completely self-reliant; on the contrary, the friendless individual is like the “fir tree” shielded neither by ‘bark nor bast’ which withers in the field: “why should he linger in life?” (st. 50). We should cultivate friendships through frequent visits (st. 44) and the exchange of gifts (sts. 41, 42) – “but foeman’s friend befriend thou never” (st. 43). Lastly, the golden mean is recommended for all human virtues, even wisdom, for the hearts of those who know more than is needful are seldom happy (sts. 54-56).

³²See especially Van den Toorn, *Ethics and Moral in Icelandic Saga Literature*.

³³Lee M. Hollander introduces his translation of *Hávamál* (“The Sayings of Hár”; Hár = Óðinn) by stating that here “more abundantly than in any other monument, do we find that homely wisdom, that sternly realistic view of life, those not ignoble ethical conceptions, which are given such classic illustration in the Icelandic Sagas,” *The Poetic Edda*, 2nd ed. (Austin, University of Texas Press, 1988), p. 14. Any subsequent direct quotations from *Hávamál* follow Hollander’s translation, with the relevant stanza nos. in brackets.

³⁴Finnbogason, G., “Lífsskoðun Hávamála og Aristoteles,” *Skirnir* 102 (1929), pp. 84–102, p. 99.

Finnbogason's comparisons of such well-known *Hávamál* maxims with the message of the *Nicomachean Ethics* on practical wisdom, friendship and moderation are stimulating, if somewhat lacking in detail. However, he does not mention *megalopsychia* as a possible interface of *SMO* and *AMO*,³⁵ nor does he pursue further his suggestions about a more general harmony of the two. To complement Finnbogason's insights, let me concentrate first on honour. *Hávamál* teaches us that while "cattle die and kinsmen die," as we shall soon die ourselves, only "one thing...will wither never: the doom over each one dead," that is, our "fair fame" (sts. 76, 77). These words epitomize the tremendous stress in the whole of *SMO* on honour. It is no wonder that most people think of it as the key concept in the world of the sagas; honour not merely as an abstract idea but as a deep and passionate experience, a basic condition of life.³⁶ There is hardly a chapter in any saga which does not embody or presuppose this ideal in some way. To pick but one example at random, Kveldúlfur in *Egils saga* (ch. 24), after having been informed that his son has been slain, is chiefly interested in knowing what the son did to his credit before his death: whether he had fought well and nobly, etc. A more famous example is the vendetta between Hallgerður and Bergþóra in *Njáls saga* (chs. 35–45), sparked off as it was by the alleged dishonour done to the former by not placing her properly, compared to her 'rival,' at a dinner table in an autumn feast. Even a child (Grettir) can be so sensitive to lack of respect as to be seriously offended when his father (Ásmundur) asks him to do the undignified job of scratching his back – scratching it so impetuously that the pain makes Ásmundur jump (*Grettis saga*, ch. 14). The scope of honour also comes to light in the innumerable cases of revenge: Steblin-Kamenskij actually counts 297 acts of vengeance in the sagas, most of them bloody.³⁷ Nothing is more noble than reclaiming one's honour by paying back affronts and humiliations, and at the same time redressing the imbalance of justice in the world created by those misdeeds. Inevitably perhaps, because of the lack of centralized executive power in saga society, the acts of vengeance often set up a chain of reactions of escalating proportions, witness the Hallgerður-and-Bergþóra vendetta. Potential enemies even had to be killed pre-emptively as a case of safety first.

³⁵As far as I know, the only writer to have done so is Árnason in a short footnote, "Morality and Social Structure in the Icelandic Sagas," p. 158.

³⁶See, e.g., Hallberg, P., *The Icelandic Saga*, P. Schach, tr. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1962), p. 99.

³⁷*The Saga Mind*, p. 105.

What is important in the present context is not this fateful lacuna in the system of law enforcement in the Icelandic Free State, but rather the fact that in *SMO*, just as in *AMO*, honour and dishonour counted as the external criteria of a person's greatness. However, in *SMO*, as for Aristotle, the honour must be deserved, and such honour is only awarded to good people: people who satisfy the chief condition of human flourishing, defined for us in *Hávamál*, as that of living without vice (st. 68). Living without vice has often been equated with displaying the virtue, commonly mentioned in the sagas, of *drengskapur*: a term which cannot be translated literally into English although 'nobility' or 'manliness' come closest to it. *Drengur* (a person exhibiting *drengskapur*) is etymologically related to *drangur* (an erect rock), thus signifying a moral ballast of honesty, purity of intention, integrity and trustworthiness.³⁸ However, there is reason to believe that in *SMO*, being *drengur* – while *necessary* for goodness – was not a *sufficient* condition of that kind of moral greatness which fostered the highest regard (see further in section IV). If we explore the variety of expressions in the sagas describing human excellences – and here we are helped to no end by the recent machine readable concordance to the sagas³⁹ – we find that persons of the highest moral standing are most typically referred to as *mikilmenni* (variously rendered in English translations as 'great men,' 'great-hearted men,' 'men of great account,' men exhibiting 'manly greatness,' or 'great-minded' persons; the last of which I shall use in the sequel). Every saga introduces one or more great-minded heroes whose mental and physical accomplishments are described in glittering terms, and every reader has his own favourite exemplar, mine being Kjartan Ólafsson in *Laxdæla saga*. *Stórmenni*, which literally means the same as *mikilmenni*, is also sometimes used for the same purpose, but more commonly it denotes dignitaries (as when Þórólfur in *Egils saga*, ch. 10, "befriends all the *stórmenni* of the district"), without moral connotations; alternatively, *qua* adverb (*stórmannlega*) it refers (as in the phrase *veita stórmannlega*) to the act of entertaining lavishly or giving lordly gifts (*Egils saga*, ch. 16; *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 5, etc.).

Great-minded persons (*mikilmenni*) are paragons of moral virtue, guarded by a strong sense of self-respect, and they are not lacking in self-esteem either, being well aware of their own merits.⁴⁰ Aristotle's

³⁸For a further discussion of *drengskapur* and its connotations, see Árnason, "Morality and Social Structure in the Icelandic Sagas," p. 158.

³⁹Bergljót Kristjánsdóttir, Eiríkur Rögnvaldsson, Guðrún Ingólfssdóttir, Örmólfur Thorsson (eds.), *Orðstöðulykill að Íslendingasögnum* (CD-ROM) (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 1996).

⁴⁰I explore the connection between Aristotle's *megalopsychia* and modern notions of self-respect and self-esteem in my "Self-Respect, *Megalopsychia*, and Moral Education,"

megalopsychoi immediately come to mind as perfect corollaries. What is more: Aristotle's model of greatness and self-knowledge can, I believe, be employed to cast light on the typology of saga characters. Apart from the great-minded persons, another group of people who appear on the scene in every saga consists of *litilmenni*: small-minded persons. Being diametrically opposite to the great-minded ones, they exhibit neither greatness of character nor think highly of themselves. Having little concern for their reputation or dignity, these people are often in socially dependent positions (tenant farmers, hired hands, slaves) and make no nuisance of themselves as long as they remain true to type – being similar to Aristotle's "temperate but without *megalopsychia*" – that is, as long they stick to their last as cameos.

The third group of persons – who often become catalysts of fateful events in the sagas – consists of the *overly ambitious*: those whose self-esteem exceeds that of their real greatness. The overly ambitious fall into two main sub-categories: *oflátar* who are basically small-minded but give themselves undue airs – witness the henpecked but boastful Björn of Mörk in *Njáls saga* who becomes an object of unrelenting derision (chs. 148–152) – and *ójafnaðarmenn* whose potential greatness is undermined by arrogance and egotism. These are the ruthless, overbearing trouble-makers such as the chieftain-cum-bully Hrafnkell who at the beginning of *Hrafnkels saga* (ch. 2) stoops to anything and refuses to redress any wrong he commits (although he redeems himself later in the story), or the implacable Guðmundur in *Ljósvetninga saga*, obsessed as he is with power and prestige. Both *oflátar* and *ójafnaðarmenn* correspond to Aristotle's specification of "the vain" who think of themselves as superior to others when they are not.

Conspicuously absent from the realm of the sagas are, however, Aristotle's *pusillanimous* persons who pretend to less than they deserve: those whose appreciation of their own moral greatness has failed to sink in. We find no morally excellent but self-unforgiving, self-flagellant whiners in the sagas; the idea of the unduly demure potential *mikilmenni* seems to have been completely foreign to saga writers. For them, great-mindedness necessarily involves awareness of one's greatness. Excessive perfectionism or a debilitating inferiority complex do probably not emerge until people become more wrapped up in themselves than the saga characters are.

Let us now present a model of the typology of saga characters, based on Aristotle's earlier schema:

Journal of Moral Education 27 (1998), pp. 5–17.

		GREATNESS	
		<i>Worthy of much</i>	<i>Worthy of little</i>
SELF-KNOWLEDGE	<i>Thinks himself worthy of much</i>	The great-minded	The overly ambitious
	<i>Thinks himself worthy of little</i>		The small-minded

We have already seen that *SMO* represents a virtue-based ethics where he or she⁴¹ who achieves moral excellence becomes a great-minded person (*mikilmenni*). This character trait is not only reflected in moral behaviour but also in an aura of aesthetic refinement and grace. Moreover, we have caught a glimpse of some of the specific virtues which constitute the good life, the “life without vice”: good sense, comradeship, generosity, moderation, etc. Another prominent one is modesty – the great-minded both being modest by definition, since they do not think more highly of themselves than they deserve, and being specifically reminded not to boast, as in *Hávamál* (st. 6). I do not pretend to have revealed any new substantive truths about *SMO* by this short *tour d’horizon*. However, bringing the typology of saga character into line with Aristotle’s conceptual schema means that recent arguments about the viability of *AMO* as a life option in the modern world can now be brought to bear on the merits of *SMO* as well.

4.

As noted earlier, those who reject the appositeness of *AMO* for modern uses may not be so concerned with the particularities of Aristotle’s character descriptions as with some general background assumptions of his moral system. Since more or less the same objections would hit at *SMO*, were that outlook also placed on the philosophical agenda, I shall now consider

⁴¹Notice that women are commonly referred to in the sagas as *drengur*, and even as *mikilmenni*; for the latter see *Harðar saga og Hólmverja* (ch. 38).

what critical ammunition both of these together have at their disposal to fight back. The main objections would typically run as follows: (a) The *megalopsychoi* and the great-minded are motivated by their strong aversion to deserved dishonour, whose internal expression is an emotion of shame, whereas *MMO* only accepts guilt, not shame, as a proper motivation for an autonomous moral agent. (b) Aristotle and the saga writers presuppose that moral greatness is, among other things, dependent on external goods and moral luck, so that a person can potentially possess all the ingredients of *megalopsychia* or great-mindedness but still lack the overarching virtue because he has, for instance, been born into too poor a family to actualize his greatness in real life. By contrast, in *MMO* only a person's 'good will,' irrespective of external conditions, matters morally. And (c) the *megalopsychoi* and the great-minded – although admittedly modest in a certain sense – lack the Christian virtue of humility, a virtue anchored in the common assumption of *MMO* that all persons are morally equal.

Recent times have brought innovative, 'purist' (section I) responses to criticisms directed against *megalopsychia* and related virtues from the standpoint of *MMO*. These responses can now, I think, be supplemented by insights from the realm of the Icelandic sagas. Let us look briefly at the above objections, in turn.

(a) The *megalopsychos* and the great-minded person are both equally concerned that they receive their deserved honours: from the right people, at the right time, and in the right proportion. The opposite of honour is dishonour or shame: the result of being seen, inappropriately, by the wrong people, in the wrong condition. Being a derivative of *aidōia* (a standard word for the genitals), the Greek word for shame, *aidōs*, signifies an experience akin to that of being caught in public with one's trousers down. Notably, in *AMO*, people can also be ashamed of being admired by the wrong audience in the wrong way.⁴² For example, the emperor in H. C. Anderson's famous story could have felt equal shame even if only he, and not anybody else in the audience, had grasped the meaning of the child's revelation about his 'new clothes.' Closely related to *aidōs* is *nemesis*: a reaction of shock or indignation over shameful conduct.⁴³ Sensitivity to one's own honour being impugned, and to that of other people doing things which are beneath their dignity – where one, so to speak, becomes ashamed on their behalf – thus go hand in hand in morally mature persons, binding them together in a community of feeling.

⁴²Williams, *Shame and Necessity*, pp. 78–82.

⁴³For a further elaboration of this relationship, see *ibid.*, p. 80.

Plainly, in *AMO*, the avoidance of shame constitutes a strong motive for action or inaction (and the same goes, naturally, for *SMO*). However, it is exactly here that many people think we have reached a perilous region where the older outlooks start to compare ill with *MMO*. The invocation of a sharp distinction between ‘shame societies’ and ‘guilt societies’ is thus a commonplace: the former being characterized by *heteronomy* (avoidance of wrongful action for fear of being found out and ridiculed by others; the reaction of running or hiding away, if caught), but the latter by *autonomy* (avoidance caused by one’s own sense of guilt; the reaction of self-loathing and of wanting to compensate one’s victims, should one have fallen into temptation).

The problem with this distinction between the primitive ‘outer’ evaluation of ancients and the more mature ‘inner’ one of moderns is, as Bernard Williams has made emphatically clear, that it does not bear historical scrutiny.⁴⁴ First, shame does not necessarily involve the presence of an actual audience: the imagined gaze of an imagined other will do. In other words, one can experience equally strong shame over unworthy conduct which would have resulted in dishonour, had one been seen, as over one which in fact did. We even saw above that, in *AMO*, being honoured for a wrong reason could be as shameful as being dishonoured for a right one. Nothing in the nature of so-called shame societies thus excludes the possibility of personal moral convictions which contradict those of the (misled) majority.⁴⁵

Second, it is foolish to conclude that because the ancients did not have two separate words for what we call ‘shame’ and ‘guilt,’ their *aidōs* could not cover the meanings of both. Indeed, as Williams amply demonstrates, *aidōs* included elements of indignation, reparation and forgiveness: the things typically associated nowadays with guilt rather than shame.⁴⁶ As far as I can see, much the same applies to *skömm* (shame) in *SMO*. Scholars have already pointed out the possibility of distinguishing, in the sagas, between honour as external esteem and as an internal feeling of doing the right thing independent of others’ appreciation. There are cases where saga characters forgave their enemies without regard to the opinions of others. Síðu-Hallur in *Njáls saga* (ch. 145) decides to claim no compensation for his slain son, “letting it be seen once again that I am *litilmenni*” (although it is obvious from the context that his goodness is based on strength, not

⁴⁴See *ibid.*, pp. 81ff.

⁴⁵As many others before and after him, John Kekes fails to grasp this truth in his “Shame and Moral Progress,” *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 13 (1988), pp. 282–296, esp. pp. 289–290.

⁴⁶Williams, *Shame and Necessity*, pp. 90ff.

weakness). There are also cases where they experienced painful remorse (as opposed to the narrowly understood ‘mere shame’) after an evil deed – witness Bolli’s mental sufferings after killing his foster-brother Kjartan in *Laxdæla saga* (ch. 69). Saga scholars have tended to attribute such descriptions to the effects of a “Christian emotional style,”⁴⁷ – a “warm breeze from the south”⁴⁸ – especially in the younger sagas. However, if we rid ourselves of overly narrow conceptions of shame, explaining cases of forgiveness and guilt (or explaining them away) as belated Christian influences may not be necessary at all.

The objector might retort, however, that the problem is not so much that the *megalopsychoi* or the great-minded persons could not have felt guilt, as well as shame, but rather that they are moved to action by the latter as well as the former: not only by the desire to *be*, but also the desire to be *seen*, as virtuous – a fact which does not tally with modern ideas about moral self-sufficiency and autonomy.⁴⁹ But the question is whether these modern ideas are necessarily sound. Needless to say, many recent criticisms of *MMO* have focused on the very idea of a disembodied, socially rootless person who passes moral judgements in a vacuum and whose self is supposed to have its basis prior to all his contingent ends. It has, for instance, become common to see liberalism as little but the last dregs of Kantian rationalism and the topmost froth of value subjectivism being gulped down together. Instead, we are now happily again offered Aristotelian – or even Humean – conceptions of our sense of *self* as being derived from social recognition and admiration: as essentially ‘heteronomous’ in the strict Kantian sense.⁵⁰ If my sense of myself requires me to seek recognition from others, and my emotions, appetites, physical embodiment and social existence are essential rather than contingent parts of my personhood, honour (or avoidance of shame) re-emerges as a perfectly valid motivation from its repressed back-alley existence in our consciousness – for whatever proponents of *MMO* have tried to teach us, the passion for glory has always remained the torch of the mind, most openly revealed in films and fiction. Thus, invoking the term ‘shame culture’ does not any longer (if it ever did) tell against the well-foundedness of *AMO* or *SMO*. ‘If it ever did’ is a

⁴⁷Miller, W. I., *Humiliation and Other Essays on Honor, Social Discomfort, and Violence* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 123.

⁴⁸Sveinsson, *Njáls Saga: A Literary Masterpiece*, p. 184.

⁴⁹Such an objection is pointedly expressed by Cordner, “Aristotelian Virtue and Its Limitations,” pp. 299–304.

⁵⁰Notably, emphasizing the social embeddedness of moral values does not commit one to the view that such values are necessarily relative to particular societies, as is implied by the sociological interpretation of *SMO* above.

particularly apt reservation here, for there is every reason to question whether honour (and with it shame) disappeared entirely in *MMO*. Perhaps MacIntyre is right in thinking that every human being is (and has always been) potentially a fully-fledged Aristotelian – unless corrupted by that particular kind of idea of a ‘divided self’ so prized in modern moral theories.⁵¹ However, as noted in section I, what chiefly concerns me here is the received wisdom about what *MMO* involves rather than speculations about what ‘un-corrupted’ moderns might have been really thinking deep down all the time.

(b) There is a passage in the *Nicomachean Ethics* where Aristotle says that good fortune contributes to *megalopsychia*: “For the well-born and powerful or rich are thought worthy of honour, since they are in a superior position, and everything superior in some good is more honoured.” Aristotle is quick to remind us that in reality, “it is only the good person who is honourable,” but still “anyone who has both virtue and these goods is more readily thought worthy of honour.”⁵² Similarly, in the Icelandic sagas, honour could reflect purely external conditions and be enhanced, for instance, simply by buying a chieftaincy, as in *Bandamanna saga* (ch. 2). There are divided opinions as to whether ‘contributing to’ *megalopsychia* means, for Aristotle, that wealth, power and such things enhance *megalopsychia* or are necessary for it. Curzer favours the former interpretation.⁵³ However, I think there are two reasons to doubt that reading. Firstly, the *megalopsychos* possesses *all* the virtues, and that must include the virtue of magnificence: generosity on a large scale. Although the magnificent person is by definition generous, “generosity does not imply magnificence,” for the latter requires “heavy expenses.”⁵⁴ Since one cannot make bricks without straw, a poor person cannot be magnificent, whatever his good intentions. We have seen how a similar virtue, *stórmennska* (entertaining in a grand manner), is championed in the sagas and connected to great-mindedness, although the latter did not require supreme riches: Ófeigur in *Bandamanna saga* (ch. 1) being “*mikilmenni* but not at ease in money matters.” Secondly, we must bear in mind Aristotle’s well-known discussion of how *eudaimonia* itself is partly dependent upon external goods: goods which are either instrumental to or constitutive of virtuous activity.⁵⁵ This insistence upon the necessity of

⁵¹MacIntyre, A., “Plain Persons and Moral Philosophy: Rules, Virtues and Goods,” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 66 (1992), pp. 3–19, p. 14.

⁵²Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, p. 100 [1124a].

⁵³Curzer, “A Great Philosopher’s Not So Great Account of Great Virtue,” pp. 520–521.

⁵⁴Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, p. 93 [1122a].

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 21–22 [1099a-b]. See also Martha C. Nussbaum’s excellent analysis of the vulnerability of human excellence in *The Fragility of Goodness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

external goods and moral luck contrasts sharply with *MMO*'s Christian and Kantian assumptions about moral goodness being wholly independent of any worldly contingencies, corruptible by moth and rust. In *MMO*, a person's good will is the only thing which matters – witness the unsurpassable virtue of the widow with her two mites.⁵⁶

Again we are forced to judge the merits of two conflicting sets of background assumptions. It may be helpful to start with the notion of 'reasonable expectations.' Do we really reasonably expect a child who has had to cope with hostile and denigrating conditions in its upbringing – a child whose virtues have not been cultivated by habituation – to turn out as a paragon of moral virtue? Do we reasonably expect people at their beam-ends and/or in wholly dependent positions to be as active in contributing to the well-being of their neighbours as those who are better off and have the resources to lend a helping hand? The mere asking of such questions is, I think, enough to bring out the true nature of our expectations, whatever *MMO* commands us to believe. Indeed, modern philosophers have written at considerable length about the importance of moral luck,⁵⁷ although their message does not seem to have filtered through society or effected any radical change in the prevailing assumptions of *MMO*.

Whether we like it or not, fortune contributes to *megalopsychia*, as to all the other virtues. Our genes matter, our upbringing matters, our family matters, and so do our living conditions and the people we happen to meet in life. There is, unfortunately, little truth in the promise of *virtute securus*. Virtue is no protecting shield which wards off grief and misfortune: the most great-minded and noble-hearted persons in the Icelandic sagas seldom die of old age after a long and happy life, surrounded by their children. Immunity to luck is not as realistic an idea as it may be a soothing one. There is no reason to reject *AMO* and *SMO* because they accept that simple fact of life.

Luck *qua* social standing may have mattered more in *AMO* and *SMO* than it would in modern Western societies, simply because being poor or belonging to the 'baseborn multitude' was more of an insurmountable barrier than it is nowadays when the majority of people can afford to be 'magnificent,' not only 'generous,' when such gestures are called for. For Aristotle, *megalopsychia* required at least a minimal standard of wealth

⁵⁶Mark 12: 42–43. This and other Biblical examples are discussed in Casey, *Pagan Virtue*, pp. 207–208.

⁵⁷See especially Nagel, T., "Moral Luck," in his *Mortal Questions* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979), ch. 3; and Williams, B., "Moral Luck," in his *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), ch. 2.

and power, which the majority of people in Greek society simply could not reach. Similarly, in the sagas, great-mindedness could only be attributed to those who could ‘afford’ to possess all the virtues. For instance, Ingjaldur who saved the life of the hero Gísli in *Gísla saga Súrssonar* (chs. 24–27), by risking his own life, was a true *drengur* (see section III above) – explaining his deed in a typically modest way by his clothes being so threadbare already that it would not grieve him not to make them more so. But Ingjaldur could not be called *mikilmenni*, for he was but a tenant farmer, dependent upon the whims of his landlord Börkur. This tells against the possible interpretation of *drengskapur* as the highest ideal of moral excellence in the sagas. Indeed, there is no suggestion to be found there, any more than in Aristotle, that sheer goodness can constitute moral greatness. The opposite of *drengur* is *ódrengur* or *niðingur* (a ‘brute’), rather than *lítilmenni*. For example, only *mikilmenni*, such as Síðu-Hallur in *Njáls saga*, but not merely *drengur*, had the social privilege of being able to abandon a justified revenge without losing his reputation in the eyes of others. All in all, “living without vice” is not the same as being able to display all the virtues.

It is true that both Aristotle’s moral system and that of the sagas can be described as *role moralities*. But instead of automatically attaching opprobrium to that notion, we must remember that all moralities are, by necessity, role moralities: what is morally required or expected of people – supererogatory actions apart – always depends to a large extent on what role they happen to occupy in the given circumstances (that of a mother or a daughter, an employer or an employee, etc.). To be sure, if one takes the view that morality is socially anchored, then there is something self-contradictory about supposing that *MMO* is not. Maybe moderns have never really stopped believing that certain virtues are tightly tied to social roles. However, there is no denying the fact that certain prominent modern moral theories have tried to sever the link to social roles, and that is precisely when they have fared worst. For instance, no morality can function without the notion of role-based reasonable expectations: a mother can be reasonably expected to tie her daughter’s loose shoe laces, but surely not the shoe laces of all the children in her city. Modern moral theories have tried to overlook this fact – witness the so-called *strong doctrine of responsibility* espoused by vulgar utilitarianism, a doctrine which is, I believe, counter-productive from the utilitarian point of view itself.⁵⁸ There is a common prejudice in *MMO* that role moralities are rigid and un-

⁵⁸See further in my *Social Freedom*, ch. 4.

changeable. However, even a somewhat rigid role morality, such as that of the sagas, does not preclude the possibility of social change and mobility.⁵⁹ Thus, acknowledging that a great number of people were excluded from the possible roles of *megalopsychos* and *mikilmenni* should perhaps not be seen as an argument against the moral systems in question, but rather as an encouragement to create such economic and social conditions as will give everyone the opportunity of achieving moral excellence.

(c) In *MMO*, considering oneself superior to others is looked at with disapproval. The traditional message is: although you may run faster than others, climb higher mountains or solve more complicated mathematical puzzles, you are definitely inferior to them in some other respects, for no one excels in everything. To be on the safe side, it is thus better to underrate one's achievements than to overrate them, that is, to be *humble*. This received wisdom if, of course, heavily influenced by Christian ideas about pride being the *radix omnium malorum* – the root of all evil – and Kantian ones about the basic equality of worth among persons, each one being an irreplaceable subject in a kingdom of ends. Hence, moderns tend to view the insistence of the *megalopsychos* upon his own superior standing, as well as his proclivity to pull rank, with a beady eye. In the sagas, cases of potentially great-minded persons underrating their attainments simply do not seem to exist, as noted earlier, and whenever the term *litillæti* (which can mean either 'modesty' or 'humility') occurs, it is used in the former sense, except in cases where people feign humility in order to achieve some end, as in *Hrafnkels saga* (ch. 6) where a person asking for compensation from the chieftain Hrafnkell thinks it wise to approach him humbly.

Curzer tries to convince us that the transvaluation of *megalopsychia* from Aristotelian virtue to Christian vice is wrong. Pride, according to Christianity, is taking oneself to be more worthy than one really is, but the *megalopsychos* who thinks himself worthy of greater things than others is really worthy of them. Thus, Christian doctrine could not define *megalopsychoi* as proud but rather as non-existent; there being no persons around satisfying Aristotle's criteria (with Jesus, perhaps, as an exception).⁶⁰ However, Curzer's defusing of this transvaluation does not really work, for Aristotle is not depicting an idealized character type which may or may not exist.

⁵⁹For a short discussion of upward mobility and the jockeying for positions within social groupings in the sagas, see Andersson, T. M. and Miller, W. I., *Law and Literature in Medieval Iceland: Ljósvetninga saga and Valla-Ljóts Saga* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989), pp. 10–11, 16–17.

⁶⁰Curzer, "Aristotle's Much Maligned *Megalopsychos*," pp. 147–149.

He is demarcating the characteristics of certain existing persons who take themselves to be (and *are* according to Aristotle) superior to others. Hence, what the *megalopsychoi* understand as correct self-knowledge must, for Christians, constitute a vice *qua* blameworthy false beliefs. Curzer is not alone in wanting to assimilate Aristotle to *MMO* in some ways; much of what passes nowadays for Aristotelian ethics is highly elaborated in order to achieve such an assimilation – witness the already-mentioned elision of *megalopsychia* from much of the current work on Aristotle. One of the main reasons for this tendency may be that, by and large, contemporary interpreters of Aristotle are not willing to go back on the thought that all persons are of equal moral worth.⁶¹

Are we forced to reject *AMO* and *SMO* because they do not accept the basic equality of all human beings? Notice first that the examples which are supposed to show that no one is best at everything are often of runners, mountain-climbers or mathematicians. But what if someone has reached a higher echelon of morality: is more virtuous than others?⁶² This question presents the advocate of *MMO* with a dilemma: *Either* he has to respond that nobody is, in the end, more virtuous than others. But that seems to be highly counter-intuitive: is Mother Theresa then not a morally better person than, say, Saddam Hussein? *Or* he has to point out that although *A* may be morally better than *B*, *A* does not run as fast or climb as high mountains. But the problem with that answer is that moral worth seems to provide us with an unoverridable criterion of human worth. If a person is a villain, it adds in no way to his human worth that he happens to run fast (quite the contrary: he will then be able to escape more easily from the scenes of his crimes).

Perhaps the modern obsession with people's equal human worth is, *à la* Nietzsche, characteristic of the degeneracy of *MMO*. Or perhaps it is simply, *à la* Williams, one more example of people conflating what they think they think with what they really think. In any case, the assumptions of *AMO* and *SMO* about the different levels of people's moral excellence seem here more realistic and, indeed, to furnish us with the necessary conditions for moral educators' being able to teach their protégés by example. Otherwise, the latter would have nothing to learn from the former. Notably, such assumptions of moral inequality do not undermine many other ideals of equality which moderns tend to cherish – for to grant that

⁶¹A case in point is the article by Nussbaum, M. C., "Aristotelian Social Democracy," in R. B. Douglass, G. M. Mara and H. S. Richardson (eds.), *Liberalism and the Good* (New York: Routledge, 1990), where Nussbaum goes so far as to forge a link between Aristotle's political theory and egalitarian Scandinavian welfare policies!

⁶²Hare, S. addresses this question in his illuminating "The Paradox of Moral Humility," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 33 (1996), pp. 235–241.

people are of unequal *moral worth as persons*, depending on their demonstrated level of moral attainment, is not necessarily tantamount to considering them of unequal *worth as moral persons*.⁶³ For instance, there are undoubtedly sound utilitarian reasons for giving everyone, as a potential moral agent, a chance to prove his mettle (equal opportunities of education, giving strangers the benefit of a doubt in human relations, etc.) and respecting such human rights as considering people innocent until proven guilty. Indeed, a certain moral egalitarianism of this kind can be culled from Aristotle's insistence that everybody should be judged on merit; that is, people should not be discriminated against for no good reason. The scale used to weigh different persons must be the same, although the outcomes will inevitably be different. Logically, there is thus nothing wrong with the idea of people, who happen to be of unequal moral worth as persons, being treated equally, for moral reasons, in various spheres of life.

5.

None of the objections raised in section IV seems to undermine the standing of *AMO* and *SMO* as contenders for our present moral allegiance. If anything, our discussion has underlined the contemporaneity of these outlooks, reinforcing Williams' insight that in our ethical situation we are now "more like human beings in antiquity than any Western people have been in the meantime."⁶⁴ The alternative background assumptions, suggested by *MMO*, seem to "serve no manner of purpose," rather than the "monkish virtues" lambasted by Hume: "neither advance a man's fortune in the world, nor render him a more valuable member of society: neither qualify him for the entertainment of company, nor increase his power of self-enjoyment."⁶⁵ Quite the opposite, *MMO*'s denial of our right to take pride in own moral achievements, our right to comport ourselves with the grace associated with a superior moral position – should we have reached it – and our right to demand an acknowledgement of such a standing from others, may threaten our moral personhood and (if Hume is right) even our sense of self.

Admittedly, exposing the weaknesses of an outlook that I have trotted out somewhat loosely under the banners of *MMO* – largely a mixture of

⁶³For this subtle distinction, I am indebted to *ibid.*, pp. 239–240.

⁶⁴Williams, *Shame and Necessity*, p. 166.

⁶⁵Hume, D., *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 270.

Christian and Kantian elements – as compared to *AMO* and *SMO*, does not commit us to a choice of one of the latter as our preferred moral outlook. Perhaps there are other outlooks in modernity, such as one or another of the newly-furbished versions of virtue ethics or a sophisticated form of utilitarianism, that also conceive of morality as being social, secular and naturalistic and that will do everything we may expect from *AMO* and *SMO* equally well or even better. Perhaps the presence of the modern state or other conditions of modernity make certain aspects of *AMO* and *SMO* unfeasible for contemporary use. Those remain matters for further investigation. What I have done here is simply to bring out the viability of *AMO* and *SMO* as options at which we need to take a hard look; or at any rate as potential sources of values to be incorporated into other moral outlooks.

Writers such as Bernard Williams and John Casey have already blown away the cobwebs surrounding *AMO* and thus contributed to the “liberation of antiquity.”⁶⁶ I hope that the present essay can pave the way for a similar liberation of the Nordic moral heritage embodied in the Icelandic sagas: its release from the thrall of antiquarianism. Ideally, in years to come we shall see a great many serious studies, exploring in detail specific aspects of *SMO* from a philosophical perspective.

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66. “The liberation of antiquity” is a recurring theme in Williams’ *Shame and Necessity*.