

An ancient virtue and its heirs

Vasalou, Sophia

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This is the pre-peer-reviewed version of “An Ancient Virtue and its Heirs: The Reception of Greatness of Soul in the Arabic Tradition” which will be published in final form in a forthcoming issue of the *Journal of Religious Ethics*. The article was accepted with no changes.

An Ancient Virtue and its Heirs: The Reception of Greatness of Soul in the Arabic Tradition

Among the many lives the ancient virtue of greatness of soul has led in philosophical and theological history, one remains conspicuously unwritten. This is the life it led in the Islamic world and the Arabic tradition. This world, as we know, opened its doors wide to the ancient philosophical legacy early in its history, and continued a lively engagement with it for a period of centuries. It was an engagement that was marked by amity but also by moments of high conflict, and it is the conflict that has frequently shaped prevailing views of the place of philosophy in the Islamic world, with al-Ghazālī’s one-man no-holds-barred campaign against the philosophers serving as the rallying point for such views. This picture has recently begun to loosen its scholarly grip, and a changing view of al-Ghazālī’s own relationship to philosophy has been among the many tributaries to its reversal. In recent times, several readers have re-directed attention to al-Ghazālī’s indebtedness and continued appreciation of the philosophical tradition.¹ Many of these writings and re-writings of the status of philosophy in the Islamic world have focused, unsurprisingly, on issues of metaphysics. These were after all the issues that apparently channelled al-Ghazālī’s discomfort in his celebrated work, *The Precipitance of the Philosophers*². Yet a finer calibration of this story of amity-and-conflict could not be achieved without taking into account the interaction of Muslim writers with the ethical elements of the ancient tradition.

Ethics has sometimes seemed an unpromising subject to commentators addressing the history of philosophy in the Islamic world. “Falsafa,” as Peter Adamson quietly notes in a conspectus of the Arabic tradition, “is not particularly known for its contributions to ethics” (Adamson 2010, 63). The intellectual giants of Arabic philosophy, such as Avicenna and Averroes, devoted their immense energies to other areas of philosophical inquiry and mostly turned a cold shoulder to ethical topics. Those works of philosophical ethics that *were* written seem to lack the intellectual élan that gives sparkle to works in other areas; and even among writers with overt religious commitments, conflict does not seem to be in the air to make it

¹ A key stimulus for such re-readings was Richard Frank’s seminal account of al-Ghazālī’s cosmology in Frank 1992, but since that time they have gathered apace. For useful pointers to this scholarship, see Garden 2014, 5-7.

² Or *Incoherence of the Philosophers*, as it is often known. See Treiger 2012 for a defence of this alternative translation (Appendix B) and also, more broadly, for an account that contributes to the re-reading of al-Ghazālī’s relationship to philosophy.

crackle. In his famous autobiography where he discusses his relationship to philosophy, notably, al-Ghazālī treats ethics with comparatively velvet gloves.

These perspectives form the backdrop of my present paper, which proposes to tell the neglected story of the reception of the ancient virtue of greatness of soul in the Islamic world. It is a story that would *prima facie* seem calculated to engage this backdrop especially strongly. For nothing, if not conflict, has characterised the passage of this virtue in our philosophical and theological history. This conflict has been palpable among recent philosophers, even among votaries of Aristotle's ethics, who have taken turns decrying his depiction of greatness of soul for a litany of moral evils, including above all a flawed mode of self-evaluation and failure of humility. Yet it has also been palpable in the reactions of earlier eras, not least within theological circles, as suggested by the history of the Christian engagement with the ancient tradition. The tension between greatness of soul or magnanimity and humility, as Jennifer Herdt remarks, "is often seen as capturing the basic tension between pagan and Christian conceptions of virtue" (Herdt 2008, 40). This history of strained responses provides an important additional foil for considering the Arabic reception.

The biographical course this virtue has traced within the Arabic tradition, as I hope to show, is a complex one. Set against the foils just outlined, it stands out as a story that is as much about acts as it is about omissions—as much about what was said as about what wasn't—and one in which the theme of conflict does not assert itself but has to be educed. It also stands out as a story in which the identity of its subject, as in all good stories, undergoes transformation in the telling. Because one of its surprises is that there are no less than *two* distinct Arabic concepts that can be identified as heirs or counterparts of the ancient virtue of greatness that was *megalopsychia*, concepts whose genealogies and trajectories converged but also diverged in crucial respects. In this respect, plotting the biography of this virtue helps provide new insight not only into the Arabic reception of ancient ethics, but also into the sources and pattern of Islamic ethical thought more broadly.

To reflect this complexity, I will be telling the story in two stages. In this paper, I will be focusing on one of these two virtues of greatness, which is also the virtue that can be most straightforwardly identified as the "heir" of the ancient one and whose story might be most naturally identified as the story of the Arabic reception of the *ancient* legacy. While I touch on a number of figures in Arabic philosophical ethics, the bulk of my discussion focuses on two major ethical writers, Miskawayh (d. 1030) and (even more directly) al-Ghazālī (d. 1111). Greatness of soul, I will suggest, sits uneasily within the ethical schemes of these writers, particularly al-Ghazālī's, for reasons that evoke those that have troubled past and present commentators on the virtue. Gaining this insight demands placing this virtue into fuller conversation with their ethical schemes. Yet this forced conversation, shunned by the participants themselves, never becomes open conflict, and this raises important questions about the nature of the Arabic engagement of the ancient ethical tradition.

So much for the main story. Launching into it, however, requires a couple of preliminaries: a brief word about the identity of the ancient virtue of greatness of soul, and another word about the textual sources that gave Arab thinkers access to it.

Greatness of soul: one virtue, many configurations

I have referred to "the" ancient virtue of greatness of soul as if there was one virtue to speak of. Yet in opening this account, it will be important to register that this was not a virtue that enjoyed perfect unity or stability over time, but one that harboured competing tendencies and provoked different articulations, no less within the ancient context than in later philosophical history. Even Aristotle's account in the *Nicomachean Ethics*—no doubt the best-known philosophical account of the virtue—has often been read as an attempt to adjudicate between

the different meanings the virtue carried in his own time, as he had outlined them in an oft-cited passage of the *Posterior Analytics*.³

Greatness of soul, as it emerges in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, can be described as a virtue of self-knowledge or self-evaluation. In Aristotle's well-thumbed formulation, it is a quality that belongs to "the sort of person that thinks himself, and is, worthy of great things" (1123b1-2).⁴ Packed into this remark is an understanding of greatness of soul as a virtue incorporating a relationship between three terms: a person's actual worth, his judgement about his worth, and (his judgement about) what his worth entitles him to. The basis of this person's worth is his virtue or excellence. "The truly great-souled man must be good," indeed superlatively so: "greatness in respect of each of the excellences would seem to belong to the great-souled person" (1123b28). That to which it entitles him is honour, which is the greatest of all external goods, the one we even bestow upon the gods. The great-souled man is the person of great moral character who, knowing his greatness, knows the recognition it entitles him to receive from others. Greatness of soul is thus principally concerned with honour.

This thumbnail sketch of Aristotle's view is worth holding on to; yet for the account that follows, it is also worth attuning ourselves to some of the nuances which make for its specific identity, and which open out to different ways of configuring the latter. The passage of the *Posterior Analytics* just referred to offers a good handle for the purpose. There (II.13.97b15-25) Aristotle had identified two key semantic strands of the virtue, "intolerance of insults" (notably exemplified by Achilles) and "indifference to fortune" (notably exemplified by Socrates). In crafting his own account in the *Ethics*, he had preserved the first meaning by connecting greatness of soul to honour, but he had effected a critical revision when it came to framing the strength of attachment that honour should arouse. The great-souled man should only be "moderately pleased" when he gets the great honour he merits; for it is after all only his due, and "there could be no honour worthy of complete excellence" (1124a6-8). And while his account focused on honour, he had also preserved the second meaning by tying greatness of soul to a similar stance extending beyond honour to encompass all external goods, one that crucially mitigated the attitude of Socratic indifference by the same emphasis on moderation. The great-souled man will be "moderately disposed in relation to wealth, political power, and any kind of good or bad fortune," and he will "neither be over-pleased at good fortune nor over-distressed at bad" (1124a13-16). He is someone ultimately little given to strong responses, whether of dismay or admiration: his sense of his own greatness is partly expressed in the sense that "nothing is great" (1125a2).

These moves would be negotiated differently at the hands of other thinkers and other philosophical schools, resulting in competing configurations of the virtue. The dominant Stoic approach notably reflected the sharper stance these thinkers adopted on the broader question of the value of external goods for the ethical life and the role of luck in the human good. Greatness of soul would thus be inscribed among them as a virtue embodying their distinctive ideal of confronting vicissitudes of fortune with equanimity, affirming the human ability to lead a life of virtue in the face of them and treating external goods with a contempt that revived Socrates' more categorical indifference. Cicero provided a key expression of this view in his *On Duties* when he described greatness of spirit as lying in "disdain for things external, in the conviction that a man should admire, should choose, should pursue, nothing except what is honourable and seemly, and should yield to no man, nor to agitation of the spirit, nor to fortune" (Book 1, 66).⁵ He also contributed another important element when fleshing out his reference to the pursuit of "what is honourable" as an imperative to "do deeds which are great, certainly, and above all beneficial," calibrating Aristotle's emphasis on receiving through a stronger emphasis on the passion for doing. The admiration of virtue voiced in this remark, similarly, was coupled to an oft-expressed admiration directed to the human subject in its ability to realise such lofty

³ For discussion of this point (and of Aristotle's view of greatness of soul more generally) see Cooper 1989; Pakaluk 2004, 269-70; and Crisp 2006, 169-70.

⁴ I draw on Rowe's translation of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (2002) with occasional modifications.

⁵ For further discussion of the Stoic approach to the virtue, see also Gauthier 1951, part 1, chapter 4.

values, one that preserved Aristotle's emphasis on self-evaluation while delicately deflecting it from the individual person to the human subject in its higher capacities. "I am too great, was born to too great a destiny," Seneca declares with characteristic hauteur in one his *Epistles*, "to be my body's slave" (Epistle 65, 21); and again: "Reflect that nothing except the soul is worthy of wonder; for to the soul, if it be great, naught is great" (Epistle 8, 5).⁶

This selective overflight already suggests that greatness of soul was a virtue hosting a number of conceptual strands, strands that could be configured in ways that yielded divergent articulations. We might heuristically pick out three such strands: one incorporating an attitude to the self (a judgement of self-worth), another incorporating an attitude to external goods (honour but also good and bad luck more broadly), and arguably yet a third incorporating an attitude to acting rather than receiving or reacting.⁷

In moving to the Arabic context, this schematic outline of the plural elements and identities of the virtue is worth keeping in view. Yet it is also worth bearing in mind that an even more nuanced survey of ancient configurations of this virtue would need to go beyond such schematisations, and attend to the more intricate pattern of intellectual moves made in the eclectic environment of later Hellenistic philosophy. This point is particularly relevant in view of the textual sources that can be identified as having provided the chief means of access to the virtue within the Islamic world. For these include, on the one hand, some of the major works of Greek ethics in which greatness of soul formed a significant element, such as the *Nicomachean Ethics* (available in Arabic translation from around the second half of the ninth century) and, to a lesser extent, Plato's *Republic* (available not as an integral text but in the form of short quotations, excerpts and abridgements from a similar time). Yet they also include a small flotilla of texts of varying length, many characterised by a complicated textual history and elusive authorship, whose philosophical identity was the product of various kinds of intellectual syncretism. In this list one must place the *Summa Alexandrinorum*, an epitome of the *Nicomachean Ethics* of contested provenance (a translation from a late Greek text or an original Arabic composition?), several parts of which, including significantly the discussion of greatness of soul, are only preserved in Latin; the pseudo-Aristotelian *De Virtutibus et vitiis*, extant in two Arabic translations; an additional "seventh book" incorporated into the Arabic version of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, which according to one conjecture may derive from a lost commentary by Porphyry; and a short treatise on ethics by a certain "Nicolaus" which was found with the manuscript of the Arabic translation of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.⁸ These short texts achieved wide circulation in the Arabic-speaking world among authors writing about ethics in a philosophical vein, and although their treatment of greatness of soul does not compare to treatments like Aristotle's in either depth and length, reflecting their overall brevity and epitomic character, it is a theme in all of them.

Defining a virtue

The above has offered an overview *in nuce* of the identity of greatness of soul and the routes by which Arab thinkers might have come to learn about it. In doing so, it has also pulled into view some of the grounds for the ambivalence with which this virtue has been met by numerous thinkers of different times, and for the mixed sense of fascination and repugnance which its larger-than-life *éclat* has aroused. The impossible hauteur captured by Seneca's turn of phrase—"I am too great"—precipitates a sense of discomfort that has usually pitted itself, less against its Stoic casting, than against its more individualistic Aristotelian counterpart. Responding to features that came into view above and also to some that didn't, many of

⁶ I draw on different translations of Seneca's *Epistles* here, respectively Campbell 2004 and Gummere 1918-25.

⁷ To identify these as distinct strands, of course, is not to deny that they were intimately enmeshed.

⁸ For this textual background, good starting points are Dunlop's introduction to Aristotle 2005, 1-109; Ullmann 2011; Zonta 2003; and Akasoy 2012.

Aristotle's modern readers have castigated the portrait of the great-souled man for his arrogance and almost stagnant self-satisfaction; his leonine inability to rouse himself for anything but the greatest deeds; his ungratefulness and inability to acknowledge his debts—an inability inscribed in the ideal of “self-sufficiency” Aristotle imputes to him (*NE* 1125a12). No wonder greatness of soul has enjoyed the dubious distinction of figuring as “the relativists’ favorite target,” as Martha Nussbaum notes, flagged for its cultural contingency and taken to imply “in its very name an attitude to one’s own worth that is more Greek than universal” (Nussbaum 1988, 38).⁹

Several of these qualms resonate with ones that have historically animated the Christian reception of this virtue, set in the horizon of the broader Christian engagement with pagan ethics. In spearheading this engagement, Augustine himself had not singled out greatness of soul as an intrinsically reprehensible trait. His few references to the virtue in the *City of God*, for example, show him not so much contesting its status as a virtue as contesting its proper application, in a way that presupposes its acceptance as a virtue or term of praise.¹⁰ Yet many of the faults he found with pagan ethics could be said to be enshrined in this virtue, including the preoccupation with honour or glory, the aspiration to self-sufficiency (present in even starker tones within the Stoic construction of the virtue), and the vice of pride that orders everything to the self, to the extent that the great-souled man’s “consciousness of his own moral worth infects his motivation” (Herdt 2008, 50; and see more broadly her discussion in chapter 2). A sense of unease with the ethical credentials of greatness of soul certainly stood in the backdrop of Aquinas’ own reconstruction of the virtue in his *Summa Theologiae*, which reconfigured its relationship to humility and gratitude in ways that served to embed it more harmoniously into the Christian ethical standpoint. In both philosophical and theological circles, greatness of soul has thus often served as a threshing ground and sometimes battleground of values.

Coming from this background, one can only approach the Arabic encounter with this virtue with a sense of high moment. The sense of moment will seem higher still if we consider that in the Arabic-Islamic case, this is an encounter that unfolded on very different terms—more suddenly and less organically—than in the case of the Christian tradition, which developed in a cultural environment still suffused with the values of the ancient world. In the Arabic case, by contrast, this encounter has the character of a sharper linguistic and cultural confrontation, one more likely to capture our imagination and put us in the mind of the potential for collision. It is the sudden encounter between a language and cultural domain that contains the concept of *megalopsychia* and one that doesn’t, and needs to find the resources for accommodating it.

Where to watch for this encounter? One of the first places one will think to look is the work of al-Fārābī (d. 950), who stands out as one of the few major philosophers in the Arabic tradition to have taken a concerted interest in the normative parts of the philosophical curriculum. Al-Fārābī’s interest lies disproportionately in political philosophy rather than ethics, and in his political works, it is Plato’s rather than Aristotle’s influence that figures most visibly. Greatness of soul appears at two significant junctures of his writings, once in his celebrated political work *On the Perfect State* and once in the shorter work *The Attainment of Happiness*. In both cases it appears as part of a list of qualities required in the philosopher-king which mirrors the list Plato had given in the *Republic* (486a, 487a), using the term *megaloprepeia*. The adjectival Arabic term is *kabīr al-nafs*, which is a direct calque of the Greek

⁹ Cf. 34, referencing the remarks of Bernard Williams and Stuart Hampshire. For an overview of some of the most common criticisms of Aristotle’s *megalopsychos*, see Crisp 2006, 169-74.

¹⁰ A good example are his remarks in the context of arguing against the idea that suicide displays this virtue. “Greatness of spirit is not the right term to apply” to a person who killed himself to avoid hardship or injustice; “we rightly ascribe greatness to a spirit that has the strength to endure a life of misery instead of running away from it, and to despise the judgement of men.” At the same time, Augustine opens greatness of spirit to a kind of fallibility that will certainly seem remarkable coming from Aristotle’s view of the virtue as presupposing consummate goodness, as suggested by Augustine’s remark that Theombrotus, who is said to have killed himself to attain eternal life sooner, “showed greatness rather than goodness.” See Augustine 2003, Bk I, §22, 32-33.

(literally, “large of soul”). The philosopher, al-Fārābī writes in *On the Perfect State*, “should be great-souled (*kabīr al-nafs*) and fond of honour, his soul being naturally above (*takburu nafsuhu*) everything ugly and base.”¹¹ One point to notice is that greatness of soul, which in Plato’s discussion had borne a distinct link to intellectual activity, is here connected to ethical excellence and concern for honour in a way that gravitates more heavily toward Aristotle’s account in the *Nicomachean Ethics*.¹² Yet such observations to the side, these modest remarks seem to exhaust al-Fārābī’s interest in the virtue. It is striking that in the detailed discussion of the virtues—one that significantly displays the strong influence of Aristotelian ideas—offered in another of his major political works, *Aphorisms of the Statesman*, al-Fārābī remains wholly silent on greatness of soul. When listing the virtues concerned with self-evaluation, it is in fact humility (*tawāḍuʿ*) that appears as the mean, flanked by the vices of arrogance (*takabbur*) and abjectness or self-abasement (*takhāsus*) (al-Fārābī 1971, 36).

The natural place to turn in hopes of a closer engagement with the virtue is a work which perhaps forms the most celebrated compendium of philosophical ethics in the Arabic tradition, Miskawayh’s *The Refinement of Character*. Among its other distinctive features, this work features an extensive section dedicated to the discussion of the virtues and vices. These are arranged in a manner which betrays the peculiar brand of philosophical eclecticism at work among Arab philosophers—one that, as suggested above, partly reflects the character of their textual sources—relying on an Aristotelian principle to distinguish between a virtuous mean and two vicious extremes, but relying on a tripartite faculty psychology inherited from Plato to identify the cardinal virtues and map these onto the rational, appetitive and irascible faculties. Wisdom is the virtue of the rational faculty (or soul), courage the virtue of the irascible faculty, temperance the virtue of the appetitive faculty, and justice the virtue that results from the combination of these virtues.¹³ Yet the specific structure of the virtues and in particular the distinction between a number of cardinal virtues and a far greater number of subordinate virtues speaks to a practice typically associated with the Stoics.¹⁴ Following one’s finger down the tables of the virtues—past the six virtues under wisdom, past the twelve virtues under temperance—one will find greatness of soul under the irascible faculty, the first of eight virtues presented as subordinate to courage. The entry reads as follows. “As for greatness of soul (*kibar al-nafs*), it is the disdain for what is insignificant and the capacity to bear honour and dishonour. The one who possesses this virtue always judges himself worthy of great things while [indeed] deserving them” (Miskawayh 1966, 21).¹⁵

¹¹ I draw on the translation by Richard Walzer (al-Fārābī 1985, 246-48) with a number of modifications. Cf. al-Fārābī 1995, 96.

¹² For more on Plato’s view of greatness of soul and the link to intellectual activity, see Gauthier 1951, part 1, chapter 2; cf. the discussion in Vasalou 2013, chapter 5.

¹³ I am simplifying certain things, as Miskawayh maps a pair of central virtues onto each faculty. See Miskawayh 1966, 16-18. Note that Miskawayh interestingly only deploys the *mesotes* scheme for the cardinal virtues, in contrast for example to al-Ghazālī.

¹⁴ Cf. Richard Walzer’s remarks in “Some Aspects of Miskawayh’s *Tahdhīb al-Akhlāq*,” in Walzer 1962, 222-23.

¹⁵ *Huwa al-istihāna bi’l-yaṣīr wa’l-iqtidār ‘ala ḥaml al-karāma wa’l-hawān, wa-ṣāhibuhu abadan yu’ahhīlu nafsahu li’l-umūr al-‘iẓām ma’a istiḥqāqihī lahā.* In his translation of this passage, Zurayk renders the last phrase: he “is always preparing himself for great deeds”: Miskawayh 1968, 19. I think this is unsound on both counts (“preparing,” “deeds”), though it would take much textual argument to fully unpack the point. Most importantly, this passage needs to be compared with the corresponding passages of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, which along with the treatise by Nicolaus, suggest themselves as key influences on this configuration of greatness of soul with its distinctive accent on merit and self-evaluation. The Arabic version of the *NE* reads: *al-kabīr al-nafs huwa alladhī yu’ahhīlu nafsahu li’l-umūr al-‘aẓīma wa-huwa li-dhālika ahl* (p. 257.10 of the Arabic edition). For the related remarks in Nicolaus’ treatise, see Aristotle 1979, 408. The indeterminacy of “great things” is best preserved, but if were to determine it, the most natural way of doing so would be as a reference to honour given this context; reference to great action is present in the *NE*’s portrait of the *megalopsychos* (e.g. 1124b25), but it is not salient. Al-Ghazālī’s phrasing of his corresponding definition, which refers to *despising* (*istiḥqār*) these great things, lends further support to this view (al-Ghazālī 1964, 277), though it does so by throwing up a textual difficulty given the

One complication needs to be quickly mentioned and put aside: this list in fact contains not one, but two, concepts that speak to the “greatness of soul” complex. A few lines below, another virtue makes an appearance, designated through the compound *‘izām al-himma*, which I will translate as “greatness of spirit.” The entry reads: “A virtue of the soul through which it endures both good fortune and its opposite, even the travails experienced at the time of death” (ibid).¹⁶ There is an important question to be asked as to the relationship between these two concepts. One thing seems clear: the latter concept foregrounds what I earlier identified as the second strand of greatness of soul, an attitude to external goods, and seems to frame the right stance to such goods in terms reminiscent of the Stoic approach. The correlation of greatness of soul with courage, we may note, was itself a characteristic Stoic move.¹⁷

I will be returning to the relationship between these two concepts in the sequel to this story. Putting this question aside for the moment, here I will restrict my attention to the first concept. How to parse it? Peering close, we will discern a focus on honour that seems reminiscent of Aristotle’s discussion in the *Ethics*, though we will also discern an emphasis on unconcern (“the capacity to bear honour and dishonour”) that seems rather less so.¹⁸ It is the last part of the statement that places the definition more decidedly in the Aristotelian force-field, with its evocative references to self-judgement, worthiness, and desert. Yet what will also stand out is the terseness of the remark, one that leaves much room for ambiguity. What, for example, are the “great things” Miskawayh refers to as the correlate of worthiness? Reading the expression against Aristotle (and indeed against the vocabulary of the Arabic translation of the *Ethics*), the answer seems clear: honour.¹⁹ Yet Miskawayh notably does not volunteer this clarity. The words he does volunteer are, on any estimate, exiguous. Coming from the history of strained responses to greatness of soul in all its provocative brilliance, one will be struck by the sheer procedural matter-of-factness with which this virtue is casually brought up, briefly defined, and then dropped before moving down the list. The only other appearance the virtue makes in the rest of the work is in a passage addressing the impact of misfortunes on happiness, one that mirrors its appearance at the same juncture of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (Miskawayh 1966, 96, cf. 99; compare *NE* 1100b32).²⁰

What to make of this offhand treatment? Before engaging with this question more seriously, we need to allow it to deepen. We can do this by turning to another ethical work featuring a prominent discussion of the virtues, al-Ghazālī’s *Scale of Action*, whose composition dates a few decades after the *Refinement*. This is a work which claims our interest on a number of grounds, not only as one of the outstanding ethical treatises in the Arabic tradition attesting the influence of ancient ethical ideas, but also as the work of a thinker whose religious commitments stand out far more distinctly and whose accomplished engagement with philosophical ethics thus demands to be located more firmly within theological space. Al-Ghazālī’s ethics in the *Scale*, as several commentators have highlighted, bears several debts. Among these, its debt to Miskawayh competes in force with its debt to the literary and religious scholar al-Rāghib al-İṣfahānī (d. before mid-11th century), whose seminal *Pathway to the Noble*

evident physical resemblance of the term *istiḥqār* (contempt) to Miskawayh’s *istiḥqāq* (merit). Another edition of the *Tahdhīb* in fact replaces *istiḥqāq* with a term close in meaning to al-Ghazālī’s, viz. *istikhfāf* (Miskawayh 1911, 17; it is not the sole textual discrepancy.) But any inclination to privilege the latter reading of the text must reckon with the fact that the former term appears both in the *NE* (e.g. p. 257.11 of Arabic edition) and in Nicolaus’ treatise.

¹⁶ *Huwa faḍīla li’l-naḥs taḥtamīlu bihā sa’ādat al-jadd wa-ḍiddihā ḥattā al-shadā’id allatī takūnu ‘inda al-mawt*. Zurayk translates *‘izām al-himma* as “composure,” which seems too restrictive in light of the uses of this term in other ethical texts, as I will show elsewhere.

¹⁷ As noted by M. C. Lyons in Lyons 1960-61, 52; Lyons suggests that the terms *kibar al-naḥs* and *‘izām al-himma* correspond to the Greek terms *megalopsychia* and *megalophrosyne*.

¹⁸ Though note Aristotle’s remark at *NE* 1124a11: “he will treat dishonour in the same way...”

¹⁹ See note 15. More could be said to unpack the somewhat cryptic reference to “disdain for what is insignificant,” but this would be a long textual story. The definitions of the virtue offered by different writers contain a few conceptual elements which my discussion has had to leave out of view.

²⁰ The term *‘izām al-himma* is interestingly juxtaposed to *kibar al-naḥs* in the first passage.

Traits of the Religious Law had blazed the trail toward a more compelling amalgamation of philosophical ethics into a Qur’anic framework.²¹

Each of these thinkers provides his own taxonomy of the virtues and vices, and the family resemblances between these taxonomies often co-exist with numerous divergences which no doubt provide the material for complicated stories about their individual genealogies.²² Yet whatever al-Ghazālī’s debt to al-Rāghib’s work, in his discussion of the virtues and vices, and in his discussion of greatness of soul in particular, it is his affinities with Miskawayh that advertise themselves most strongly—though these are indeed affinities that throw the delicate yet significant differences into even sharper relief. Unlike Miskawayh, al-Ghazālī mentions not only the virtue but also its corresponding vices, naming them as smallness of soul (*ṣiḡhar al-naḡs*) and arrogance or presumption (*takabbur*).²³ Unlike Miskawayh, he omits any reference to the second virtue, “greatness of spirit” (*‘iḡam al-himma*). And here comes the formal definition, filed once again under the cardinal virtue of courage. Greatness of soul (*kibar al-naḡs*):

A virtue through which a person has the capacity to judge himself worthy of grand things while despising them and caring little about them out of delight in the value and grandeur of his soul. Its effect is that one takes little pleasure in great honours bestowed upon him by scholars and one takes no pleasure in honours bestowed by contemptible people, or in small things, or in good things that are a matter of luck or fortune (al-Ghazālī 1964, 277).²⁴

One thing that will instantly stand out are the rather firmer bridges this remark throws to Aristotle’s discussion, as evidenced by the resumption of Aristotle’s qualification about the great-souled man’s response to honour depending on the identity of its dispenser (*NE* 1124a5-11). The similarities with Miskawayh’s account will be plain. They notably include the emphasis on worthiness of great things (complete with the same reticence on what those great things are), which highlights the second strand of greatness of soul identified earlier—self-evaluation—and likewise situates al-Ghazālī’s definition within the Aristotelian force-field. At the same time, al-Ghazālī incorporates a stronger emphasis on the second strand, the attitude to luck; he also calls sharper attention to the element of self-evaluation by highlighting the double movement of exaltation of the self and contempt for things external to it.²⁵

What such a painstaking comparison of *differentiae* points to, however, is the similarity between the two discussions that is most basic—and to the reader approaching these discussions with an awareness of the broader history of the virtue, most surprising: and this is just how impassively and cursorily both writers pick up greatness of soul only to drop it in their forward-moving march down their table of definitions. The space al-Ghazālī devotes to this virtue exceeds the space he allocates to most other virtues, and it is almost double the size of Miskawayh’s. Yet that is to say very little given the brevity of both sets of remarks.

Yet what makes this offhand brevity even more striking is that, even in their terseness, these statements have succeeded in giving voice to a conception of the virtue that places some of its starkest, and indeed most contentious, features on full display. It is al-Ghazālī’s statement that stands out here with the almost gratuitous extravagance of its wording, picking out the element of self-evaluation to parse it as the great-souled man’s “delight in the value and

²¹ Al-Ghazālī’s debt to al-Rāghib has been emphasised by a number of writers, including Madelung 1974 and Mohamed 1995 and 2011.

²² Among many other differences, al-Rāghib’s focal term is *kibar al-himma*. For a quick comparison of the tables of the virtues provided by some of our writers (al-Ghazālī, Miskawayh and Avicenna, though not al-Rāghib), see Sherif 1975, appendix II.

²³ Though note that al-Ghazālī gives the term *tabajjuh* as the corresponding vice a couple of pages later (al-Ghazālī 1964, 279).

²⁴ *Faḡīla yaḡdiru bihā al-insān an yu’ahhila naḡsahu li’l-umūr al-jalīla ma’a istiḡqārihi lahā wa-qillat mubālātihi bihā ibtihājan minhu bi-qadr naḡsihi wa-jalālatihā (...).*

²⁵ For more on this double movement, see Vasalou 2013, 181-88, and more briefly Vasalou 2015, 160-61.

grandeur his soul.” The grandeur of his soul; or as an alternative translation might have it: its majesty. For readers familiar with the strained history of this virtue’s reception, such electric terms will have the effect of returning them to the grounds of this reception and to the pangs of moral discomfort the virtue has provoked among many thinkers, particularly in its Aristotelian articulation. This discomfort has centred on the attitude to the self and the view of the proper way of relating to its merits that it appears to codify; and it has been especially high among thinkers whose religious commitments have led them to accentuate the value of humility as an ethical ideal. Given the intellectual identities of both writers, and even more so al-Ghazālī’s, their appearance of extending a matter-of-course welcome to this virtue will thus make us wonder, and will call for deeper investigation.

The ethics of honour and self-esteem: Miskawayh

It is an investigation, I would suggest, that requires placing these brief remarks in a more thorough conversation with these thinkers’ broader ethical schemes. And to the extent that one of the main (and most contentious) ethical stakes thematised by the virtue centres on the proper attitude to self-esteem and to the esteem bestowed by others, it is with these thinkers’ views on those topics that their statements about greatness of soul need to be placed in the closest contact. The path to investigating the Arabic reception of this virtue thus passes through an invitation to piece together a more positive and substantive picture of these thinkers’ ethical commitments. My focus will in fact principally fall on al-Ghazālī, who provides the richest though not the most unequivocal contributions on the topic, and whose theological commitments give him a higher stake in the subject. My argument, to briefly preview it, is that on closer scrutiny, the virtue of greatness of soul turns out to sit uneasily within these thinkers’ positive morality, particularly al-Ghazālī’s, for reasons that evoke the ones that animated some of their Christian counterparts in their response to pagan ethics and greatness of soul in particular. The conflict with (one important strand of) Islamic religious morality seems no less real for being unvoiced, though if this is the case, it will then be an interesting question to ask why the conflict should be obscured from view.

Miskawayh’s broader work offers little sustained commentary on the ethical stakes just isolated, and indeed some of the views he voices may put us in the mind of the ethical register texturing the ancient schemes in which the virtue of greatness of soul thrived. Thus, the simple affirmations of the dignity of human beings that are woven through his *Refinement of Character*—the soul is “nobler” in substance (*akram jawharan*) than all material things and humans have the greatest dignity among mundane beings (*ashraf mawjūdāt ‘ālamīnā*) (Miskawayh 1966, 6, 36)—may remind us, minus the specific vocabulary of grandeur, of some of the exulting expressions of human greatness among Stoic thinkers. As Seneca puts it in one of his *Epistles* (102, 21): “The human soul is a great and noble thing.”²⁶ No less important, Miskawayh, as some have observed, fails to follow al-Fārābī’s example with regard to humility and gives it no place in his classification of the virtues.²⁷

Yet a closer look at a number of his remarks—isolated yet no less telling—yields a complex picture that raises questions about the position that greatness of soul, particularly in its Aristotelian modulation of the proper attitudes to honour and self-evaluation, could occupy within it. As regards externally bestowed honour, for one, Miskawayh’s moral exemplar is a person whose pursuit of excellence for its own sake can survive others’ complete ignorance about his merit (though Miskawayh underlines that virtues “shine like the sun” and in practice rarely remain undiscovered). The right attitude to others’ failure to recognise one’s merit, he tells us at one place, is indifference: one “should be unconcerned (*lam yaktarith*)”; he continues: “for we know that it is a vice to seek to obtain and to love honour (*iltimās al-karāma wa-maḥabbatuhā radhīla*).” While Miskawayh recognises the motivational value of honour and

²⁶ Here I draw on the translation by Gummere 1918-25.

²⁷ See Sherif 1975, 53-54, for some brief but helpful remarks on the topic.

commends its pedagogical use as an incentive among those cultivating virtue, he disparages the desire for it as a vice.²⁸ This last set of remarks is consistent with the guarded attitude to honour expressed in the first part of Miskawayh's definition of greatness of soul (it involves "the capacity to bear honour and dishonour"), yet it is rather less consistent with Aristotle's own framing of the proper attitude to honour, to the extent that this fought shy of Socratic (and later Stoic) indifference. Similarly, unlike Aristotle's great-souled man, who—if he does not actively "look down on people" in general (*NE* 1124b5), makes a point of acting grandly toward the eminent (1124b18-19)—Miskawayh's paragon of virtue is explicitly said to be one who "behaves humbly toward everyone (*yatawāda'u li-kull aḥad*) and honours everyone he consorts with (*yukrimu kulla man 'āsharahu*)" (Miskawayh 1966, 60).²⁹

Even more telling, however, are those of Miskawayh's remarks that touch upon the internal element of the "ethics of esteem" plexus, that which concerns a person's own estimation of his merits. In this respect, the significance of Miskawayh's failure to include humility in his list of the virtues needs to be calibrated by the observation that a quality which presents itself as the opposing vice does indeed make an important appearance in his discussion. In a later chapter of the *Refinement* dedicated to discussion of the maladies of the soul, one of the vices that Miskawayh brings up is conceit (*'ujb*), which he defines as "a false view that the soul deserves a station it does not deserve (*ẓann kādhib bi'l-nafs fī istiḥqāq martaba ḡhayr mustaḥaqqā lahā*)" (Miskawayh 1966, 196).³⁰ The invocation of the notion of desert will remind us of Miskawayh's use of the same term in his definition of greatness of soul. The conceited person, we learn, is the one who has an exaggerated view of his deserts; the virtuous person, by implication, will be the one who takes a just view of his deserts, and who thus only judges them to be great when they really are great (as the great-souled man does). Yet Miskawayh's continuation, which proposes a reflection intended to medicate or remedy the vice, is suggestive: "It befits one who knows his soul to know the multiplicity of flaws and deficiencies that beset it." And it is suggestive for apparently leaving little room for the possibility that self-knowledge could ever yield a judgement of great merit—that it could ever produce legitimate self-satisfaction.³¹

If this remark does not seem sufficiently conclusive, a pregnant statement Miskawayh offers in another of his works, *The Scattered and the Gathered*, drives the point more forcefully home. It is pregnant not least in appealing to a term that has already appeared once in this discussion, "greatness of spirit," and whose fuller exploration I have deferred to another occasion. "The great-spirited person (*al-kabīr al-himma*)," Miskawayh tells us there, "belittles the virtues he possesses on account of his aspiration to what surpasses them; for however high the level (*martaba*) of excellence that a person acquires, it is nugatory compared with that which surpasses it"; and it is the limitations of human nature that "prevent one from grasping it fully and attaining its utmost degree" and "seeking the highest level of the human excellences" (Miskawayh and al-Tawḥīdī 1951, 308). It is a part of virtue, Miskawayh suggests—indeed, part of a virtue of *greatness*—to never feel satisfied with the excellence of one's character; because complete perfection in fact lies outside our reach. The proper attitude toward one's own character is never a static sense of possession such as Aristotle's great-souled man appears to

²⁸ For the last quote, see Miskawayh and al-Tawḥīdī 1951, 300; and see 307 for the remark about excellences shining like the sun (though see also 303 for a seemingly more positive comment on honour). On the pedagogical harnessing of honour, see e.g. Miskawayh 1966, 56 (talking about the education of the young).

²⁹ As Pakaluk argues in the context of broader remarks engaging the putative "arrogance" of Aristotle's *megalopsychos*, the translation of *kataphronei* as "looks down on people" is misleading insofar as it introduces an object that the original text lacks. Pakaluk 2004, 264.

³⁰ This vice appears more specifically in Miskawayh's discussion of anger, where it is named as one of the causes of its pathology; we may recall that greatness of soul was also subsumed into the irascible faculty.

³¹ Miskawayh offers a second, slightly less transparent therapeutic reflection, which seems to centre on one's dependence on others and the lack of self-sufficiency of one's virtue.

evinced. Moral greatness must always figure in the content of a future-directed aspiration rather than as the content of a factual judgement about one's existing character.³²

Taken together, this evidence suggests that the virtue of greatness of soul, particularly in its Aristotelian inflection, could at best occupy an ambivalent place in Miskawayh's broader ethical scheme. Although Miskawayh allows for the importance of proper self-respect—one should not gratuitously expose himself to ridicule and dishonor, he notes at one place: "the virtuous person...honours himself and protects his dignity (*yukrimu nafsahu wa-'irdahu*)" (Miskawayh 1966, 199)—his overall understanding would seem to bear an awkward relationship to the view of the proper attitude to honour and self-esteem embedded in Aristotle's account.

The ethics of honour and self-esteem: al-Ghazālī

In crafting this comparison, I have held Miskawayh's ethical viewpoint against (a rudimentary schema of) Aristotle's while allowing myself the liberty to look away from Miskawayh's own schema of the virtue, whose bare simplicity, and indeed strategic ambiguities, make it a limited mirror of Aristotle's account and present its contentious elements in a relatively muted form.³³ In turning to al-Ghazālī, such textual scruples loosen their grip given the boldness with which such elements are placed on display. The great-souled man judges himself "worthy of grand things" while disdaining them "out of delight in the value and grandeur of his soul."

Now in seeking to situate this remarkable characterisation within al-Ghazālī's broader ethical understanding, it will be instructive to note that this is not the first time that al-Ghazālī has linked the notion of a positive affective response to a person's perception of his own character and of the quality of his soul within the pages of the *Scale*. Envisaging the life of sustained religious obedience a few pages earlier, al-Ghazālī makes the tantalising remark that fulfilling this life will lead to greater reward and a state of greater purity for the soul, such that "its perfection (*kamāl*) is more complete, and the joy its owner takes in its beauty (*ibtihāj ṣāhibihā bi-jamālihā*) upon release from the attachments of the body is more intense and abundant." This point is echoed later in the *Scale* where al-Ghazālī refers to the way the veil that prevents a person from "perceiving his soul and its perfection and beauty (*mushāhadat nafsihi wa-kamālihā wa-jamālihā*)" will be lifted upon death, allowing one to witness one's perfection and to "rejoice in it and experience never-ending bliss in it" (al-Ghazālī 1964, 256, 357). The focal terms here, it will be observed, are "perfection" and "beauty." These are notions that are organically interrelated and in turn directly linked with both the concept of character and with the more solemn notion of "grandeur" deployed in al-Ghazālī's remark about greatness of soul. The notion of beauty, al-Ghazālī explains in the *Revival of the Religious Sciences*, is not confined to things we can perceive with the physical senses but has wider application. In this wider sense, an entity is beautiful when it is characterised by the perfection that is proper to it and possible for it. It is in this wider sense, in which beauty is predicated not of the "outer" but of the "inner" form, that we speak of beautiful or fine character (*khuluq ḥasan, akhlāq jamīla*) (see the discussion in al-Ghazālī 1356–57 [1937–38], 14: 2577–81). Having linked the good to the beautiful—a link indeed catalysed by the very Arabic term *ḥusn*, which can signify both "goodness" and "beauty," and evoking a conceptual conjunction that was likewise central to the pattern of Greek ethics—elsewhere al-Ghazālī links the beautiful to the great by suggesting that

³² Note that the understanding of Aristotle's *megalopsychos* in terms of "a static sense of possession" is open to debate. For a robust defense of the role of aspiration in Aristotle's portrait, see Pakaluk 2004; cf. the discussion in Vasalou 2013, 184–86.

³³ This reflects a broader picture of sketchy engagement with the *NE* which has been the source of enduring doubts as to the precise identity of the texts Miskawayh was using during his composition of the *Tahdhīb*, and as to whether he had access to the entire text of the *NE* or was instead using the *Summa Alexandrinorum* under the mistaken impression that this was the *NE*. See the brief remarks in Akasoy 2012, 101–102 and references there.

beauty (*jamāl*) is but the subjective correlate of grandeur or majesty (*jalāl*) (al-Ghazālī 1971, 126).

This last suggestion appears in a short but important work that al-Ghazālī devotes to an investigation of the names of God, *The Most Exalted Aim in Expounding God's Beautiful Names*. This is a work whose distinctive task is to offer guidance to the believer striving to model himself on the divine names and to fulfil the religious mandate indicated in a well-known hadith to “assume the character traits of God” (*takhallaqū bi-akhlāq Allāh*). For our context, it will be particularly relevant to note the appearance that the notions of beauty and majesty make in al-Ghazālī’s framing of this ethical pursuit. The person who has gained insight into one of the attributes of God is struck by its grandeur and splendour (*isti’zām, istishrāq*) in a way that fills him with “a longing for that attribute, an ardour for that grandeur and beauty, and a desire to be adorned by that feature” (ibid, 43).³⁴ It is the perception of God’s beauty and majesty, this suggests, that rouses our moral aspiration and drives us to imitate it; and what is crucial is that, in responding to that stimulus, it is the desire to be beautiful—a longing to appropriate that beauty as our own—that forms the content of our moral motivation. Elsewhere the same point is couched using the language of perfection, appearing as the claim that “the perfection and virtue of one’s soul” should form the content of one’s aim in the mundane world (al-Ghazālī 1964, 361).

Taken together, the above suggests that al-Ghazālī’s pithy statements about the great-souled person’s delight in his own greatness betoken—and mesh with—a broader readiness to give ethical sanction to the idea that the perfections of one’s own character might show up as the object of positive valuation. This indeed reflects a psychological truth that al-Ghazālī states in universal tones in the *Revival*: perfection forms an object of desire, and the attainment of objects of desire causes pleasure; thus “when the soul perceives its perfection it is gladdened and moved by joy” (al-Ghazālī 1356–57 [1937-38], 10: 1847).³⁵ The picture of moral aspiration as a self-focused desire for one’s future perfection would appear to tie into this larger picture. It will not be incidental to further observe that in his classification of the virtues and vices in the *Scale*, al-Ghazālī, like Miskawayh before him, not only fails to incorporate humility (*tawāḍuʿ*) among the virtues, but unlike Miskawayh, goes further in identifying humility as one of the *vicious* extremes of a virtue named as “dignity” (*waqār*) and defined, in terms highly reminiscent of greatness of soul, as “assigning one’s soul the status it deserves due to one’s knowledge of its worth (*qadr*)” (al-Ghazālī 1964, 277-78).³⁶ And whatever we make of Miskawayh or Fārābī’s stance on the topic, this understanding of the proper way of relating to one’s merits would in turn appear to connect al-Ghazālī to a view finding voice among other stakeholders in the same ethical tradition, albeit with varying degrees of directness. These include the Christian philosopher Yaḥyā ibn ‘Adī (d. 974) who, opening his own work on the virtues, *The Refinement of Character*, would commend it both to the reader who lacks the virtues, but also to the one who possesses them and who can thus taste “a wondrous pleasure and delighting joy” upon recognising his own perfections in the ethical ideal extolled in the work (Yaḥyā ibn ‘Adī 1978, 70).³⁷ The Shi’ite writer Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī (d. 1274) would later echo this thought in the overture to his celebrated compendium, *The Nasirean Ethics* (al-Ṭūsī 2015, 90).

³⁴ Cf. the phrasing of 44: *al-taḥallī bi-maḥāsinihā*. See also the remarks about God’s beauty as the stimulus of ethical pursuit in al-Ghazālī 1964, 402-3. The virtue of noble-mindedness (*shahāma*) as limned in the *Mizān* also appears to incorporate a desire for beauty in the content of motivation. It is defined as “alacrity for great deeds in the expectation of beauty (*al-jamāl*)”; ibid, 277. Miskawayh, interestingly, has “a fine/beautiful reputation” instead (*uḥḍūtha jamīla*: Miskawayh 1966, 22).

³⁵ The context, importantly, is a discussion of the reasons we take pleasure in praise.

³⁶ An alternative translation for *waqār* might be “gravitas.” Sherif’s translation as “correct evaluation of self” (Sherif 1975, 53) seems infelicitous, inter alia, in insulating the term from its ordinary linguistic meaning. Yet note the apparently *praising* reference to humility in al-Ghazālī 1964, 252.

³⁷ This joy is compared to the pleasure taken in praise. Yet in fact Yaḥyā, like al-Ghazālī (as we will see), turns out to take a more qualified view of the ethics of self-esteem, reserving strong words against the vice of arrogance, which involves a sense of one’s grandeur and satisfaction in one’s virtue: see ibid, 96-

Yet this understanding of the broader ethical tendencies animating al-Ghazālī's thought in this domain turns out, on closer consideration, to carry tensions that make it difficult to simply rest with it. The invocation of the notion of merit or desert (*istiḥqāq*) in al-Ghazālī's statements about the virtues of dignity and greatness of soul should be one of the first things to give us pause, given what we know about al-Ghazālī's theological identity. For among Ash'arite theologians, who vociferously rejected the kind of moral objectivism defended by Mu'tazilite thinkers, the notion of moral desert had a highly contested status. Similarly, it will be noted that al-Ghazālī's above remarks about the joyful perception of one's beauty pertain to the posthumous domain. Yet of course this domain is governed by moral conditions so different from those of the mundane one—it is the domain in which ethical endeavour comes to a rest and its harvest can finally be enjoyed as a sure possession—as to raise a question, at the very least, whether the joyful contemplation of one's soul in the next world could automatically translate into a model for the right relationship to one's soul in this one. In the same vein, to acknowledge that we are driven by a desire for beauty is not the same as to assert that we should rejoice in the confident certainty that we have realised it. And even the lightest reading of al-Ghazālī's theological remarks, including his remarks about beauty in the *Revival*, raises serious questions about how earnestly he might mean to ensconce the notions of perfection, beauty and indeed grandeur within the self-regard of human beings. For "perfection belongs to God alone," he trenchantly declares in one place, with an exclusivity that recurs in a statement appearing in the same vicinity: "To Him belongs beauty and splendour, greatness and magnificence (*al-ʿaẓama wa'l-kibriyā*)" (al-Ghazālī 1356–57 [1937-38], 14: 2588). And again, in *The Most Exalted Aim*, invoking the term appearing in his definition of greatness of soul: "The only being that is absolutely great (*jalīl*) is God" (al-Ghazālī 1971, 126). Meditation on God's greatness and majesty, we hear elsewhere in the *Revival*, is one of the chief spiritual tasks of the believer, and anyone who apprehends God's majesty ceases to perceive beauty in any other being.³⁸

Such observations will immediately make us wonder how deeply to read the significance of the brief remarks surveyed above, and how seriously to credit them as a guide to al-Ghazālī's considered ethical views on the topic. Where to look for stronger evidence? The obvious place to turn is al-Ghazālī's multi-volume *magnum opus*, the *Revival of the Religious Sciences*. Divided into two halves focusing respectively on the external and internal dimensions of the religious life, the second half of the *Revival* offers a detailed discussion of the ethical and spiritual traits that need to be cultivated and avoided within this life. Within this discussion, the topic of honour occupies a salient place, as do the ethical traits that concern the attitude to self-worth, with an entire book devoted to the former under the title *On the Condemnation of Status and Dissimulation*, and another book to the latter under the title *On the Condemnation of Arrogance and Conceit*.

The relationship between al-Ghazālī's ethical thought as expressed in the *Scale* and as expressed in the later *Revival* has been the subject of extensive commentary among al-Ghazālī's readers, given the more overtly philosophical character of the former and the more palpable Sufi commitments of the latter. Al-Ghazālī's description of his "spiritual crisis" in his celebrated autobiography, *The Deliverer from Error*, has drawn many readers toward an understanding of his intellectual development as one governed by decisive moments of rupture. Querying these traditional literal-minded readings of al-Ghazālī's autobiography, recent scholarship has placed the accent on the stability of his intellectual commitments and the continuity between his ethical works, with one commentator describing the *Scale* as "a sort of first draft of the *Revival*" and suggesting that its key concepts and ethical views survive in the *Revival* "largely unchanged"

97. He also elsewhere dismisses the love of honour and praise as a vice, even while recognising that it has an important developmental role to play (*ibid*, 101).

³⁸ On the task of meditating on the greatness of God, see briefly Sherif's remarks on *tafakkur* and *fikr* in Sherif 1975, 122-23; and for the next point, see al-Ghazālī 1356–57 [1937-38], 13: 2390.

despite perceptible differences in both form and substance between the two works.³⁹ In taking the *Revival* as a document that can be naturally placed in conversation with the *Scale* in piecing together a fuller picture of al-Ghazālī's ethical views, my emphasis also falls on the continuities. Yet as we will see, this emphasis is compatible with keeping an open mind regarding the precise balance of continuities and discontinuities, and with remaining attuned to interpretive tensions between the two works; as it is compatible with remaining attuned to tensions to be found even within the body of a single work.

It is an attunement that is called into service from almost the very first pages of the remarkable account of honour that al-Ghazālī offers in his book *On the Condemnation of Status and Dissimulation*. In its basic or original sense, he notes in opening the book, status or standing (*jāh*) refers to fame. Yet this definition gives way to a rather more striking formulation a few pages later: the meaning of "status" is "possession of the minds of people, from whom one desires aggrandisement and obedience" (al-Ghazālī 1356–57 [1937-38], 10: 1835).⁴⁰ Possession; or in another, starker translation: "mastery." The concept of mastery continues to play an organising role in al-Ghazālī's ensuing exposition. To have status is to dispose over people's minds in ways that allow one to use them in pursuit of one's ends.⁴¹ Human minds submit to a person when they form the belief that he is characterised by certain perfections, a class that includes—notably for our purpose—good character but also physical strength, beauty, knowledge, and piety. The person who seeks status seeks to produce such beliefs with a view to producing the state of submission and subservience that results from them. Properly speaking, status is the internal state of judging and believing that constitutes status, which is then outwardly expressed through honour and different forms of service.

Coming from many other accounts of honour, this presentation will seem remarkable. Honour emerges here as a special kind of exercise of power; it is a form of mastery or domination, with all the violence these concepts evoke. To exact honour from people is indeed in a real sense to enslave them.⁴² This way of collapsing the quest for honour into the quest for power will appear particularly striking when set against some of the salient moments in the history of the Christian engagement with pagan ethics. It was a crucial distinction between these two drives, for example, that formed the backbone of Augustine's proposal that pagans can develop virtue "insofar as they move from the pursuit of *dominium*, driven by the desire to impose their own will on others, to the pursuit of glory and honor" (Herdt 2008, 48). For there is a "clear difference between the desire for glory before men and the desire for domination," he had observed, even if in practice there is a "slippery slope" from one to the other (Augustine 2003, Bk V, §19, 212). It will also appear striking coming from Aristotle, for reasons that help bring out the structure of al-Ghazālī's reasoning more distinctly. For in characterising honour as the greatest external good and "the one we mete out to the gods" (*NE* 1123b17-18) in his remarks about greatness of soul, Aristotle had suggested an understanding of honour as something possessing intrinsic value and desired for its own sake. Al-Ghazālī's account, by contrast, reduces this value to purely instrumental terms: if we desire people to honour us, it is because we have other separate ends that this enables us to achieve and other goods we want to obtain. In this respect it is like money, which gives us access to an indefinite range of things we might happen to desire (the analogy is al-Ghazālī's: 1356–57 [1937-38], 10: 1836).

³⁹ The quoted remarks are respectively from Garden 2014, 31, and Garden 2015, 228. Garden offers a careful re-appraisal of al-Ghazālī's autobiography drawing on an extensive body of recent work. Debates about al-Ghazālī's continued commitment to the philosophical ethics articulated in the *Mizān* date back several decades, as can be seen from the brief overview in Abul Quasem 1974, 111-12. They also provide the context for the above-cited study by Sherif, who stakes an implicit claim for al-Ghazālī's continued philosophical commitments by seamlessly treating the *Mizān* and the *Ihyā'* as equal partners in building his account.

⁴⁰ *Mulk al-qulūb al-maṭlūb ta'zīmuḥā wa-ṭā'atuhā*.

⁴¹ *Ibid*: *li-yasta'mila bi-wāsiṭatihā arbābahā fī aghrāḍihī wa-ma'āribihī*.

⁴² The language is al-Ghazālī's: "The seeker of status seeks to subjugate and enslave free men (*yastariqqu al-aḥrāra wa-yasta'biduhum*)" (*ibid*).

And it is in fact precisely this utilitarian view of honour that al-Ghazālī is next challenged to defend, giving him an opportunity to finesse his account, but also to introduce a new source of ambiguity or tension. For “it is an astounding thing about human nature,” an imaginary reader observes, that we find people treating both kinds of goods—money and honour—in ways that seem utterly resistant to such an instrumentalising construction. We see people insatiably hoarding possessions and amassing wealth that far outstrips their present and conceivable needs. In like manner, we see people eager to have their renown diffuse over the four corners of the earth, in places where it is inconceivable they will ever set foot and whose denizens they will never meet in order to profit from their obeisance (ibid, 10: 1837-38). Al-Ghazālī responds by first querying the notion of possibility or conceivability deployed in this observation: what reason sees as inconceivable, anxiety deems far less so. Yet it is his second response—which he himself calls the “weightier” of the two—that will rather engage our interest, for it shows al-Ghazālī abandoning the utilitarian part of his argument and making a crucial concession to the truth of his reader’s observation. The spirit, he remarks, is “a lordly thing” (*amr rabbānī*), as indicated in the well-known Qur’anic verse: “The Spirit is of the bidding of my Lord” (17: 85).⁴³ A lordly element forms one of the central constituents of human nature. This element expresses itself as a powerful desire for perfection for its own sake, which in turns manifests as an insatiable desire for domination (*istīlā*) that is satisfied either by actually exercising power over existents or (where this is not possible) by making them objects of knowledge. Hence indeed our ardour for probing wondrous and mysterious things (*asrār*, ‘*ajā’ib*); for “by knowing an object, one dominates it” (al-Ghazālī: 1356–57 [1937-38], 10: 1841).⁴⁴ Our desire for honour is connected to this deeper drive, and represents a desire to exercise power over one of the two classes of mundane entities, namely souls, the other being bodies.

We may notice the striking Nietzschean overtones of al-Ghazālī’s understanding of wonder and the drive to knowledge. More relevantly, we will notice that in this account the conflation of the desire for honour and the desire for domination has not been expunged, but engraved even more deeply. What will be especially interesting, however, is to note the tension this account now seems to introduce into the status—and valuation—of this desire, one that derives from an important ambiguity about the status of the “lordly” element within his broader scheme.

This is not the first time the “lordly” or “masterly” (*rabbānī* or *rubūbī*) aspect of human nature has appeared in al-Ghazālī’s discussion. It appeared in an earlier book of the *Revival* where al-Ghazālī offered an overview of human nature by identifying four elements that enter into its constitution: the “predatory” (*sabu’ī*), the “bestly” (*bahīmī*), the “satanic” (*shayṭānī*) and the “lordly” (ibid, 8: 1356). This four-fold scheme echoes a more familiar tripartite scheme found in numerous works of Arabic philosophical ethics based on the Platonic distinction between the rational, spirited or irascible, and appetitive parts of the soul. Given the frequent identification, within these works, of the “predatory” aspect with the irascible faculty and of the “bestly” aspect with the appetitive faculty, the most intuitive way of reading al-Ghazālī’s “lordly” element is as another designation for the privileged faculty standing at the normative apex of this scheme, namely reason. This is a reading al-Ghazālī reinforces in several ways, not only by speaking positively about the need to subjugate all other elements to the “governance of the lordly attribute” (ibid, 8: 1358), but also by once again associating this element with the quest for truth and an insatiable drive to knowledge.⁴⁵ As in the discussion we have seen, here

⁴³ The term *amr*, as these translations reflect, is an equivocal one.

⁴⁴ *Fī’l-‘ilm istīlā’ ‘ala’l-ma’lūm*; al-Ghazālī’s response extends from 10: 1838-41. In the above I am simplifying somewhat a complex and multifaceted discussion.

⁴⁵ Inter alia, al-Ghazālī compares the lordly aspect to a sage (with the other aspects compared to a dog, a pig and a demon) and connects it to reason (*‘aql*); ibid, 8: 1356-57. This scheme evokes a similar (albeit not entirely identical) scheme found in Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī’s work, which we know al-Ghazālī drew copiously on: al-Makkī 2001, 1: 251-52. Yet al-Makkī made it rather plainer than al-Ghazālī in this context that the lordly aspects must be subdued and replaced by the aspects of servitude (*awṣāf al-‘ubūdiyya*).

too al-Ghazālī associates this element with a different kind of drive directed toward mastery, elevation and eminence (*ri'āsa*). A remark in this context stands out as particularly pregnant given the echo it provokes with the terms of al-Ghazālī's statement about greatness of soul. When this aspect of human nature dominates, he states, one acquires "an entitlement (*istiḥqāq*) to pre-eminence over people due to the perfection and grandeur (*jalāl*) of knowledge" (ibid). The grounds of the positive valence apparently attaching to this element would seem to be reflected in its very designation. This is an aspect of our being that makes us share in something that belongs to God; it is the basis of our kinship with God. It is not incidental that this notion should appear in the first pages of al-Ghazālī's *The Most Exalted Aim*, a work devoted precisely to the project of cultivating that kinship. It is by striving to acquire the divine traits, al-Ghazālī tells us, that "a person may become lordly" (al-Ghazālī 1971, 44).⁴⁶

The lordly aspect of human nature thus appears to carry a distinct normative privilege; and the drive to mastery and honour, having been grounded in it, could be expected to reflect this. Yet a closer reading makes clear that this positive understanding is subject to important qualifications. And here, it is precisely al-Ghazālī's approach to the second component of this lordly aspect—the drive to honour and mastery—that serves as the strongest interpretive lever. For there is no mistaking al-Ghazālī's intention, in the unmistakably entitled book *On the Condemnation of Status and Dissimulation*, to subject the desire for honour to a scathing critique that unfolds on a number of separate levels. Some of the grounds of his critique are linked to the danger that this desire poses to our moral motivation. The love of honour renders us insincere, making us act out of a concern for how we appear before others and displacing the desire for God's praise—which ought to be our real concern—with a desire for the praise of human beings. Yet some of al-Ghazālī's other grounds are more tightly linked to his nuanced construal of this desire in terms of an instrumental and intrinsic drive to power, and indeed bring to the open certain important evaluative distinctions to be drawn within the lordly element of our being. For among the two intrinsic drives that constitute this element, the one to power and the one to knowledge, it is only the latter, al-Ghazālī explains in the continuation of his discussion, that represents a real perfection (*kamāl ḥaqīqī*), as it is the only perfection that endures in the next life (al-Ghazālī 1356–57 [1937–38], 10: 1842–43).⁴⁷ This is linked to another point. For insofar as the desire for honour is an instrumental one, deriving from the way it enables us to achieve separate ends through the mastery of others' minds, its value will depend on the value of the goods obtained by its means. Al-Ghazālī's analogy with money suggests that he has primarily mundane goods of a sensory kind in mind, whose pursuit is subjected to severe strictures within his ethical scheme (ibid, 10: 1836).⁴⁸ These are strictures that his condemnation of honour directly reflects. A degree of esteem among our fellow beings is necessary for living in the world—and indeed a degree of attachment to it may form a necessary motivational stepping stone in moral development—but it should not exceed the modicum that enables us to cover our basic needs.⁴⁹

The negative light trained on the lordly aspect of human nature through these distinctions becomes even sharper in other contexts, in ways that crucially transpose al-Ghazālī's critique of honour into a more decisive stance regarding the internal counterpart of the ethical stakes we have been examining, namely the proper attitude to self-worth and the ethics of self-evaluation. For in making us desire eminence and domination, al-Ghazālī observes when first introducing his fourfold scheme of human nature, this lordly element impels us to "loosen the yoke of servitude (*'ubūdiyya*) and humility from our necks" (ibid, 8: 1356). Yet this is a yoke which, bondsmen of God that we are—in religious writings, the term *'abd* (slave) is the

⁴⁶ Literally, "that a *servant of God* may become lordly (*yaṣīru al-'abd rabbāniyyan*)."

⁴⁷ It is also the only perfection that can be properly attributed to human beings, given that power is only properly attributed to God (10: 1843).

⁴⁸ Cf. the reference to the needs of the body (*muhimmāt al-badan*) on 10: 1843, though the preceding context also suggests a broader specification of the ends served.

⁴⁹ Al-Ghazālī's allowance for the developmental value of the love of honour or eminence—its value as a transitional motivation that should eventually be superseded—is signalled e.g. in al-Ghazālī 1964, 365–66.

commonest designation for “human being”—we cannot quite throw off. “The lordship that is in our nature,” al-Ghazālī explicitly declares elsewhere, is “the opposite of the servitude that we were commanded to” (ibid, 12: 2186). This, in fact, points to a tension within the project of imitating God that was already evident in the thought of the prominent Sufi writer to which al-Ghazālī bore the greatest debt in composing the *Revival*, Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī (d. 996). In his *Nourishment of the Heart*, al-Makki had touched upon the notion of imitating God and highlighted its significance for the religious life. Those who have the greatest love for God are “those who most excel in assuming His character traits (*aḥsanuhum takhalluqan bi-akhlāqihī*), such as knowledge, clemency, forgiveness,” among others. Yet he had then appeared to distinguish this from a different form of imitation, one qualified more negatively as a “contestation” of God’s exclusivity and connected to a different list of attributes. The attributes featured on this list included pride or a sense of one’s greatness (*kibr*), the desire for praise, and the love of self-sufficiency (al-Makkī 2001, 2: 1042-43).

Al-Makki’s implicit distinction between good and bad forms of imitation would find a crucial reflection in the architecture of al-Ghazālī’s *The Most Exalted Aim*, which is organised by a scrupulous differentiation between the way the divine names apply to God and the way they apply to human beings. Not all divine traits, this suggests, should form objects of human imitation; certain attributes that are virtues in God may be vices in human beings, and to seek to imitate them may be an unconscionable bid to participate in something that is properly divine. For our purposes, what is especially significant is that the list of traits offered by al-Makki includes a number of concepts thematised by ancient articulations of greatness of soul and speaking to the ethical field of esteem and self-esteem more specifically. Among these concepts, the most important to attend to will be the first, which I translated neutrally as a “sense of one’s greatness” to allow for its positive sense as applied to God. If a sense of one’s own greatness is appropriate to God, al-Makki’s remarks already indicate that it may not carry the same appropriateness when exhibited by human beings. The term *kibr*, which bears a positive sense when applied to God, will in turn carry a negative sense in the human context. Applied to human beings, in fact, *kibr* is the term that signifies the vice of excessive pride or arrogance. This is one of two concepts, alongside conceit (*‘ujb*), that organise al-Ghazālī’s discussion in that book of the *Revival* devoted to an investigation of the ethics of self-worth, *On the Condemnation of Arrogance and Conceit*, to which we now need to turn in order to place this ethics into fuller view and into fuller conversation with his remarks on greatness of soul.

Al-Ghazālī addresses these two vices seriatim, providing separate analyses for each. Yet it is clear that these qualities are deeply intermeshed, not only in a structural sense—conceit is formally identified as the cause of arrogance—but also in sharing in many of the key features of al-Ghazālī’s analysis, including the analysis of what makes them vicious, what is the means of remedying them, and what is the virtue that should replace them. Both qualities represent failures in the evaluative attitude to the self and flawed modes of relating to one’s merits. Given the root meaning of “arrogance” (literally “magnitude”), the sense of one’s greatness naturally figures more strongly in al-Ghazālī’s account of this vice, which he specifies in terms that crucially incorporate a comparative dimension. The arrogant person is not simply the person who deems himself great (*yasta‘zimu nafsahu*), but the person who deems himself greater than others and judges his perfections (*sifāt al-kamāl*) to exceed others’ (al-Ghazālī 1356–57 [1937-38], 11: 1946). This relational aspect is absent from the vice of conceit (literally “self-admiration” or “self-amazement,” from the root meaning “amazement” or “wonder”). Yet it is again a relational aspect that organises al-Ghazālī’s specification of the latter, though this is a relation of a rather different kind and the vice consists not in its presence but precisely in its absence. Conceit is a sense of satisfaction and confidence in one’s perfections, or more broadly the blessings one enjoys, that fails to have regard for their origin.

Whatever the differences that separate these vices, what is crucial is that both fundamentally represent failures in knowledge and self-knowledge; and in both cases, it is a knowledge of the self in its relation to God that supplies the necessary corrective. Fresh from al-Makki’s remarks, we will instantly recognise one of the grounds that al-Ghazālī appeals to in mounting his critique of the vice of arrogance. “A sense of one’s greatness is befitting to God

alone,” and thus the person who displays arrogance “has contested God’s claim over an attribute that only befits His majesty” (ibid, respectively 11: 1979 and 1951). The vice of arrogance will be uprooted by a knowledge of God that induces a proper appreciation of His greatness, combined with a knowledge of self that induces a proper appreciation of its insignificance. This is a knowledge that al-Ghazālī takes it upon himself to provide in broad brushstrokes at this juncture of the *Revival* by offering a sweeping portrait of the human condition which traces the long arc of human life from the absolute nothingness of non-existence, through to birth, to the different stages of development, to death, and on to resurrection and the day of Judgement, highlighting the powerful hand of God at every step of this narrative *sub specie aeternitatis*. It is a portrait that may remind readers in certain respects of Pascal’s grandiose exercise in astonishment when conjuring the “two infinities” in the *Pensées*. The effect is the same: to place us in a way that displaces us, bringing home our insignificance and dependence, and provoking in us a sense of humility, which forms the only appropriate moral response (see ibid, 11: 1969-73).⁵⁰

Several elements of al-Ghazālī’s confrontation of the cognitive basis of arrogance recur in his discussion of conceit, but there is a shift of emphasis that reflects the distinctive character of this vice. In turning to examine the latter, it will be worth observing that it is in fact conceit that constitutes the most direct interlocutor of Aristotle’s virtue of greatness, insofar as the latter was specified in absolute rather than comparative terms. With this in mind, it will be interesting to consider al-Ghazālī’s critique, which he prefaces with a more nuanced characterisation of the vice. Conceit relative to some perfection is realised when a person “rejoices in it and reposes his confidence in it, and when he rejoices in it under its aspect as a perfection or blessing or good or distinction, and not under its aspect as a gift from God and a blessing received from Him. Rather he rejoices in it insofar as it is a quality he possesses and is ascribed to him as his possession” (ibid, 11: 1991). Synopsising: conceit consists in judging a certain asset one possesses to be great (*isti’zām*) and placing one’s reliance in it (*rukūn*) while failing to ascribing it to its real giver, that is, God. Add another conceptual filament—a sense of entitlement (*ḥaqq*) to receive rewards and advantages from God—and you have the cognate vice of presumption (*idlāl*) (ibid, 11: 1991-92).

Having limned the nature of this vice more precisely, al-Ghazālī proceeds to a thorough demolition of its cognitive basis by a *tour de force* deconstruction of the notion of human authorship or responsibility embedded in it. Anyone who takes pride in his perfections because he believes they have their origin in him dwells, very simply, in the night of ignorance. All the elements of our being on which our action depends—whether the will or power that moves us, or the bodily parts we move—have been created in us by God in an act of undeserved and ungrounded beneficence. If anything should provoke our wonder or admiration, it is not our own perfections but God’s generosity in providing them to us, when indeed he has chosen to withhold them from others. The deterministic underpinnings of this response are hardly hidden from view; and indeed al-Ghazālī continues with an open avowal that ensures nobody could mistake them. “It was not you who acted when you acted; it was not you who prayed when you prayed.” In reality there is no agent other than God (*lā fā’ila illā Allāh*) (ibid, 11: 1993, 1995; and see 1992-97 for al-Ghazālī’s overall discussion). In a later book of the *Revival* devoted to the topic of gratitude, al-Ghazālī puts the same point using the concept of beauty as his focal term. “God bestowed beauty and God then gave praise...it is as though a king were to clear away the filth from his filthy servant, dress him in his finest clothes, and...then say to him, ‘How beautiful you are! How beautiful your clothes and how clean your face!’” (ibid, 12: 2228-29).⁵¹ Given God’s ultimate responsibility for the beautiful aspects or perfections a person possesses, it is he who ultimately deserves praise and thanks for them.

⁵⁰ I am simplifying al-Ghazālī’s account of the treatment of arrogance, which includes other cognitive strategies and also incorporates a behavioural component. Some of the cognitive strategies (e.g. the ones schematised on 11: 1981) have much in common with the strategies used to treat conceit.

⁵¹ Cf. al-Ghazālī 1971, 126: all the beauty and perfection found in this world derives from God’s being.

Once we appreciate our dependence on God, in fact, we will realise that the right attitude to any perfections we happen to possess is not one of joyful confidence but of fear and trembling—a fearful perception of the fragility of our virtue. For what was given to us without reason can be equally easily taken away without reason. And given the distance that still separates our virtue from its happy consummation in the next life, any sense of safety will be premature until that threshold has been crossed. This latter point indeed forms the basis of al-Ghazālī’s engagement with what I earlier described as the “psychological truth” that we take pleasure in our perfection. His normative response to this psychological fact is simply to deny that we should succumb to it. “We must not rejoice in [our perfection], because the conclusion (or “issue”: *khātima*) is unknown. For this entails joy because it draws one near to God, yet the danger of the conclusion remains. The fear of a bad conclusion should thus take the place of joy in anything that is found in the mundane world. The mundane world is a vale of sorrows and griefs, not a realm of joy and happiness” (ibid, 10: 1852-53).

There will be several things to note about this remarkable positioning. In identifying an overblown sense of security and false sense of self-ownership as the nub of this moral pathology, al-Ghazālī may remind us of a complaint often voiced against Aristotle’s portrait of the great-souled man: the troubling sense of possession with which he relates to his virtuous character, which combines with an inability to tolerate indebtedness to others that reflects an exaggerated sense of self-sufficiency and a broader failure to recognise his dependencies.⁵² By the same token, al-Ghazālī’s account may provoke an interesting comparison with some of the strategies that Christian writers would later adopt in seeking to reconcile this virtue with their own characteristic viewpoint on these dependencies. Thus, one of several moves that Aquinas’ would make in engaging with the virtue in the *Summa Theologiae* would be to anchor the notion of human greatness more firmly within a theological framework, focusing attention on what is great in a person in its status as a gift from God. As with al-Ghazālī, one consequence of this move was to effect a shift in the place of honour within the ethical landscape (and for Aquinas, within the architecture of magnanimity specifically); for seen in this light, any honour that is due to a person for his greatness ultimately redounds to God. As Augustine had earlier put it in *The City of God*, when a person recognises that it is from God that “man receives whatever in him is rightly deserving of praise,” his concern becomes that praise should be given not to himself but to God (Augustine 2003, V, §19, 212-13). Aquinas would join these recalibrations to another, modifying the great-souled man’s sense of his own greatness with a sense of humility that forms the natural corollary of this acknowledgement of dependence.⁵³

The emphasis on humility will likewise already have stood out as a key feature of al-Ghazālī’s ethical understanding. It is indeed humility that shapes his account of the proper way of relating to the self and its merits, and that constitutes the virtue that should take the place of the vices of self-esteem he outlines. Yet the terms in which he specifies this virtue, as the above will also have suggested, are so stark as to make one wonder what foothold it could still allow to any notion of human greatness. And here, looking away from Aquinas’ own delicate recalibrations, we should instead focus on the comparison of greater moment. For in casting arrogance and conceit as vices of self-knowledge, al-Ghazālī’s account resonates with Aristotle’s understanding of greatness of soul (and its corresponding vices) as I earlier characterised this. Yet if for Aristotle self-knowledge could support a judgement of one’s greatness, for al-Ghazālī, as his view emerges from these passages of the *Revival*, self-knowledge not only fails to support a judgement of one’s greatness—the only judgement it supports is a judgement of one’s baseness. The sweeping vista of the human condition that al-Ghazālī summons to drive such self-knowledge home characteristically terminates in an insight into “the worthlessness of one’s being” (*khissat dhātihī*). The raft of moral exercises he subsequently offers are intended to lead his reader to “regard himself with contempt” (*yuḥaqqira nafsahu*). “The higher a believer stands in God’s estimate,” he approvingly quotes a religious saying, “the lower he stands in his own.”

⁵² See briefly Herdt 2008, 41-43; as Herdt notes, there is some tension here given Aristotle’s sensitivity to these dependencies elsewhere.

⁵³ Aquinas’ discussion of magnanimity can be found in *Summa Theologiae*, IIaIIae, q. 129.

And again, using terms that will seem especially pregnant: God said, “You have worth (*qadr*) in our sight so long as you assign yourself none” (respectively, al-Ghazālī 1356–57 [1937-38], 11: 1971, 1975, 1943, 1959). It is not that the term “great” could not be applied to human beings at all within this outlook. But it will be applied precisely to the humble; and as the quoted remarks already suggest, it will be applied not from their perspective, but from God’s. “The one who is great (*kabīr*) is the one who is great in God’s estimate in the hereafter” (ibid, 11: 1980).⁵⁴

In the *Scale*, al-Ghazālī had referred with apparent approval to the delight the great-souled man takes in the value (*qadr*) of his soul; in these pages of the *Revival*, he denies one could ever rightfully assign oneself any. In the *Scale*, he had spoken with apparent approval of a positive sense of self-worth founded on one’s proper deserts; here any such moderating perspective seems absent.⁵⁵ Taken together, everything we have seen attests a fundamental tension between the view of honour and self-esteem expounded by al-Ghazālī in his major ethical work, the *Revival*, and the view embedded in the ancient virtue of greatness of soul, particularly in its Aristotelian articulation. Discounting certain sources of ambivalence, his view of honour is overwhelmingly negative; his view of how one should relate to one’s merits dominated by an emphasis on their deprecation.

An ethical conflict and its eclipse

The conversation between the two sets of views, it should be noted, is not a seamless one, and there are differences of emphasis between them which reflect profound divergences in intellectual outlook and which should not be disregarded. For example, al-Ghazālī’s criticism of the pleasure deriving from an awareness of one’s perfection (“we must not rejoice in it because the conclusion is unknown”) will seem striking coming from Aristotle’s account, which his terms otherwise appear to directly engage, in the emphasis it places on future consequences and in viewing them as a factor that can enter into the evaluation of actual present perfection. This, of course, reflects a crucial feature of al-Ghazālī’s religious metaphysics, in which perfections and imperfections are indissolubly linked to specific otherworldly outcomes. This point ties into an even broader observation which concerns the content of the concept of “perfection” that organises al-Ghazālī’s account. Even though ethical character forms a central preoccupation of the *Revival*, one of the most surprising features of his discussion of the ethics of self-esteem is how rarely he brings it up in specifying the perfections that are engaged in a person’s self-assessment. The most important (genuine) perfections highlighted in his discussion are knowledge (*‘ilm*), piety (*wara’*), worship (*‘ibāda*) and action (*‘amal*) (see, indicatively, al-Ghazālī 1356–57 [1937-38], 10: 1852; 11: 1992). It is not that character is formally excluded by the terms of this list. This list can in fact be mapped on to a basic categorial division that is pivotal to al-Ghazālī’s conceptual landscape—as indeed to Islamic ethical culture as a whole—according to which the field of what is “morally relevant” is carved into two main domains, knowledge and

⁵⁴ Cf. 1959, using the alternative term *‘azīm* (“great”) to suggest: the person who is great is the one who does not think himself great or greater than others. Compare the rather more stipulative-sounding remarks in the *Maqṣad* regarding the application of the term *kabīr* to human beings (al-Ghazālī 1971, 119).

⁵⁵ It might be thought that precisely such a moderating perspective is offered in a brief section at the end of al-Ghazālī’s discussion of the vice of arrogance (1356–57 [1937-38], 11: 1987-88), where he suddenly appears to recollect the Aristotelian principle of the mean and offers to locate the virtue of humility against not only the vice of excessive self-regard, but also against a vice of excessive self-abasement. The terms he uses for the latter are *takhāsus* and *madhalla*. Yet what is striking is that he appears to tie this concept narrowly to *external behaviour*—behaviour that is degrading insofar as it violates something we might call social status or dignity, as when the scholar man leaps up to offer his seat to the shoemaker and treats the latter with lavish deference—and he provides no indication that there is a vice of thinking too poorly of oneself on the internal level.

action. Character is formally subsumed in the latter category.⁵⁶ This categorial move carries evident awkwardness, and in fact despite this formal inclusion, direct references to character in specifying the notion of “perfection” are few and far between. And given the way in which moral character is out-privileged by knowledge—it is a perfection that is ultimately valued merely instrumentally, as a means to knowledge, and construed merely negatively, as freedom from animal drives and detachment from worldly concerns⁵⁷—one cannot help thinking that an element which played an important role in the architecture of Aristotle’s profile of the *megalopsychos* has undergone significant displacement, so much indeed as to raise real questions about the exact extent of the conversation taking place between these schemes.

Yet if we prescind from such questions here and focus on the essentials of al-Ghazālī’s account, the conflict between al-Ghazālī’s views of esteem and self-esteem and ancient views inscribed into the virtue of greatness of soul seems open and direct. What will seem remarkable given this open conflict is that al-Ghazālī himself never confronts it. And this will seem doubly remarkable given the way in which his very own language often drives him repeatedly up against it.

Readers may already have picked up on an interesting linguistic affinity between the term used to signify greatness of soul (*kibar al-nafs*) and the term signifying arrogance or pride (*kibr*). The affinity is suggestive; and among the thoughts it suggests is one I voiced earlier when first situating the Arabic reception of greatness of soul in a field of expectations, and indeed of heightened curiosity. Here was a culture that lacked the concept of *megalopsychia*, suddenly confronting another which contained it. How would it find the conceptual and linguistic resources to absorb it? Given the cultural contingency the concept has often been seen to carry, this confrontation would seem to have the makings of a collision. It is a collision, of course, taking place on a grand scale in the early centuries of the Islamic world, which set itself the task of absorbing a monumental body of philosophical and scientific literature from Greek and Syriac sources from the 8th to the 10th centuries. Translators of these texts had to negotiate the challenge of bridging the “cultural gap dividing ancient Greece from medieval Iraq” case by case.⁵⁸ The success of this undertaking depended on the ability to draw on the existing resources of the language even while expanding its boundaries, and it could hardly leave the language unchanged. One can see this process of boundary-pushing transformation on display in many of the key literary monuments of the translation movement, including, as Manfred Ullmann observes, in the Arabic version of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.⁵⁹

This is the broader context in which to locate the particular encounter with *megalopsychia*. Yet one wonders whether, even in a language undergoing seismic changes, some of these changes would prove harder to absorb than others, and whether some of the semantic freight carried by the linguistic resources mobilised would complicate the progress of a particular graft. It is a question one raises, certainly, with regard to the Arabic absorption of the virtue of *megalopsychia* through the simple calque *kibar al-nafs*, given the awkward contiguity it produces with a term carrying far more negative ethical connotations. The term *kibar al-nafs*, signifying a sense of one’s greatness understood as a virtue, lies only a morphological whisker away from the term *kibr*, signifying a sense of one’s greatness understood as a vice. Given this background—given an awareness of both the cultural specificity of the concept and of the potential tensions brooked by its Arabic accommodation—one watches eagerly for an explicit

⁵⁶ This is signalled clearly by al-Ghazālī in al-Ghazālī 1964, 192, where he explains the term “action” (*amal*) in terms of regulating the appetites and controlling anger and subjecting these two drives to reason—which is what good character essentially comes down to in his account. Cf. Sherif 1975, 8.

⁵⁷ The instrumental and negative view of virtue is crystal-clear e.g. in al-Ghazālī 1964, 217 (though the issue admits further discussion). See also the stark remarks in al-Ghazālī 1356–57 [1937–38], 10: 1844, where the knowledge-action binary is replaced with a knowledge-freedom binary that accentuates the negative aspect of “virtue.”

⁵⁸ The remark is from Akasoy 2012, 90; and see the ensuing discussion for some examples of this kind of negotiation with regard to the translation of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

⁵⁹ See Ullmann’s remarks in Ullmann 2011, vol. 1, introduction, esp. 27–28.

comment on the linguistic character of the term among its philosophical discussants. Among those who touch upon it, the only one who comes tantalisingly close to such comment is Avicenna (d. 1037) in his reprise of Aristotle's above-cited passage of the *Posterior Analytics*, which is also one of the few occasions when he refers to the virtue. The terms in which Aristotle had set up the discussion in the *Posterior Analytics*—in order to define the concept, “we must consider individual great-souled persons whom we know, and see what one characteristic they all have *qua* great-souled”⁶⁰—had made an implicit appeal to ordinary usage in presupposing the inquirer's ability to make judgements about the appropriate application of the concept. Yet when he reprises the point in the *Healing*, Avicenna ignores the invitation to reflect on the linguistic status of the concept and simply rehearses Aristotle's claim about people who are “described” (*mawṣūfūn*) or “called” (*yusammā*) great-souled without so much as a word about who exactly calls them that in his own times (Avicenna 1956, 316). Other writers who visit the concept either place it, like Miskawayh, in the segregated space of a definition without commenting on its relationship to ordinary speech, or less usually, like al-Fārābī, blend it into the flow of their speech with little to call attention to its linguistic particularity and to thematise its intelligibility to the average reader.

Yet whatever we make of these other discussants, in the case of al-Ghazālī the potential tensions at stake are signalled with special intensity by his own linguistic usage, and by tremors rippling through the fabric of his own ethical speech. There are several moments in his discussion of arrogance in the *Revival* where the term *kibr* appears next to the term *nafs* in a close proximity that will make readers sit up and take notice. Arrogance, al-Ghazālī states at the opening of his discussion, refers to an internal characteristic rather than to outward behaviour. If there is no outward expression, “one says that a person has arrogance in his soul (*fī nafsihi kibr*).” “Arrogance and pride (*al-kibr wa-‘izzat al-nafs*),” he writes in another place, close the doors of heaven (al-Ghazālī 1356–57 [1937–38], 11: 1946, 1947). Yet even readers sensitised to these tremors may be astonished to see the term *kibar al-nafs* appear only a few pages later in full armour, in a statement that plainly marks the reversal of its positive signification and its assumption of the negative meaning attaching to its linguistic neighbour. When people become indignant on God's behalf upon the sight of sinful behaviour, al-Ghazālī states, their motives are sometimes baser than they suppose, and it is often “arrogance (*kibar al-nafs*) and a presumptuous belief (*idlāl*) in their knowledge and piety” that drives them (ibid, 11: 1980).

In the *Revival*, al-Ghazālī provides no commentary on greatness of soul in the manner of the *Scale*; yet greatness of soul certainly makes an appearance in his list of the virtues.⁶¹ The unmarked transition of *kibar al-nafs* from virtue to vice within the body of a single work will seem extraordinary. Yet more extraordinary will be the broader phenomenon it represents, and that is a distinct failure on al-Ghazālī's part to thematise the existence of conflict where conflict would certainly appear to be found.⁶² In trying to understand al-Ghazālī's complex relationship to philosophy, readers have often had recourse to the remarks made in his famous autobiography, *The Deliverer from Error*, where he had reviewed, in his own stylised way, the milestones of his intellectual career and his relationship to the key intellectual approaches competing for truth in his day. In spelling out his attitude to philosophy, al-Ghazālī's concern had been to distance himself from the philosophical sciences and to highlight his commitments to Sufism. Recent readings of the *Deliverer* have suggested that this presentation was motivated by specific apologetic aims and furnishes a less than faithful reflection of al-Ghazālī's intellectual commitments. Yet what is important is that even with this ostentatiously negative account, ethics had been singled out from among all other parts of the philosophical curriculum for a

⁶⁰ I draw on the translation by Hugh Tredennick (Aristotle 1960), with modification.

⁶¹ It does not appear in the first list of the virtues given in al-Ghazālī 1356–57 [1937–38], 8: 1358, but it appears in the second list, ibid, 8: 1437 (reading *kibar* instead of the edition's *kasr*).

⁶² It is a curious feature of one of the precious few scholarly discussions of this virtue in the Arabic tradition—Sherif's remarks in Sherif 1975, 49–51—that it reaches the same conclusion as I have, albeit less emphatically (p51: greatness of soul does not “appeal” to al-Ghazālī), without making clear that this conclusion needs to be wrested from the texts and is not signposted by al-Ghazālī himself.

particularly irenic treatment. Al-Ghazālī had underscored the consonance between philosophical ethics—notably philosophical accounts of the virtues and the vices—and the teachings of the mystics, and he had indeed claimed the higher ground by suggesting that such similarities in content were the result of the philosophers’ borrowings from the latter. Even when philosophical ethical teachings happened not to have their counterpart in religious writings, the attitude toward them was to be one of qualified acceptance subject to a basic assessment: “If they are reasonable in themselves and supported by proof, and if they do not contradict the Koran and the prophetic practice, then there is no reason to abstain from using them.”⁶³

This irenic treatment and indeed defence of philosophical ethics reflects al-Ghazālī’s heavy incorporation of philosophical material into his ethical work—a feature that, as commentators have observed, makes for the continuity between ethical works of otherwise diverging register, such as the *Scale* and the *Revival*. In including greatness of soul into his classification of the virtues, al-Ghazālī would appear to be implicitly denying that any contradiction like the one indicated in the *Deliverer* arose to place it beyond acceptance. The above discussion has called this into question, as it called into question, though with a softer touch, the harmony of this virtue with Miskawayh’s environing ethical scheme.

In the case of al-Ghazālī, one might be tempted to remove the appearance of conflict by appealing to the chronology of his works—with the *Scale* usually dated before the *Revival*—to speculate about a change of intellectual viewpoint. Yet greatness of soul, as I have noted, appears in both works even if it only receives direct consideration in the former. One might also be tempted to remove it by appeal to the special context of al-Ghazālī’s discussion in the *Revival*. The book which served as our principal informant, it will be observed, was a book dedicated not to what I have been referring to as the “ethics of self-esteem” more broadly, but more narrowly to the class of vices within that field, and as such, governed by a therapeutic aim that would unavoidably influence its presentation. For as al-Ghazālī would suggest, echoing an insight of Aristotle’s, the effort to heal a vice may sometimes necessitate erring toward the opposite extreme.⁶⁴ Al-Ghazālī’s failure to thematise a more positive concept of self-esteem may thus reflect the therapeutic character of his discussion, as also the fact that human beings are more likely to err in the direction of too *much* self-regard than in the direction of too little.

Yet against this hypothesis one would have to stack a number of observations. Al-Ghazālī’s disavowal, for one, of the notion of entitlement in his discussion of conceit—in tension with the role played by this notion in his positive virtues of self-esteem elsewhere—dovetails with a suspicion of moral desert that formed one of the hallmarks of the Ash‘arite theological viewpoint defended by al-Ghazālī in other works. Given the debates that have raged regarding the depth of al-Ghazālī’s Ash‘arite commitments, it might seem risky to place such interpretive weight on them for this purpose.⁶⁵ Yet on this point, al-Ghazālī’s Ash‘arite viewpoint ties in with intellectual commitments so deeply engraved into his overall vision that it is hard not to take them as a central interpretive fulcrum. These include, above all, his deterministic understanding of the relationship between divine and human power, which receives eloquent expression across the *Revival*, and is at the root of his account not only of the need for humility but also of a number of other moral imperatives such as gratitude and trust (*tawakkul*) in God.⁶⁶

⁶³ See the nuanced discussion in al-Ghazālī 1967, 86-90; the quoted passage appears on p88. I use Sherif’s translation (Sherif 1975, 18) with one minor modification.

⁶⁴ This idea is present in al-Ghazālī’s remarks on the treatment of bad character in al-Ghazālī 1356-57 [1937-38], 8: 1446-53; see e.g. the remarks about treating arrogance on 1449. Cf. Aristotle, *NE* 1109a30-1109b7.

⁶⁵ Some of the most heated debates have centred on al-Ghazālī’s understanding of the concept of causality. See Griffel 2009 for discussion of these issues.

⁶⁶ To these considerations, one might add the simple observation that although al-Ghazālī indicated a more positive virtue of self-respect with regard to external behaviour in the *Iḥyā’* (see note 55), he refrained from extending this gesture to internal attitudes despite having registered the distinction between outer and inner plainly (al-Ghazālī 1356-57 [1937-38], 11: 1946).

Yet if these attempts to clear away conflict are rejected, what alternatives remain? The presence of such unexplained and seemingly irreconcilable tensions will unavoidably bring to mind a sense of scepticism that these kinds of ethical works have often provoked when it comes to evaluating their philosophical quality or analytical depth. Oliver Leaman gives a characteristic statement of this scepticism—a statement indeed rather more persuasive than his attempt to counter it—when he remarks that treatises like Miskawayh’s strike readers at first sight as “rather banal” and “disappointing in their lack of philosophical sophistication and excess of syncretistic reasoning.” In such works we see “a mixture of ideas and arguments, a list of other people’s observations, and sometimes rather unexciting advice as to how one should conduct oneself...it is tempting to reject it as real philosophy and classify it with literature...with little if any philosophical interest” (Leaman 1996a, 160).⁶⁷ It is not incidental, in this respect, to note that George Hourani, in his well-known classification of types of Islamic ethics along two axes—religious vs. secular, normative vs. analytic—placed the ethical works of Miskawayh and his successors, notably Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī and Jalāl al-Dīn Dawānī, in the category of secular *normative* ethics, citing their derivativeness from the Greek tradition and lack of originality—their framework “offers little of general philosophical interest that is new”—and their failure to engage the subject analytically (see Hourani 1985; 21 quoted). Hourani, it must be remarked, was operating with an excessively restricted conception of what it is to approach the subject analytically which reflects the biases of the moral philosophy of his time: ethical analysis *proprement dit* is the analysis of ethical terms. Yet even if we bracket this outmoded conception, his classification captures something important about the character of the works that formed our primary sources for the treatment of greatness of soul above, Miskawayh’s *Refinement of Character* and al-Ghazālī’s *Scale of Action*. This character in fact reaches its highest expression in the account of the virtues and vices provided in these works, which attests an all-consuming interest in the production of lists and definitions at the expense of deeper analysis, as if the task of ethical inquiry was complete once a virtue or vice had been slotted into a broader hierarchical structure and supplied with a satisfactory definition.⁶⁸

Seen in this light, Miskawayh’s and to a greater extent al-Ghazālī’s inclusion of greatness of soul in their list of virtues without thematising the conflict it poses to other elements of their ethical scheme might be taken as a symptom of the limitations of the analytical character of their work. Putting the point more negatively, one might describe it as a failure to fully rationalise and integrate received ideas and place them in full conversation with the constants of their overall scheme. Yet the fierce intelligence displayed by al-Ghazālī, for one, in critically confronting philosophical views in other works makes this negative reading harder to credit, and might make us reach for a more positive way of casting the point. One might thus take it to reveal something important about the nature of the intellectual task these authors saw themselves as pursuing in their works—about the reflective depth and indeed authorial originality they set themselves as their ideal. The stage-setting statement with which al-Ṭūsī would later open his own reworking of Miskawayh’s compendium here seems especially suggestive as one possible expression of the guiding ideal. All the elements of practical philosophy related in this book, he would write, “are by way of transmitting and reporting, and by manner of presenting and recounting, the views of the philosophers of ancient and recent times without venturing to declare which view is true and which view false and without undertaking to determine which opinion is most plausible and which doctrine false” (al-Ṭūsī 2015, 29).

This blanket disavowal of intellectual responsibility and renunciation of authorial voice may seem unconvincing as a total characterisation of al-Ṭūsī’s and his philosophically-minded

⁶⁷ Cf. his remarks about Miskawayh’s work in the same volume: Leaman 1996b, 256-57.

⁶⁸ In this respect, it may be observed, these works reflect the character of some of the Greek texts available in Arabic translation as outlined earlier—short compendia, such as the treatise by Nicolaus or the *De Virtutibus*, in which the enumeration of the virtues and vices occupied an important place. To that extent this can be taken as further evidence of the stronger influence exercised by such texts as compared with better-known and more analytical works like Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*.

predecessors' relationship to the material contained in their work, and it will grate with those who reject the dismissive view of these writers as "mere copyists."⁶⁹ In the case of al-Ghazālī, in particular, it will also be hard to reconcile with the intense sense of religious responsibility he displayed in engaging philosophical ideas over his career. Yet one can take it, more modestly, as flagging a feature of this genre of ethical reflection that constitutes what one might hesitantly call its own internal "standards of excellence," and that serves to distinguish it from other genres of ethical reflection of a more analytical character, such as the one found in works of speculative theology (*kalām*), which both al-Ṭūsī and al-Ghazālī additionally engaged in. In the latter genre—distinguished, in terms of subject matter, by its overwhelmingly meta-ethical focus—the standards of excellence centred on the combative confrontation of opponents through high-octane analytical argument. In the genre of character-focused writing that writers like al-Ghazālī and Miskawayh participated in, by contrast, the core values constituting the standards of excellence centred not so much on critical argument and rational coherence, as on an attitude of appreciation and accommodation, and a concern to transmit received funds of ethical wisdom which need not necessarily entail scrutinising the relationship of every element to every other and subjecting every element to stringent critique. This, in turn, might be connected to the practical aims shaping these works, insofar as they aimed to have an effect on the moral life of their intelligent reader.⁷⁰ In ethical works governed by such standards and looser security checks, one might say, certain lower-order elements might occasionally pass the gates which a more critical spirit would have screened out.

This explanation will not satisfy everyone. Among the questions it provokes, one of the most interesting is how writers like al-Ghazālī and Miskawayh understood the status and significance, more specifically, of their classifications of the virtues and vices, which is the component of their works that gives the least evidence of higher-order critical reflection and that is also least easy to envisage serving a practical aim. One of the greatest obstacles to accepting this explanation is that it would challenge a conviction that exercises a magnetic effect over us as readers and interpreters, and that is the faith in a unified consistent viewpoint that is present among conflicting and ambiguous textual phenomena waiting to be discovered. This interpretive heuristic seems especially seductive in the case of a thinker as perspicacious yet also as elusive as al-Ghazālī, whose ambiguous pronouncements on a host of questions have often driven readers to the kind of task I pursued above—to a painstaking effort to place the different parts of his work into conversation and piece together a unified account of his "real" view. Taneli Kukkonen offers a particularly relevant expression of this stance in a recent essay devoted to an effort of this type, where he stakes a claim for there being a "theoretical backdrop at all to al-Ghazālī's seemingly disjointed accounts of the various virtues and vices" and states that "a unitary account must undergird the different presentations given to our moral striving in various contexts, even if the exact formulation should prove elusive" (Kukkonen 2015, 140).⁷¹ The distinction drawn above between different domains of ethical writing and their respective levels of reflective depth, if sound, would lead us to question this faith—even if in practice, such faith could only be abandoned after first pushing it as far as it will go.

⁶⁹ As does Lenn E. Goodman vis-à-vis Miskawayh in Goodman 2003, 108.

⁷⁰ These aims are stated plainly by Miskawayh, for example, in Miskawayh 1966, 1, and they are reflected in the association of several of the works considered above with a genre of ethical writing identified as "propaedeutic" to philosophical learning and distinguished from a genre of higher-level ethical thought that presupposes such learning. See briefly Druart 1996 and references there. The point of course can only be pushed so far; Aristotle characterised his own aim in practical terms with little sacrifice of analytical depth.

⁷¹ Kukkonen's entire project in this paper is shaped by a methodological insistence on an analytical rather than "compilatory" or descriptive approach to al-Ghazālī's thought which leans heavily on this heuristic. The special elusiveness of al-Ghazālī's thought has been a central factor in the colossal amount of interpretive debate his work has attracted, but it should be kept in mind that it reflects a broader phenomenon that is pervasive in the field, as I have suggested in my study of the Mu'tazilites (Vasalou 2008, esp. chapter 1) and also more recently of Ibn Taymiyya. See e.g., briefly, Vasalou 2016, 6-7, 16-21.

Concluding reflections

In this paper, my aim has been to train a searchlight on the Arabic reception of greatness of soul by studying its place in the work of two major figures, Miskawayh and al-Ghazālī, while also casting some sidelights on a number of other figures along the way. Both thinkers, as I have shown, allocate this virtue—as identified through the Arabic term *kibar al-nafs*—a distinct place in their taxonomies, specifying it in ways that evoke several of the conceptual strands featuring in ancient configurations of the virtue, and that notably include an Aristotelian emphasis on the agent’s self-evaluation and relationship to his merits. Yet as thus construed, I have suggested, greatness of soul appears to come into conflict with these thinkers’ larger ethical schemes. This holds especially true of al-Ghazālī, whose considered stance on the ethics of esteem and self-esteem would seem to drive a deep wedge between his outlook and the one embedded in ancient conceptions of the virtue and Aristotle’s more particularly. A reflexive appreciation of one’s greatness would seem to have no place within this outlook as conditioned by al-Ghazālī’s religious commitments. And although I have not commented on the aspect of the virtue that concerns the attitude to luck and the endurance of misfortune, it is at the very least clear that the abstraction of the reflexive aspect could hardly leave ancient approaches to this untouched, especially among the Stoics, given how deeply a reflexive stance of hauteur infused their approach. (Seneca: “I am too great, was born to too great a destiny to be my body’s slave.”)

This conclusion may now call to mind a broad point that has sometimes been made regarding Islamic culture and its relationship to some of the ethical concepts that shaped the progress of intellectual history in the Western context. At the end of his *Theological Origins of Modernity*, Michael Allen Gillespie draws a contrast between the evolution of humanistic ideas in the Christian and the Islamic traditions. The emphasis within Islamic thought on the absolute difference between God and man at the expense of their ontological connection, and on divine omnipotence at the expense of human freedom, he writes, is what made Islam inhospitable to the kind of humanism that developed within the Christian tradition. He connects the latter development to the possibilities opened by the notion of divine incarnation, and more specifically to “the possibility for a form of humanism that grants quasi-divine status to human beings”—a notion manifest not only among humanists like Pico and Erasmus but also present in new guises among later philosophers such as Locke and indeed Kant, with his notion of human beings as ends in themselves. For orthodox Islam, by contrast, the notion of “the intrinsic value of the individual, as modernity has understood it since Petrarch, is...theologically problematic.” And it is, crucially, to al-Ghazālī that Gillespie appeals in crafting this comparison, taking his “devaluation of the individual” and “mystical focus on an omnipotent God” as a key factor that rendered mainstream Islam “unreceptive to the ideas that came to characterize modernity in the European world” (see Gillespie 2008, epilogue).

Like all interpretations that come in broad brushstrokes and bold print, this interpretation will make many readers uneasy. It notably leaves out, for example, the project of *imitatio Dei* that a plethora of Muslim thinkers, al-Ghazālī among them, made pivotal to their understanding of the best human life; and this of course was a project that focused attention on the continuities between man and God, though it also calibrated these against important discontinuities, as I briefly indicated above. Were we to focus on the ethics of self-worth—intimately linked after all to larger views about human worth—and on al-Ghazālī’s stance on this topic, it would seem that the above discussion has served to lend support to Gillespie’s thesis. Yet even this conclusion, I would suggest, cannot be held down without locating it against a more inclusive appreciation of the conceptions of human worth and self-worth at work in Islamic ethical culture. My present paper has offered a first approach to these conceptions, by investigating an important “virtue of greatness” that I identified as the readiest heir of the ancient virtue of *megalopsychia*. Yet this, in fact, is not the only concept of greatness to be found within this ethical culture. There is a different concept that lived a far more vibrant life than the etiolated notion of greatness dutifully slotted into Miskawayh and al-Ghazālī’s taxonomies and ultimately undigested by their ethical schemes. This was a concept which struck deeper roots

reflecting the complex genealogies that entered into its formation and the multiple ethical discourses it inhabited, and in which the attitude to self-worth formed a significant element. I hope to devote a separate paper to its investigation.

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