

Philosophy and Politics Perfected: Aristotle's Greatness of Soul Embodied in Plutarch's
Alexander the Great

by Raquel Grove

Among “great men” and “great books,” “great minds of science” and “great philosophers,” the world we know is saturated with examples from the past to whom we look for inspiration and guidance in the present. We have statues erected to great explorers, libraries dedicated to great teachers and politicians, curricula preserving the works of great authors, and great names we venerate with the utmost fervor: all pay homage to lives played out on a scale far beyond the common reach. In admiring a famed man of extraordinary achievements on his gilded pages or marble pedestal, the idea of greatness can seem far removed from the person looking up. And yet, the greatness of a man is nothing if not inseparably intertwined with the masses that look up to him, as suggested by two ancient thinkers who themselves usually claim seats in the row of great philosophers: Aristotle and Plutarch. Aristotle’s great-souled man, delineated in Book IV of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, has long been one of the most puzzling elements of a generally straightforward study of virtue. How a man’s goodness relates to his societal status, how honor is both the first and last concern of the best man, and how “greatness of soul” can be the ultimate in virtue is a deeply layered riddle. Plutarch’s *Lives*, on the other hand, approaches the mystery of a “great-souled man” through the more extensive lens of biography—in his *Life of Alexander*, Plutarch carefully crafts the narrative of Alexander the Great, a king who walked the line between man and god in the eyes of his people. In addressing these two works in the context in which I believe they were each meant to be read—concerning a city as a whole and addressed to those destined to rule it—I hope to shed light on one of the most elusive concepts of the *Ethics*, that of greatness of soul, and present a personification of Aristotle’s ideal in Plutarch’s aptly-named Alexander the Great. Through this comparison, the similarities connecting Aristotle and Plutarch, and the aims of their works in presenting ideals of greatness, may be revealed.

1. The *Nicomachean Ethics*

A. Greatness of Soul: Character, Contradictions and Context

For many, the chapter regarding the great-souled man in the *Nicomachean Ethics* is a profoundly jarring one. Situated in the midst of the precise, sensible-sounding virtues explained through the Doctrine of the Mean, the idea of greatness of soul comes across as incongruous, vain and even unethical. However, I believe that a negative impression of greatness of soul

usually results from two things: 1. narrowed context and 2. a lack of examples. While the second will be discussed later, it is essential to examine the former, as the great-souled man only appears odd when focusing on the immediate context of chapter IV.3, and not the larger context of virtue as a whole and the *Ethics* as a complete, deeply political work.

“Greatness of soul,” from the Greek *megalopsuchia*, is still a tricky subject, as various common translations of the word—“magnanimity,” “pride,” and “high-mindedness”—may imply. Essentially, Aristotle describes a man who “thinks himself worthy of great things—and is indeed worthy of them” (NE IV.3.1123b3-4). He is juxtaposed with the vain man, who thinks himself worthy of things beyond his merit, and the small-souled man, who does not allow himself the honors to which his greatness should entitle him. Unlike most of the virtues in Books III and IV, greatness of soul is inseparable from other aspects of a good life. While a man may attain the mean in regard to courage, but fail when it comes to temperance, to be great-souled a man must fully possess *all* of the virtues. Indeed, Aristotle calls greatness of soul a sort of “crown of the virtues, because it makes them greater and does not occur in isolation from them” (NE IV.3.1123b). Because of his complete virtue, Aristotle maintains that the great-souled man will be primarily concerned with “honors and dishonors,” specifically “honor on a grand scale,” performing magnificent acts for his city that will bring him renown. However, he will not bother acting unless “there is great honor or a significant result at stake” (NE IV.3.1124b). Likewise, he “is the sort of person to do good, but is ashamed to be a beneficiary himself, since doing good is characteristic of a superior, receiving it of an inferior” (NE IV.3.1124b). Here, Aristotle often begins to lose people. A man who only chooses to do good when he can make a spectacle of it, elevating himself above others, grates on the modern mind and comes across as self-serving and self-righteous. Then, having established that honor, the “greatest external good,” is purportedly the primary concern of the great-souled man, Aristotle proceeds to stun his readers with the claim that said man “does not even view honor as a terribly important thing,” an apparent contradiction (NE IV.3.1123b, 1124a). Add that to the fact that wealth is a quality necessary in being great-souled, and that the great-souled man’s possessions will be “noble but unprofitable, rather than profitable and useful,” and many readers understandably balk, concluding that Aristotle’s idea of virtue is tied to wealth, operating on inequality and money

rather than on goodness (NE IV.3.1125a). It is easy at this point to write off the great-souled man as a supercilious, honor-hungry show-off, but that would be a drastic mischaracterization. The key to this puzzle is that the great-souled man is only secondarily concerned with the people—his primary focus is always virtue. Honor—the “greatest of the *external* goods”—is still intrinsically second to the *internal* good the great-souled man finds in “the noble.”

B. “For the Sake of the Noble”

Many of the presumed contradictions of the great-souled man can be resolved through a closer examination of the Greek concept of *kalon*, for the sake of which all actions “in accordance with virtue” are done (NE IV.1.1120a). *Kalon*, variously translated as “the noble,” “the fine,” or “the admirable,” is the ultimate perfection of beauty. In her essay “Aristotle on Moral Virtue and the Fine,” Dr. Gabriel Richardson Lear examines the nature of the “noble” or “fine,” concluding that *kalon* is composed of three elements: “effective teleological order, visibility, and pleasantness” (Lear 117). Effective teleological order simply means that whatever possesses *kalon* is ordered to its proper end—it works in harmony with itself to its own good and purpose, just as people are virtuous when their lives are spent effectively pursuing their “chief good” (NE I.2.1094a).

Secondly, *kalon* must be clearly visible, as Lear says: “It seems, then, that in order to be beautiful or fine, a thing must not only be ordered with reference to its good, but this arrangement must also be manifest or apparent” (Lear 123). A thing cannot be *kalon* and be hidden, or even be small and unobtrusive. Like truth itself, Aristotle wishes the noble to not only be perfect in proportion, but also in size. “When our actions are fine,” Lear explains, “their perfection is easily intelligible. In fact, the grander and more beautiful they are, the more easily we know their goodness” (Lear 131). This brings us to the “grand scale” of the great-souled man and his seeming haughtiness. We must remember that the great-souled man possesses the utmost virtue—he is one of a kind in his city, and Aristotle makes it clear that he feels no pressure to prove himself to the common man, for he neither praises nor seeks praise, and “cares more for the truth than for what people think” (NE.IV.3.1124b-1125a). While Lear does not address *kalon* in relation to the great-souled man, the parallel is immediately apparent. The great-souled man must limit his actions to important deeds and be continuously honored by the city not because he

is vain, but because the scale on which he lives—wealth, honor, status and all—is the only way to make his virtue fully apparent. Small acts of goodness and modest virtue, while highly esteemed in our modern society, have no place in Aristotle’s ethics, simply because to Aristotle, the more people who can observe virtue, the more perfect it becomes. Many small acts of goodness, while virtuous, would both be difficult for the masses to see and, unfortunately, largely uninteresting to them. Grand size is only a requirement of unparalleled virtue, then, because the virtue must be “visible to the appropriate audience”—in the case of the great-souled man, his city (Lear 123).

Lastly, *kalon* must be pleasurable. As Aristotle maintains over the course of the *Ethics*, the virtuous life is the most pleasurable one, and while *kalon* and virtue are distinct, they are still closely intertwined. As Lear explains, because virtuous actions are done “for the sake of the noble,” the awareness of *kalon* in a man’s actions “brings the actualization of his rational soul to the fullest completion” (118). Thus, acknowledging one’s own virtue is not an act of pride or haughtiness: rather, it is the final quality of seeing the good for what it is—something beautiful, noble, and proper for mankind. Far from being selfish and haughty, by not recognizing the goodness of his actions and virtue and allowing himself the honor it merits, the great-souled man would be disrespecting the good and the noble, not preserving it. Thinking of his own actions and observing *kalon* in them does give the great-souled man pleasure and pride, and Aristotle considers this pride appropriate and well-founded: he is contemplating the human good, and this only heightens his virtue, as it shows he takes pleasure in what is noble and best.

In being well ordered to its proper end, visible, and pleasurable, a virtuous action both aims at and takes part in the noble. Therefore, it is readily apparent that the great-souled man, whose life is centered around virtue, should have intimate knowledge of the *kalon* and strive to attain it. However, the relationship can be taken a step further—essentially, the great-souled man can be seen as a perfect representation of *kalon* itself: his life is ordered perfectly toward the chief good of virtue and contemplation, his every move is on display for the city, and he finds pleasure in his own life just as the city takes pleasure in him. Not only is *kalon* an integral component of the great-souled man’s life, I would argue that the life of the great-souled man is

kalon personified, Aristotle's representation of "the noble" in human form on display for the sake of his city.

C. A Political Ethics

But how does the virtue of one man, noble or not, make any difference for a city, or accomplish the least good for any of his fellow men? Instead of narrowing the context of the *Ethics* to focus on one aspect of virtue, we must now broaden it to attain a view of the treatise as a whole. The *Ethics* was written as a political work. Aristotle makes this clear from Book I, in which he concludes that the chief good for mankind must be found in political science (NE.I.2.1094a). Dr. Malcom Schoefield, in his essay "Aristotle's Political Ethics," points to the "bookends" of the *Ethics*—Book I designates politics as the path to virtue while the final book serves as a segue to Aristotle's next work, the *Politics*. "For us, ethics and politics signify two distinct, if overlapping, spheres, Schoefield says. "For Aristotle, there is just one sphere—politics—conceived in ethical terms" (305). In essence, the end goal of politics is to provide a law that will make citizens good, and as good law can only be brought about by virtuous men, politics and ethics must therefore be inseparable. Aristotle maintains that law habituates common men to doing good, training and guiding them along a path of virtue which most could not find for themselves. The *Ethics* is not written for these men: it is written for the lawgiver, to show the men destined to rule how to be good and how to make people good—in essence, how to create a virtuous city.

Another way in which ethics are bonded to politics lies in Aristotle's study of *phronēsis*, or "practical wisdom," which plays a large role in both the public and moral spheres. "Practical wisdom," Aristotle says, "is concerned with human affairs, namely, with what we can deliberate about. . . The person unqualifiedly good at deliberation is the one who tends to aim, in accordance with his calculation, at the best of the goods for a human being that are achievable in action" (NE.VI.7.1141b). Thus, it appears that practical wisdom brings abstract moral knowledge of what is good into the practical, action-oriented realm of politics. Yet, though it concerns all men, practical wisdom, unlike the other virtues Aristotle describes, is an intellectual virtue limited to a select group of people. As Dr. Eugene Garver explains in his book *Confronting Aristotle's Ethics: Ancient and Modern Morality*, "We have *phronēsis* through two

things, being ethically virtuous and being in a position to rule” (Garver 145). Because only men with a knowledge of virtue are lawgivers, it follows that they will possess the practical wisdom necessary to realize this virtue in the city. Garver continues, “*Phronēsis* is the knowledge of means, and the ruler supplies the means so that the citizens can act virtuously. For citizens to act justly, liberally, with wit, etc., depends on the provision of means, which is the job of the state not the individual” (Garver 146).

Lastly, the city can neither be separated from its citizens nor the human good. While Aristotle’s idea of the good at the end of the *Ethics* (a life of contemplation) may appear individual, he never abandons the political perspective that the good of the city is the ultimate goal. “A human being is by nature a social being,” Aristotle boldly declares in Book I, and “while the good of an individual is a desirable thing, what is good for a people or for cities is a nobler and more godlike thing” (NE I.7.1097b, NE I.2.1094b). In the end, it is the city that unites everything: people, virtue, and the chief human good. As Dr. Garver summarily puts it: “The virtues are one, and the soul is one, because of the unity of the polis” (Garver 154). Only in a virtuous city are the human good and the noble united and brought to their fullest completion, making it the greatest good of all.

D. The Noble City: The Perfection of the Great-Souled Man

Between the abstract good of the noble and the practical good of the city, the great-souled man provides the link: he combines *kalon* and *phronēsis*, his life serving as the perfect combination and perfect representation of both. One aspect of greatness of soul I have not seen as thoroughly treated in existing scholarship is the *ethical* purpose of the great-souled man in the city: many scholars focus, understandably, on his material value in providing resources for grand events and public works. However, I would argue that the great-souled man serves a far more important, yet less publicized role: he leads men to virtue on a large scale.

In *Confronting Aristotle’s Ethics*, Dr. Garver comments on the close relationship between ethics and the *polis*, or the “city-state”:

The rationality of the ethical life depends on the rationality of the polis. The polis must embody a system of praise and blame that gives the right kind of feedback so that the virtues can both develop and be exercised. . . . For true Aristotelian virtues to develop and

flourish, good actions must succeed, for the most part, and bad actions fail. It is the job of the polis to make that happen. The rationality of the polis would be exhibited when the best men rule, and when they find ruling an expression of virtue and not a burden.

Unfortunately, the rational nature of the ethical life at the same time restricts the good life to the few men who can virtuously rule a polis” (Garver 161).

The type of ideal relationship Garver describes is exactly why the great-souled man is so essential. In the great-souled man’s visible actions and public honors, good is shown to succeed, and virtue is shown to rule. Seeing virtue honored leads citizens to aspire to be like the great-souled man, whose every action is a worthy example for them. He becomes an ideal, a kind of intermediary between the people and the noble. Likewise, in exercising his duty as a lawgiver and ruling well, the great-souled man proves that ethics is essential not only in personal life, but in the regulation of a city. For him, ruling is an “expression of virtue”—for it is, above all, the expression of his virtue that guides his city.

As Aristotle establishes, men must be habituated to goodness, and laws exist to habituate them. It is clear from the social position of the great-souled man that he would be involved in the making of these laws and the ruling of the state, exercising *phronēsis*, and in that way he certainly works to train his city to virtue. Aristotle also allows for men to be habituated through example, however—and it is example above all that the great-souled man provides, as the ultimate in virtue and a personification of *kalon*. Thus, living visibly as virtuous lawgiver, the great-souled man unites *kalon* and *phronēsis*, living for the perfect, coexisting good of man and city. With his extreme wealth and power and unparalleled goodness, he serves a function no one else can. While the great-souled man may seem similar to the magnificent man, who also serves his city, the latter is only necessarily virtuous in one area: that of generosity. Thus, his service to the city is primarily material. The parallel is clear, however: while the magnificent man’s gifts of his wealth are “like votive offerings,” the great-souled man’s offering is primarily that of his own self as an example. Just like Greatness of Soul is a “crown of the virtues,” the great-souled man is a crown to the city. His love of the noble and status in the city places him in a position to inspire people to goodness. He is an emblem of the unity the city itself strives to achieve, theoretical and practical virtue as one.

Above all, the great-souled man is called to be an example. This becomes even clearer in reexamining the extremes Aristotle posits in relation to his mean: it is not the vain man who is the most blameworthy, for he is simply not virtuous enough to merit great regard in any sense. Rather, it is the small-souled man who is the opposite of the great-souled man. In not accepting the honors of which he is worthy and acknowledging his own virtue, the small-souled man gives up the opportunity to do boundless good for his city, both materially and morally—he denies his people an example to learn from, a selfish rather than selfless act. The vain man does not wish to do good at all; he only wishes to be honored, purely for his own pleasure, and not for the sake of the noble, his virtue, or the city, and therefore he “misses the mark” of virtue (NE II.6.1106b). The small-souled man hits the mark, and then proceeds to deny it. The great-souled man, despite his initial impression of vanity, therefore finishes by appearing to be the most virtuous, most selfless character. He is focused on honor because it perfects the good in himself and his city, guiding the people around him. Ultimately, the great-souled man, in being centered around the noble, serves to center the city around the noble: by far the most important task, one both requiring and worthy of the honor he receives.

2. *Plutarch's Lives*

A. Narrative of Nobility

Plutarch underscored the beliefs of Aristotle in regard to the great-souled man by describing Alexander the Great's rise to becoming as well as destroying the great-souled man. Even before delving into the specifics of virtue according to Aristotle and Plutarch, the connection between Aristotle and Alexander the Great is evident: Aristotle was Alexander's tutor for some of his most formative years, educating him in politics, ethics, and the ways of the Greeks. Between Plutarch and Aristotle, the connection is more subtle. Though casual readers and scholars alike typically term Aristotle a “philosopher” and Plutarch a “historian,” I believe the two reveal themselves to be far more similar, both in philosophy and in the objectives of their works, than meets the eye.

Above all, Plutarch is not simply a “biographer” in the sense the word is considered today. In the very first paragraph of *The Life of Alexander*, Plutarch refers to himself as more of a “painter” than a historian. “I am not writing history but biography,” he says, “and the most

astounding exploits do not always have the property of revealing the goodness or badness of the agent. . . And so, just as a painter reproduces his subject's likeness by concentrating on the face and the expression of the eyes, by means of which character is revealed, and pays hardly any attention to the rest of the body, I must be allowed to devote more time to those aspects which indicate a person's mind and to use these to portray the life of each of my subjects, while leaving their major exploits and battles to others" (312).

With this statement of purpose in mind, the *Life of Alexander* takes on a very different character. Plutarch has no interest in laying out the facts and events in his subject's life as we would typically see in a modern biography, but rather in reading between the lines of history to reveal the soul of the man underneath. This, of course, raises the question of what Plutarch's purpose is in writing this *Life*. If he is not concerned with recording events for posterity, what does he consider so valuable and necessary for men to know about the inner life of Alexander? As Dr. Robert Lamberton observes in his biography *Plutarch*, "both [biographical and historical] modes of writing about great men of the past are, as Plutarch represents them, concerned with the exemplary virtue—the value as exempla—of their subjects. Plutarch may claim the right, as a biographer, to deflect attention from traits, characteristics, and actions that are at odds with the sort of person he is painting" (Lamberton 72). This kind of portrait is one with a far more philosophical bent than we normally consider to be a part of "biography." Plutarch is not concerned with cold facts nearly as much as for his *Lives* to present examples of virtue which can be seen and imitated by other men. In his introduction to Plutarch's *Greek Lives*, Dr. Philip Stadter calls the *Lives* a "historical narrative from a philosophical perspective" (x). He continues, "With the *Parallel Lives* [Plutarch] undertakes a grand project to explore, in the lives of famous statesmen and commanders, all major historical figures, the interplay of character and political action" (x). This should sound quite familiar. From the outset, the history-heavy *Lives* appears to profess something of the same goal as the very political *Ethics*: to explain and fulfill the "ethical needs of men active in public life" (xiv). In fact, Stadter continues so far as to claim that Plutarch, "although generally a Platonist, took his basic philosophy of ethics from Aristotle" (xv). For according to both Aristotle and Plutarch, virtue is action-oriented,¹ and for

¹ In the *Ethics*, Aristotle calls the chief good of human life an "activity of the soul in accordance with virtue" (NE I. 7.1098a).

Plutarch, virtue is best practiced by observing and applying the success and failure of other great men to one's life. As Stadter describes it, "Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* are an attempt to . . . provide the material which will allow men in power, statesmen, and commanders themselves, to become aware of results of personal choices, and the moral decisions—and often ambiguities—inherent in political action" (xiv). In light of this very philosophical goal, a reading of Plutarch's *Life of Alexander* must constantly take the structure of the narrative into account, referring to the foundation and frame of the story in order to better understand the unique portrait of virtue Plutarch intended to create.

B. Alexander the Great: Model and Warning in Phases

Because of Plutarch's overarching focus on philosophy and the importance of biography as a mode of showcasing virtue, the strokes he uses to paint his portrait are of the utmost importance. Plutarch is not arbitrary in the stories he tells, the qualities he highlights, and the order in which everything falls into place. In fact, the heart of Alexander's example of virtue lies in the very narrative structure Plutarch uses to tell the story of his life. I have separated the *Life of Alexander* into what I consider the seven separate sections that form the story: referring to Figure 1, it is impressive to see how perfectly each section fits into a traditional plot diagram. Plutarch does not simply extol the young Alexander, nor does his greatness forever continue to climb. Plutarch's biography from Alexander's birth to death delineates the rise, decline and fall of one of the greatest souls to walk the earth, and a very Aristotelian portrait of virtue which serves both as a model of greatness and a cautionary tale.

Fig. 1



Phase 1: Natural Dispositions and Character [1-8]

Plutarch begins the *Life of Alexander* not with the birth of the hero, but with the events that preceded his birth, in the form of signs and omens. Olympias, Alexander's mother, is surrounded by miraculous visions and mystic rituals, and Plutarch initially leaves it open for debate whether or not Alexander is really the son of a god. This is not an isolated technique—throughout the biography, Plutarch often employs signs and omens to punctuate the majority of his important ideas, using prophecies or miracles as metaphors for the changing virtue of Alexander. Likewise, this entire section can be read as a prophecy—it foretells, through anecdotes revealing the natural tendencies and amazing potential of the child Alexander, the greatness of the Alexander to come. Plutarch begins, then, with a supernatural aura surrounding Alexander, not to imply that he himself believes in the young king's divinity, but rather to highlight the godlike potential born within him. He then proceeds to detail Alexander's

childhood, focusing on his honorable natural tendencies and correct desires in a way that strongly echoes the qualities of the great-souled man:

His temperance, as to the pleasures of the body, was apparent in him in his very childhood, as he . . . always used them with great moderation; though in other things he was extremely eager and vehement, and in his love of glory, and the pursuit of it, he showed a solidity of high spirit and magnanimity far above his age. For he neither sought nor valued it upon every occasion, as his father Philip did . . . but when he was asked by some about him, whether he would run a race in the Olympic games, as he was very swift-footed, he answered, he would, if he might have kings to run with him (542).

The use of the word “magnanimity” is particularly striking, considering that the Greek—*megalopsuchia*—is the same both here and in referring to the great-souled man. It is entirely possible that Plutarch intends his readers to draw the parallel, because this passage practically describes Aristotle’s great-souled man: here we have a character who is virtuous (temperate, appearing to achieve the mean, neither lazy nor rash), and who values honor highly (he will only compete with those whose talents and status are comparable to his own), and yet who does not lose sight of what is truly important—Alexander refuses to go begging for glory, nor will he vainly parade his success, as his father did.

The next sign of Alexander’s impressive capacity for greatness plays out in the episode of Bucephalas, a horse Alexander claims he can manage when the entire court has given it up as intractable. Alexander does not relent when laughed at by his father, King Philip, and the rest of the court, wagering the price of the horse against his abilities. He succeeds, to the great wonder of the court, by turning the horse to face the sun, having noticed that the animal was frightened by its shadow. Alexander, like the primary characterization of the great-souled man, knew himself—he neither overestimated nor flaunted his abilities, but stood by the truth of his worth. We can also assume that Plutarch means to draw a parallel between Alexander and Bucephalas—like the horse, Alexander is gifted with an unparalleled raw, natural power: he only requires proper management to be truly unstoppable. Likewise, turning the horse to face the sun is an interesting detail, one reminiscent of Plato’s allegory of the cave—as if Alexander needed only the light of reason to control his raw power. It is therefore no coincidence that in the very next

paragraph, King Philip sends for Aristotle to tutor his son, providing the guidance necessary to develop and hone Alexander's natural gifts, and turning him to focus his sight on what is noble. In citing an excerpt from a letter to Aristotle, Plutarch then makes it clear that this teaching was initially very well received: "For my part, I assure you," Alexander says, "I had rather excel others in the knowledge of what is excellent, than in the extent of my power and dominion" (543). From the very first section, Plutarch sets the stakes of Alexander's life quite high: surrounded by divine omens of triumph, virtuous inclinations, and a natural magnanimity trained by a matchless tutor to love the noble, the future greatness of this boy appears inevitable.

Phase 2: Tested and Victorious [9-16]

While part one dealt with the raw potential and unique capacity of the young prince, it is in the second portion that his mettle is tried, and Alexander takes on the mantle of man and king. The section begins with Alexander, at the age of sixteen, being given his first military and political command. He easily quashes a dangerous revolt, making his father proud. However, Plutarch then immediately describes the decline of King Philip, who suddenly changes, alienating his son and his nation, and utterly fails to comport himself in a kingly manner. The news of Philip's murder then places the throne and all of Macedonia under the control of 20-year-old Alexander. In chronicling the decline of Philip before his death, Plutarch implies that both moral and political power have been transferred to Alexander, who takes up both the kingship and the life of virtue his father abandoned, setting out to build his own, more perfect kingdom and legacy. Initially, the young king is advised to think small, and not dare to set his sights on conquering other lands. However, Alexander proves himself determined to "look thee out a kingdom equal to and worthy of thyself, for Macedonia is too little for thee," as his father once told him, and launches a daring campaign through which he "resolved to win safety and security for Macedonia" (543, 321). He is then showered in success, and proves himself, in a battle against Thebes and an episode with a wronged widow, to be both a just and merciful leader (321-322).

At this point, Alexander begins to take the form of a perfect king, and again he perfectly treads the line between smallness of soul and vanity. When he comes across true greatness in the form of the old philosopher Diogenes, he is duly impressed and slightly humbled; however,

when visiting the oracle of Delphi presided over by a stubborn prophetess, he takes his fate into his own hands, both demanding and receiving the prophecy due to him. Plutarch then details another omen predicting Alexander's victory and describes Alexander's pre-battle pilgrimage to the gravesite of Achilles, his primary inspiration, proving that Alexander's sight remains fixed on what is noble. At the same time, Alexander refuses to see another relic, Paris' lyre—a fact which is especially interesting considering that Paris is referred to by his other name, "Alexander." Essentially, Plutarch shows Alexander refusing to succumb to an inferior representation of himself. He rejects the smaller, weaker type of man he could be, instead looking toward virtue in the form of the more valiant Achilles and preparing himself for battle. He lives up to his hero: section two ends with Alexander crossing a river against all odds, overcoming a barrier that should have been naturally impossible, and winning an arduous but miraculous victory. This is the very end of Alexander the boy king, for from now on, the world itself seems to fall at the feet of Alexander the Great.

Phase 3: Paragon of Virtue & Kingship [17-34]

In his next and longest section, Plutarch presents Alexander as finally achieving both political and moral perfection. This is an unstoppable Alexander, having come into his own as a man and a king, and succeeding at everything he touches. The section begins with yet another omen: a bronze tablet miraculously appears foretelling a Greek victory over the Persians. Before the battle, Alexander comes across the Legendary Gordian knot, of which it was said that "whoever undid the knot was destined to become ruler of the whole world" (327). Alexander foregoes the puzzle and slashes through the knot with his sword, foreseeing his complete military domination. Plutarch then introduces a rival for Alexander in the form of Darius, king of Persia. In the subsequent battle, Alexander proves himself a worthy opponent, both in tactical ability and virtue—he conquers Darius' army (although Darius himself escapes), yet treats Darius' captive family with the utmost of respect, refusing to gloat, abuse the enemy, or degrade himself. According to Plutarch, Alexander exercises the utmost in virtue and temperance, "consider[ing] the ability to control others far less important for a king than the ability to control himself" (331). In each act of military might and moral strength, Alexander continues to outdo himself, only growing both in virtue and power. Plutarch assures his readers that Alexander's only fault was

that when drunk, he tended to boast and enjoy flattery he would not otherwise approve of—a slight indication that Alexander leans more toward the vain man than the small-souled man, but more serving to confirm how complete Alexander's greatness of soul was (333).

In the midst of more omens and battles where Alexander repeatedly proves himself, Plutarch inserts a small episode where Alexander sends an exorbitant amount of spices to one of his former tutors in memory of a childhood reprimand:

Leonidas, it seems, standing by him one day while he was sacrificing, and seeing him take both his hands full of incense to throw into the fire, told him it became him to be more sparing in his offerings, and not to be so profuse till he was master of the countries which those sweet gums and spices come from. So Alexander now wrote to him, saying, 'We have sent you an abundance of myrrh and frankincense, that for the future you may not be stingy to the gods' (552).

While a seemingly insignificant anecdote, this is a prime example of Plutarch's stated intent to paint the character of the man more than the statistics of his battles. In relating this episode, Plutarch shows Alexander as fulfilling his childhood potential: all his natural inclinations, which were noble and correct then, may now be fulfilled with the utmost ease. He is justified and perfected, possessing the wealth and the status of the great-souled man to go along with his love of virtue and the noble. He is even shown to surpass his tutor in the love of what is noble and the ability to achieve it.

However, the greatest test and victory is yet to come. Alexander passes through a treacherous desert on the way to his final confrontation with Darius, pausing along the way to consult the oracle of Ammon, which tells him he shall rule the entire world and (likely accidentally) addresses him as the "son of Zeus" (338). Plutarch then digresses over the question of Alexander's divinity—he did not really believe himself a god, Plutarch says, but used that persona to garner the appropriate honor from the foreign lands he conquered. "It is apparent that Alexander in himself was not foolishly affected, or had the vanity to think himself really a god," Plutarch assures his readers, "but merely used his claims to divinity as a means of maintaining among other people the sense of his superiority" (554). He also "kept his divinity within reasonable bounds and did not overdo it when he was dealing with the Greeks" (338). For men

he conquered, perhaps considering Alexander as a god was the closest approximation to understanding his almost superhuman virtue. Darius himself concedes this point when he is finally beaten by Alexander in the climactic battle for Persia: he finds comfort in the idea “that he was being beaten by a man who could rise above human nature” (340). The battle itself is artfully done, beginning with more omens, signs and Alexander refusing to “steal a victory,” or win with anything but honor (342). He then dresses for battle in, according to Stadter, language recalling the *Iliad*, which Alexander has brought with him for inspiration (455). Darius is defeated honorably, and then Plutarch reveals the climax of the *Life*: “This battle was generally believed to mark the overthrow of the Persian empire, and Alexander was proclaimed king of Asia” (345).

It is here, I would argue, that Alexander achieves his peak and truly becomes the great-souled man. He has fulfilled the potential of his youth, refused to restrict his sights to common actions and honors below his worth, yet has never overestimated his abilities, and all this time has remained focused on virtue, showing a highness of mind that shocks even his enemies. He lives and acts for his country, conquering to make the land secure for the Macedonians, and it is clear that he is an inspiration and model to his soldiers and citizens by how willingly they follow him, no matter the odds, without a murmur of dissent. In proclaiming Alexander king of Asia, Plutarch really does give him the world—all of moral goodness and political power lie in his control as he takes on this last, dazzling crown to his virtues.

Phase 4: Warning Signs [35-43]

However, this perfection is short-lived. With nowhere to climb, from this point on, Alexander only falls in virtue, power, and the regard of his men. At the beginning of this section, he is still a triumphant king. Then, however, Plutarch embarks on a lengthy and seemingly random explanation of the dangers of naphtha, which is “so sensitive to fire that it is ignited, even before a flame has touched it, just by the radiance around the flame, and often sets fire to the intervening air as well” (345-6). Stadter comments on this digression, which involves both the lighting of a path for a king and a servant boy nearly burning to death, observing that it sets the stage by providing a metaphor for “the brilliance and danger of Alexander’s dry and fiery nature” (455). After this darkly prophetic tangent, Plutarch reveals Alexander’s darker side: he

orders a massacre of prisoners at Susa, deliberately leaves a statue of Xerxes lying ignominiously in the dust, and against all reason, allows Xerxes' palace to be burned, watching the flames from his banquet. Of this last action Alexander repents, but the damage is done, and Plutarch has made his point clear—Alexander's nature is indeed like that of naphtha, a dangerously volatile composition capable of great good or great harm.

However, at this point Alexander has not yet degraded himself or fallen in his people's regard; he remains lingering in the balance between vice and virtue. He continues to "risk his life in the pursuit of excellence for himself and [tries] to motivate the rest of his men to seek it too," as a great-souled man should (351). At one point, during a campaign in which his army is dying of thirst, a man offers Alexander a helmet full of water. He refuses to drink while his men thirst, an action which renews the morale of the army. Alexander thus uses his virtue to collectively inspire his men to do what is right themselves—a theme very consistent with the great-souled man. Plutarch also still characterizes him as "loving his reputation more than his life and his kingdom," so it is clear that Alexander both remains fixed on the noble and the idea of honor as the greatest external good. This section ends with the army finding Darius on the verge of death, who with his last words bequeaths his kingdom to Alexander. While Alexander still shows the great power and virtue central to his character, Plutarch implies that it would not take much for the passions of Alexander to ignite and consume his reason.

Phase 5: Things Fall Apart [44-56]

Section five is a section primarily of division. While Alexander attempts to prove himself by uniting Macedonia with the kingdoms he conquered, he only succeeds in driving wedges between himself, his people, and the man he was. First, to the chagrin of his fellow Macedonians, he adopts Mede and Persian clothing in hopes of appealing to conquered Persia, but this is only a small indication of the change in Alexander. Next, the two friends Alexander "loved most in the world" are caught fighting, and Alexander barely restrains them from killing each other, a dangerous omen.

Alexander's dark side, so ominously hinted at in section four, then fully matures. When one of his friends is found to have spoken badly about him, Alexander has him tortured and killed. He then proceeds, unjustly, to put the man's loyal father, one of his closest friends and

advisors, to death (357-8). Next, at a banquet where Alexander's friend Clitus angrily challenges him, denouncing the degradation of the state and its king, Alexander, very drunk, explodes. He "call[s] out in Macedonian" for a weapon, tries to sound an alarm (which would have thrown the camp into complete confusion) and punches the attendant who refuses to comply, then snatches up a spear and stabs his friend to death. In the silence that follows, Alexander immediately regrets this decision, weeping and considering suicide, but this is, so far, his lowest moment. It is also worth noting that Plutarch specifies how he calls out in Macedonian, not in Greek—Alexander, educated in Greek ideals and the Greek language by Aristotle, seems to have reverted to a sort of bestial mindset and forgotten the teachings of his tutor.

Lastly, Plutarch relates the episode of Callisthenes, who, though not a very great man in himself, prevents Alexander from committing the massive mistake of requiring prostration from all his subjects, Persian and Macedonian—an act reserved only for the Greek gods. It appears that Alexander can no longer distinguish the honors he deserves from those he does not, and finally entertains delusions about his own divinity. Callisthenes therefore "saved the Greeks from serious humiliation, and Alexander from even worse dishonor," but Alexander repays the favor by having him imprisoned and killed (362-4).

Alexander has fallen sharply away from the character of the great-souled man: he no longer seems to know his own worth, cannot differentiate vice from virtue, refuses to hear the truth spoken from outside sources, and acts savagely and brutally when crossed. He has rejected the teachings of his former tutor Aristotle, forgone reason, and cracked the foundations of his empire, dividing his people and drifting further and further away from the virtuous, unstoppable, great king of Asia he once was.

Phase 6: Death of "the Great" [57-68]

However, the death of Alexander's greatness is not official until the second-to-last section, in which Plutarch relates a series of anecdotes representing loss, degradation, and Alexander's inescapable mortality. He begins the section with another dark foreshadowing of the destruction to come: Alexander and his men set off on a campaign, but, "bogged down by all the booty they had taken," must burn their spoils of war to keep moving. The men cheer, as if a great burden had been lifted from them (364). Alexander soon breaks a truce by ambushing and

slaughtering men he swore faith to, which Plutarch calls a “stain on his military achievements” (366). Alexander then tries to make sense of several ambiguous and contradictory omens, when he is confronted by the worst one of all: a soldier also named “Alexander,” whom Alexander tells to fight valiantly for the name he carries, dies in battle (365). Though he himself is still alive, the loss in these stories is prominent: Plutarch shows, through metaphor, Alexander’s kingdom, his honor, and his life all passing away from him.

Alexander then begins to confront his own mortality. He is devastated by the death of Bucephalus, the horse which had, years earlier, represented his great potential (368). He narrowly escapes death himself in battle, and then, after capturing several Indian philosophers, Alexander questions them, threatening to kill them if their answers are not sufficient. The last three questions, however, correspond eerily to Alexander’s own life:

The answer of the seventh to his question, how a man might become a god, was, “By doing that which was impossible for men to do.” The eighth told him, “Life is stronger than death, because it supports so many miseries.” And the last being asked how long he thought it decent for a man to live, said, “Till death appeared more desirable than life” (571).

Alexander releases the philosophers, but the impression haunts both him and the reader. Alexander rose to heights of greatness and virtue most men could hardly fathom, in many ways approaching divinity. He then brought tragedy after tragedy upon himself, gradually tearing down all he had built. Alexander now embarks on a failure of an expedition, his army ruined, and when he finally receives fresh troops, his army is restored only to wallow in drink with “Bacchic license” (373).

Plutarch has made his point. At this point, Alexander has lost every part of his greatness. His kingdom, his military achievements, and his honor have all been stripped away, and life has become such a burden that death finally appears preferable to the once-immortal king.

Phase 7: Death of the Man [69-77]

Plutarch, as is his custom, begins the end with yet another omen: Alexander’s friend Calanus, afflicted by an intestinal disorder, builds a pyre, climbs upon it, and burns himself to death like a sacrifice (374-5). Another of Alexander’s friends dies after contracting alcohol

poisoning from a drinking game (375). Yet another friend contracts a fever, but refuses the diet necessary to treat it, and likewise dies, causing Alexander to go “out of his mind with grief” (375-376). Each of these men are killed by two things in conjunction with each other: the frailty of their bodies, combined with their own actions. Plutarch knows that men cannot escape mortality, yet he maintains through his stories that they can either stall or hasten their deaths through the choices they make. Alexander is no different. After “abandon[ing] himself to superstition,” and giving up the last of reason he possessed, he perishes just as anticlimactically. After a night of drinking, Alexander the Great contracts a fever and dies shortly afterwards (377-8).

The story ends as it begins: without Alexander. The last lines are not dedicated to Alexander’s death; rather, Plutarch relates anecdotes concerning those who survived him, completing the cycle of a life both above and confined to human nature.

C. Between Virtue and Vice: Alexander “the Great”?

Caught between a beginning of such perfect virtue and an end of such pathetic vice, can Alexander truly be called great-souled? Does Plutarch admire such a man? The answer is both yes and no. In his portrait of Alexander, Plutarch does not take a static view of virtue. As it is for Aristotle, virtuous states are linked to virtuous actions, and virtue itself is a mean between two extremes of vice. While Alexander perfectly walks the line of the mean for years, he is eventually drawn away by extreme passion and love of flattery. Plutarch does not allow that to cloud Alexander’s former greatness, and yet, he cannot deny the failings of such a man by the time of his death. The best critique of Alexander as the great-souled man, in its ideal and corrupted forms, lies in Callisthenes’ condemnation of Alexander at his lowest point, after the murder of Clitus:

Look at Alexander, the idol of all the world! Here he lies prostrate with grief, as afraid of people’s rules and criticism as a slave, when people should really regard him as their rule and standard of right and wrong, since by his victories he has gained the right of rulership and authority, and need never be enslaved and cowed by superficial opinion. Don’t you realize. . . why Zeus had Justice and Right seated beside him? It is to ensure that every action performed by anyone in a position of authority is right and just (361).

While Alexander failed in his role as example to his citizens, Callisthenes points to a time when this was not the case, when Alexander was strong in himself and his own worth and self-knowledge, with his eyes fixed on what was noble—then, and only then, such a man could be law to his country simply through his actions. Like the great-souled man, Alexander’s nobility, not his lineage, gave him authority, as Callisthenes argues in referencing his “victories.” For now that he has abandoned his honor and his virtue, Callisthenes sees Alexander as nothing—a man who has lost his right to rule and all semblance of what he was—only a man, or perhaps even less. However, in his perfect state, Alexander is supposed to be the epitome of virtue, and in some ways, a merging of the human and the divine, as Callisthenes says: “the idol of the world.” And yet in the end, Alexander the Great suffered two deaths: that of his greatness of soul, and that of his frailty of body. Plutarch creates this characterization through the great and small events of the *Life of Alexander*, painting a portrait of the contradictions of Aristotle’s most famous student that reveals both superhuman virtue and inhuman vice to his audience, making an argument for virtue as persuasive as any in the *Ethics*.

3. A Pair of Political Philosophers

Both the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Lives* of Plutarch, for all their differences in method or subject, can only be qualified as treatises on practical virtue. Aristotle and Plutarch each express the ultimate goal of providing, through logic or narrative, examples to help guide their readers, the potential lawgivers of a city, to the good life so that they in turn may guide their cities to virtue. For this to succeed, each work must hinge on the noble, the city, and ultimately, the value of exempla. These arguments are achieved through structure, as each concept may only be examined in light of the context of the entire work. While the idea of Alexander as perfectly virtuous and great-souled may chafe at the minds of those who have heard other tales of his failings, the goodness of Alexander the man is not in question. There are many accounts outside of Plutarch of his brutality as well as his magnanimity. What is significant in understanding the *Life of Alexander* is not who the historical Alexander really was, but the way Plutarch uses and reconstructs the life of his example. Likewise, Aristotle’s great-souled man taken out of context is neither helpful nor rational. He comes across as the polar opposite to what he is intended to be. What we must look to in the case of both Alexander and the great-

souled man is this: what is their purpose in the narrative, in the work as a whole? Their lives are each laid out so meticulously, what is it that connects them to the grand visions of virtue Aristotle and Plutarch are so fervent to instill in their readers? And what must the reader do in light of such exempla?

Both Aristotle and Plutarch, above all, are focused on the nobility of virtue. Aristotle considers virtue the key to the ultimate good, so he directs his arguments at all times toward the noble and man's "chief good." Likewise, with Plutarch's references to "magnanimity," his praise of Alexander for honoring the gods, taking Achilles as a model, showing mercy to the conquered, his moderation in his pleasures, and his unfathomable energy to achieve what is good for Macedonia, Plutarch makes virtue more central to the *Life of Alexander* than conquest.

Next, both authors must be considered in light of the politics they profess, the universal nature of seemingly individual instruction. Aristotle's great-souled man, for all his internal contemplation and wealth, is ultimately a political creation: he exists as the bridge to lead the people to the good, that virtue may be perfected in both himself and his city. While the *Ethics* is addressed as if to one man, they ultimately concern a much larger body. The origin of the *Ethics* supports this purpose—Aristotle originally wrote them not to publish, but to use as lecture notes to instruct the city's rising lawgivers. Likewise, while Plutarch may seem to focus on the individual virtue of one man, Alexander, he has the state of Macedonia in mind. Alexander is an example to his people and his soldiers, and the virtue he exhibits in his conquests have consequences that go far beyond his own life. In addition, Plutarch wrote the *Life of Alexander* (coupled with the *Life of Caesar*) for the Emperor Trajan, in the hope that some of the virtue imparted within might be used to guide the rule of the Roman state.

However, for their readers truly to understand and achieve virtue, Aristotle and Plutarch acknowledge the necessity of providing exempla for men to pattern themselves after. Aristotle often uses logic and hypothetical scenarios as examples, providing illustrations to the concepts he delineates in each book of the *Ethics*. However, it is the great-souled man who is the most perfect exemplum for Aristotle, because he represents both the entire work and the entirety of virtue: an emblem of both the ideal and practical forms of the good. In personifying *kalon* and *phronēsis*, he unites and completes the themes of the *Ethics* for Aristotle's readers. In practice,

he unites virtue and the human life for his city. He is a mirror for both the noble and the people, or perhaps more of a window—revealing each to the other, so that men may be habituated to the good life. Plutarch takes much the same view of exempla and virtue. As Stadter says,

[Plutarch] believed that it was possible by constant practice to progress step by step in virtue. . . . Of major importance is the observation in others of the fault you are trying to correct. . . . like having someone hold up a mirror to you in your moments of rage.

Observation also allows us to understand the general nature of vice and virtue, and of the emotions and passions which lead to vice—knowledge learned only abstractly in philosophy lessons. . . . We can learn by observing in others not only given qualities, but the effects that they have on the men involved, their families, and their states” (xv-xvi).

Likewise, Plutarch’s main focus is on the collective effect of virtue one example can bring about. Seeing virtue reflected in others allows a man to better know virtue (or the lack thereof) in himself, and therefore to strive to attain it both for himself and for his friends, his family, and his state. As Lear says, the necessity of visibility for a thing to be *kalon* gives the “implication that unless virtuous actions are visible or intelligible as virtuous, they will be in some sense incomplete,” and for both Aristotle and Plutarch, exempla make their ideas visible, completing and perfecting the virtue they describe (Lear 123). Through the examples of the great-souled man and Alexander the Great, the overarching philosophy of Aristotle’s *Ethics* and Plutarch’s *Lives* is completed and perfected.

4. Conclusion

In the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Life of Alexander*, Plutarch and Aristotle each look towards a purpose beyond the surface of their works. Just as Plutarch is not simply concerned with describing events and recording battles for posterity, neither is Aristotle interested in endless questions or arguments without practical purpose. Both philosophers, for they are philosophers, are also politicians, and they search above all for the unification of *kalon* and *phronēsis*, practical wisdom applied, virtue and how men may realize it through their actions. By aiming to lead a few men to goodness through the exempla in their works, they in turn set those men up as exempla for the cities they go to shepherd. Aristotle is a genius of logic, building up arguments supported by intricate relationships and detailed definitions, which he uses to create a human

representation of perfect virtue and the noble in the great-souled man. Likewise, Plutarch is a master of the art of narrative. The *Life of Alexander* is a story carefully crafted to reveal the character of a virtuous, but ultimately flawed king. Every event is intentionally placed, creating a structure for the rise and fall of Alexander's virtue, which is described to raise questions about virtue and how it exists individually and collectively. Plutarch combines philosophy and practicality to create a guide through biography, a sort of "practically-applied ethics."

Ultimately, both Aristotle and Plutarch are passionately concerned with the connection between virtue and politics, ideals and practicality, and believe in the power of the city to make men good, and the power of men to make a virtuous city. While the two methods may seem quite different, one of pure logic and the other of historical illustration, they converge where it comes to virtue, each crafting a representation of goodness to serve as a guide in the hope that politics and philosophy may eventually be united and perfected.