

Aristotle

The High-Minded Man

High-mindedness would seem from its very name to have to do with great things; let us first ascertain what these are.

It will make no difference whether we consider the quality itself, or the man who exhibits the quality.

By a high-minded man we seem to mean one who claims much and deserves much: for he who claims much without deserving it is a fool; but the possessor of a virtue is never foolish or silly. The man we have described, then, is high-minded.

He who deserves little and claims little is temperate [or modest], but not high-minded: for high-mindedness [or greatness of soul] implies greatness, just as beauty implies stature; small men may be neat and well proportioned, but cannot be called beautiful.

He who claims much without deserving it is vain (though not every one who claims more than he deserves is vain).

He who claims less than he deserves is little-minded, whether his deserts be great or moderate, or whether they be small and he claims still less: but the fault would seem to be greatest in him whose deserts are great; for what would he do if his deserts were less than they are?

The high-minded man, then, in respect of the greatness of his deserts occupies an extreme position, but in that he behaves as he ought, observes the mean; for he claims that which he deserves, while all the others claim too much or too little.

But the gifts of fortune also are commonly thought to contribute to high-mindedness. For those who are well born are thought worthy of honor, and those who are powerful or wealthy; for they are in a position of superiority, and that which is superior in any good thing is always held in greater honor. And so these things do make people more high-minded in a sense; for such people find honor from some. But in strictness it is only the good man that is worthy of honor, though he that has both goodness and good fortune is commonly thought to be more worthy of honor. Those, however, who have these good things without virtue, neither have any just claim to great things, nor are properly to be called high-minded; for neither is possible without complete virtue.

But those who have these good things readily come to be supercilious and insolent. For without virtue it is not easy to bear the gifts of fortune becomingly; and so, being unable to bear them, and thinking themselves superior to everybody else, such people look down upon others, and yet themselves do whatever happens to please them. They imitate the high-minded man without being really like him, and

they imitate him where they can; that is to say, they do not exhibit virtue in their acts, but they look down upon others. For the high-minded man never looks down upon others without justice (for he estimates them correctly), while most men do so for quite irrelevant reasons.

The high-minded man is not quick to run into petty dangers, and indeed does not love danger, since there are few things that he much values; but he is ready to incur a great danger, and whenever he does so is unsparing of his life, as a thing that is not worth keeping at all costs.

It is his nature to confer benefits, but he is ashamed to receive them; for the former is the part of a superior, the latter of an inferior. And when he has received a benefit, he is apt to confer a greater in return; for thus his creditor will become his debtor and be in the position of a recipient of his favor.

It seems, moreover, that such men remember the benefits which they have conferred better than those which they have received (for the recipient of a benefit is inferior to the benefactor, but such a man wishes to be in the position of a superior), and that they like to be reminded of the one, but dislike to be reminded of the other.

It is characteristic of the high-minded man, again, never or reluctantly to ask favors, but to be ready to confer them, and to be lofty in his behavior to those who are high in station and favored by fortune, but affable to those of the middle ranks; for it is a difficult thing and a dignified thing to assert superiority over the former, but easy to assert it over the latter. A haughty demeanor in dealing with the great is quite consistent with good breeding, but in dealing with those of low estate is brutal, like showing off one's strength upon a cripple.

Another of his characteristics is not to rush in wherever honor is to be won, nor to go where others take the lead, but to hold aloof and to shun an enterprise, except when great honor is to be gained, or a great work to be done—not to do many things, but great things and notable.

Again, he must be open in his hate and in his love; for concealment shows fear.

He must care for truth more than for what men will think of him, and speak and act openly; he will not hesitate to say all that he thinks, as he looks down upon mankind.

Nor is he easily moved to admiration; for nothing is great to him.

He readily forgets injuries; for it is not consistent with his character to brood on the past, especially on past injuries, but rather to overlook them.

He is no gossip; he will neither talk about himself nor about others; for he cares not that men should praise him, nor that others should be blamed

(though, on the other hand, he is not very ready to bestow praise); and so he is not apt to speak evil of others, not even of his enemies, except with the express purpose of giving offence.

When an event happens that cannot be helped or is of slight importance, he is the last man in the world to cry out or to beg for help; for that is the conduct of a man who thinks these events very important.

He loves to possess beautiful things that bring no profit, rather than useful things that pay; for this is characteristic of the man whose resources are in himself.

Further, the character of the high-minded man seems to require that his gait should be slow, his voice deep, his speech measured; for a man is not likely to be in a hurry when there are few things in which he is deeply interested, nor excited when he holds nothing to be of very great importance: and these are the causes of a high voice and rapid movements.

This, then, is the character of the high-minded man.

But he that is deficient in this quality is called little-minded; he that exceeds, vain or conceited.

While Aristotle wrote extensively concerning the ideal man, he ignored the matter of the ideal woman. Reflecting the prejudices of his society, Aristotle thought woman to be naturally inferior to man and not worthy of special analysis. In a treatise entitled "On the Generation of Animals," Aristotle writes that a female was simply a failed male. Nature in producing human beings aims at making a male offspring, but when the process is defective, a female is the result. Because the woman by nature is colder than the man, girls are usually born when the father is either young or old, that is, when he has not yet reached the heat of maturity or when past that point. This view of man as the most perfect creature in nature and of woman as a defective or second-rate man was to have long-range repercussions in Western culture. Yet one should not conclude that the ancient Greeks consistently viewed the female as inferior. The goddesses in Greek mythology, the ideal female form in sculpture, the admiration shown for Sappho, and characters such as Lysistrata in comedy and Antigone in tragedy attest to the contrary. Plato envisioned equality between superior men and women in *The Republic*. And yet it is fair to conclude that the ennobling ethical and aesthetic Greek view of "man" that has so influenced our civilization was, on the whole, limited to the male point of view.