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Ancient Philosophy

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### Aristotle and 'The Mean' of Virtue

In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle grapples with how to rightly achieve and maintain happiness, best translated into the Greek as “eudaimonia”. While our contemporary, Western ideas of happiness refer to a temporary, fleeting state of good spirits, Aristotle is aimed at obtaining life, characterized by abiding flourishing and prosperity, or eudaimonia. He settles on the idea that being a virtuous person is what will lead us to happiness which is ‘the end’, or the sort of peak of self-actualization. But now, it is necessary to determine how to be a virtuous person; only then can we forge the path to happiness. In an effort to answer this dilemma, in Books II and III of *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle explores how virtue is about achieving ‘the mean’. Although his argument lacks particularly in application, Aristotle’s blueprint to achieving virtue is effective in its effort to assert the subjective nature of virtues in practice and awaken us to the reality of ethical life.

In defining virtue as the mean, Aristotle asserts that virtue is the intermediate between two extremes, deficiency and excess. He articulates the extremes’ relationship to the mean, or the virtue, in the following: "In some cases the deficiency, in others the excess, is more opposed to the intermediate condition. For instance, cowardice, the deficiency, not rashness, the excess, is more opposed to bravery, whereas intemperance, the excess, not insensibility, the deficiency, is more opposed to temperance” (Book II, Chapter 8, Section 6, 1109a1-5). In either case, excess or deficiency, Aristotle clarifies each extreme is not an exercise of too much or too little of each

virtue but rather an entirely different entity. For example, bravery is the virtue, or the mean, and neither rashness nor cowardice are any form of bravery, nor do they have bravery in them.

Rashness is entirely its own state while each bravery and cowardice are entirely their own states:

“... there is no mean of excess or of deficiency, and no excess or deficiency of a mean” (Book II, Chapter 6, Section 20, 1107a25-26). As neither a feeling nor a capacity (Book II, Chapter 5, Section 6, 1106a12-13), the mean is sufficient in and of itself and cannot be anything other than that.

Aristotle then offers two reasons for the non-virtues. First, one of the extremes is seemingly more similar to the mean. Specifically, he asserts, “Since rashness, for instance, seems to be closer and more similar to bravery, and cowardice less similar, we oppose cowardice more than rashness to bravery; for what is further from the intermediate condition seems to be more contrary to it.” (Book II, Chapter 8, Section 7, 1109a9-13). In the example of bravery, Aristotle claims that we oppose cowardice more because it appears less like bravery. At the end of the day, however, that does not prevent us from, entertaining the other extreme, rashness. But Aristotle argues that another reason for an inclination toward the extremes comes from within us; we have a natural tendency toward either excess or deficiency, and we should be most on guard of that extreme, for Aristotle contends, “Hence we say that an extreme is more contrary if we naturally develop more in that direction” (Book II, Chapter 8, Section 8, 1109a17-18). This can take the shape of bad habits, for example, which can be tough to break if we are not especially mindful of them. Additionally, for instance, wastefulness and ungenerosity are the excess and deficiency of generosity, respectively, so if you have a natural tendency toward ungenerosity, that is the extreme which is further from the mean and the one you should be of the most

attentive. Therefore, an understanding of these extremes demonstrates how to be wary of them to try to better locate the intermediate--virtue.

An outline of virtue's opposite extremes still does not explicitly point us in the direction of virtue itself. Before Aristotle outlines the extremes, he establishes, "... having these feelings at the right times, about the right things, towards the right people, for the right end, and in the right way, is the intermediate and best condition, and this is proper to virtue" (Book II, Chapter 6, Section 11, 1106b21-23). Virtue is the absence of extremes, and it is also having all the right feelings at the right times. This implies that in any given situation, there is a right (virtuous) way to act, and a wrong way to act, which might surface as either excess or deficiency. As humans with reason, agency, and the ability to choose how and when to act in various situations, this does not seem unattainable.

But Aristotle fails to clarify exactly how to do this--how to feel a certain way at the right times, about the right things, toward the right people, etc. His argument is not substantive because it gives us vague guidelines but no practical information for how to apply it. Aristotle provides us with an abstract understanding of virtue with no substantial operational direction. For instance, Aristotle specifies the examples of bravery and various other virtues with their respective excesses and deficiencies, but he does not effectively explain these virtues in action in particular situations. He tells us that to become virtuous we must practice, or habituate, virtues, for "actions control the sorts of states we acquire" (Book II, Chapter 2, Section 1, 1103b32); here again is a command with no direction. It is as if Aristotle is telling us to do the right thing, and he is telling us what the right thing is but not how to do it. When there is no objective measurement for determining the proper practice of virtue, how can one possibly effectively be a virtuous person? Or if there is no benchmark for the intermediate, how will we know if we are practicing/

habituating virtues? Even further, his account that the practice of virtue is something so narrow as having the right feelings, at the right times, toward the right people, etc. seems like a daunting undertaking and easy to mess up or miss the mark. With these thoughts and questions in mind, the path to happiness seems quite circuitous.

While Aristotle's account of virtue lacks objectivity, perhaps that is for the best. A more substantive answer might risk projecting feelings that would not actually be virtuous in that particular situation. For example, a typical embodiment of the virtue of generosity would likely say that if you see a poor person on the street, you should give money, food, etc. as much as you can spare. However, this situation would have unique implications for the little girl of parents with comfortable means who was specifically instructed by her parents to use the money they gave her to buy milk and bread from the store and return home right away. Technically the girl has the means to give the poor person on the street her money or groceries, but then she would be disobeying her parents. On another account, standing up to speak in front of a large group of people would require different amounts of bravery for different people, and for some people, it might not require bravery at all. Thus, perhaps there is not a one-size-fits-all approach to virtuous life.

Despite a seemingly vacuous account of virtue, Aristotle is actually portraying how an ethical approach to virtue requires subjectivity; in order to honestly consider all the implications of the situation which might affect the practice of the mean, a subjective approach is necessary. Like in the previous example given regarding generosity, an objective standard of generosity would count the little girl generous for giving the money and/or food to the poor person, but this standard fails to see that the girl is both disobeying her parents and giving away money that is not truly hers. On the other hand, if the little girl kept the money and/or food she would be

deemed ungenerous, for she did not give what she could spare to someone who needed it, but she would also be obeying her authority's command. Aristotle draws us back to the example of bravery: "Hence whoever stands firm against the right things and fears the right things, for the right end, in the right way, at the right time, and is correspondingly confident is the brave person; for the braver person's actions and feelings accord with what something is worth, and follow what reason prescribes" (Book III, Chapter 7, Sections 3-5, 1115b19-1116a19). Therefore, in leaving room for the reader to interpret the virtue into their proper circumstances, perhaps Aristotle is doing us a favor, leaving us space to contemplate with the reality of ethical life. Ethical life does not just require that we act in a certain way, but it also requires that we use our own reason and agency to make the decision to act virtuously. That being said, if we were forced or otherwise coerced to act in a way, this action would not be considered virtuous since the individual did not make the decision to pursue virtue in their own right. So, by giving us a command with vague applications, Aristotle provides for us the space to reason and practice virtuous living with how it is best executed in our particular situations.

Ultimately, Aristotle's argument of understanding virtue as 'the mean' is important because it is what will lead us to eudaimonia. In discerning how the mean applies to each of our particularities and circumstances, we can lead lives of human flourishing and hopefully inspire others to do the same. His approach to virtue as the mean both awakens us to our own selves into being in tune with our natural tendencies away from the mean, while using our reason to determine what is the right state to be in at the right time, in the right place, with the right people, etc., and also turning us outward to interact with others in our states of virtue. In embracing Aristotle's idea of virtue as the mean, we heed responsibility for ourselves, as Aristotle declares, "... an individual is responsible for being unjust, because he has cheated, and for being

intemperate, because he has passed his time in drinking and the like; for each type of activity produces the corresponding sort of person” (Book III, Chapter 5, Section 10, 1114a6-8). In other words, we are responsible for our actions which then produce the kind of person we become. We can use our reason to determine how to act or be virtuous in a situation, and our awareness of the consequences of habituating unvirtuous actions will also encourage us to choose virtue, leading to our flourishing and ‘the end’ of happiness. And, again, while Aristotle does not provide us with some super specific and detailed guideline for how to be a person of virtue, he does tell us what *not* to do, and often, that is the best way to learn.