
The Doctrine of the Mean

Charles M. Young

According to Aristotle, each of the virtues of character – courage, temperance, liberality, etc. – is associated with a plurality of vices. Thus he associates courage with rashness, cowardice, and arguably other vices as well; temperance with profligacy and insensibility; liberality with prodigality and a variety of strains of illiberality; and so on. Moreover, Aristotle holds – indeed he is famous for holding – a general thesis as to how exactly the virtue in each sphere is related to its correlative vices: the so-called “Doctrine of the Mean.” In the present paper I seek to understand the substance and point of Aristotle’s thesis.

I

In *Nicomachean Ethics* II.6, Aristotle defines *virtue of character* (ἀρετή) as “a disposition concerned with choice, consisting in a mean state relative to us that is defined by reason and as the practically wise person would define it” (1106b36–1107a2). Although he presents this definition as the conclusion of an argument,¹ not all its parts are justified by the considerations explicitly advanced in its support. Thus in Book II Aristotle does not develop the idea that virtue is “concerned with choice” (προαιρετική); rather, he defers detailed discussion of the topic of choice until the opening chapters of Book III. Likewise, not until Book VI does he try explicitly² to articulate the connections between virtue and reason (λόγος) and practical wisdom (φρόνησις) mentioned in his definition of virtue. Indeed, the only parts of the definition that are directly supported by what is actually said in Book II are the idea that a virtue of character is a disposition (ἕξις) and the idea that a virtue is a mean state (μεσότης) relative to us.

Aristotle argues for these points in *N.E.* II.5 and II.6, respectively. In II.5, he argues that, generically

speaking,³ a virtue of character is neither a passion like desire, anger, fear, or cheer, nor a capacity to experience such a passion, but rather a disposition – something that disposes us well or ill in relation to one or more of the passions.⁴ In II.6, he argues that what marks off virtues, which dispose us well towards the passions, from vices, which dispose us ill, is that the virtues are mean states (μεσότητες) while the vices are either states of excess (ὑπερβολαί) or states of deficiency (ἐλλείψεις). To explain the idea that the virtues are mean states, Aristotle says two things. First, he says that a virtue is “a mean state between two vices, one of excess and one of deficiency” (1107a2–3). Second, he says that a virtue is a mean state in that, “while the vices fall short of or go beyond what is required in passions or actions, the virtue finds and chooses what is intermediate,” τὸ μέσον (1107a3–6).⁵

Two distinct theses, then, make up the Doctrine of the Mean. First we have the idea that the virtues are mean states in that they are “between” states of excess and of deficiency. This thesis serves to locate the virtues in relation to their associated vices in some logical or conceptual space of undetermined metric; I will call this thesis simply *Location*. Then we have the idea that the virtues are mean states in that they aim at what is intermediate. This thesis – *Intermediacy* – tells us something about the expression of the virtues in actions and passions. To understand the Doctrine of the Mean, we need to understand both *Location* and *Intermediacy*, and how they are related to each other.

II

There are problems with both of the theses that make up the Doctrine of the Mean. In the first place, *Location* does not apply neatly to particular cases. Among the virtues Aristotle takes up in *Nicomachean Ethics* III–V,

for example, are the cardinal virtues of temperance, courage, and justice, and any general account of the virtues should be true at least of them. As Aristotle analyzes them, however, not one provides us with a clear, unproblematic illustration of Location.⁶ Aristotle does associate temperance with a vice of excess, profligacy, but he says things that arguably undercut his claim that it is also associated with a vice of deficiency. He notes, for example, that the deficient state occurs hardly at all and that, in consequence, it lacks a name (II.7, 1107b5–7 and III.14, 1119a5–6 and 10–11). To be sure, these observations by themselves do not represent temperance as an exception to Location. But Aristotle goes on to suggest at III.14, 1119a6–7, that the vice of deficiency (“insensibility,” as he labels it at II.7, 1107b8) is “not human” (οὐ . . . ἀνθρωπικῆ) and at 1119a9–10 that one who is infected with the vice is “far from being a human being” (πόρρω . . . τοῦ ἄνθρωπος). If with these claims Aristotle means that natural necessities block the manifestation of insensibility and hence that it is not a human possibility, an uncharitable critic might well maintain that Aristotle’s insistence that temperance is located between profligacy and insensibility answers more to the architectonic demands of Location than to any truths about temperance.⁷ If temperance is associated with too few vices, courage (at least in the *N.E.*) seems associated with too many: Aristotle relates it not only to cowardice and rashness but also to a third vice, “excess in fearlessness” (II.7, 1107b1–2, and III.7, 1115b24–25), and arguably to a fourth.⁸ Justice, finally, is a blatant exception to Location. Aristotle makes no attempt to find a vice other than injustice to associate it with, and in fact he admits that Location breaks down in its case. True, he does insist in *N.E.* V.5 that “justice is a mean state,” but, he concedes, “not in the same way as the other virtues” (1133b32–33).

There are problems with Intermediacy as well. According to Intermediacy, the actions and passions expressive of each virtue are in some sense intermediate relative to the actions and passions expressive of its associated vices. One interpretation of Intermediacy is *Moderation*, the idea that virtuous actions and passions are intermediate in the sense that they are *moderate*. According to *Moderation*, for example, a person with gentleness, the virtue regulating anger, will feel a moderate amount of anger when anger is in order; likewise, a temperate person will eat and drink in moderation; and so on. This is not, however, a plausible

view to attribute to Aristotle.⁹ It seems clearly false, for example, that a gentle person will feel moderate anger whenever anger is appropriate; that person will, rather, feel a degree of anger that is appropriate to the provocation, and moderate anger only in response to a moderate provocation. It is also false, I think, that a gentle person will always feel less anger than an irascible person at the same provocation: Because they react so quickly to provocations, irascible people may misperceive the magnitude of the wrong to which they are reacting.¹⁰ Again, if we assume for the sake of the point that temperance regulates the consumption of alcohol,¹¹ we may doubt that it recommends the moderate consumption of alcohol. For, on Aristotle’s analysis, temperance will recommend patterns of consumption that are conducive to or at least consistent with health (see *N.E.* III.11, 1119a16–18).¹² Temperance will recommend the moderate consumption of alcohol, then, only if moderate consumption is at least consistent with health, and we can reasonably question this assumption. For all we know – and for all Aristotle knows – alcohol’s effects are always harmful.¹³

Since Aristotle accepts Intermediacy but would (or should) reject *Moderation*, we should try to find another interpretation of Intermediacy. One proposal is that Intermediacy is not an independent thesis but instead depends on Location. So Urmson:

It is perfectly plain, in fact, that for Aristotle what is primarily in a mean is a settled state of character. In his definition he says that excellence of character is a settled state in a mean; thus an emotion or action is in a mean if it exhibits a settled state that is in a mean.¹⁴

Here Urmson does not distinguish as clearly as he might between being a mean state, which for Aristotle is a feature of dispositions, and being intermediate, which for Aristotle is a feature of actions and passions: In its first and third occurrences in Urmson’s second sentence, the phrase “in a mean” is used to express the idea that a virtue is a mean state, while in its second occurrence, it is used to express the idea that a virtuous action or passion is an intermediate one. But we may revise Urmson’s sentence in the light of the convention adopted in note 5 above:

In his definition he says that excellence of character is a settled state that is a mean state; thus an emotion or action is intermediate if it exhibits a settled state that is a mean state.

And it is now plain that Urmson is attributing to

Aristotle the idea that virtuous actions and passions are intermediate actions and passions simply in that they emerge from states of character that are mean states. Or again, he thinks that, for Aristotle, Intermediacy depends upon Location.

We can appeal to Location to explain Intermediacy only if we have an independent account of Location: something that neither Urmson, in his article, nor Aristotle, in his ethical writings, provides us with. Aristotle appeals to the idea of a mean state in other writings, however, and he does a better job there of explaining what he takes a mean state to be than he does in the ethical treatises. It is worth our while to see how he understands the idea of a mean state in these other contexts and then to see whether this helps us to understand its use in Location.

III

Plato appeals to the idea of a mean state hardly at all; forms of the word *μεσότης* occur only five times in the entire body of his writings, four times in the *Timaeus* and once in the *Laws*.¹⁵ In contrast, Aristotle invokes the idea of a mean state with some frequency: it figures not only in his ethics but also in his views on the composition of living bodies, on politics, on perception, and perhaps on health. Two texts are especially useful in coming to see how Aristotle understands the idea of a mean state outside the ethical treatises: *Generation and Corruption* II.7, which makes the general idea reasonably clear, and *Politics* IV.9, which provides us with a simple but sharp illustration of the idea.

In *Gen. et Corr.* II.7, Aristotle's problem is to explain how the sublunar elements (fire, air, water, and earth) combine to produce the organs and other structures that make up the bodies of living organisms. Since he believes that these organs and structures are made up of so-called "homoeomers" – materials, like flesh, bone, and blood, any of whose parts is similar to the whole – his problem is to explain how the wide variety of such complex materials can be formed from just four simple elements. Surely earth and water can come together to produce mud; adding fire would make the mud warm; and adding air would make it frothy. But it is not easy to see what elaborations of the recipe might eventuate in bone, flesh, blood, and the other homoeomers, with their complex properties.

Aristotle deals with this problem by distinguishing

between two different ways in which the elements can come together. In one mode of combination, called synthesis (*σύνθεσις*), the elements come together, Aristotle says,

in the way in which a wall comes to be out of bricks and stones. The elements out of which the combination is made up will be preserved, but will be put together alongside one another in small quantities. (*Gen. et Corr.* II.7, 334a25–29)

I take it that this is the mode of combination that produces first mud, then warm mud, and finally frothy warm mud. In the other mode of combination – mixture (*μίξις*) – the elements themselves are preserved only potentially, and something new is produced. When the four elements come together in a mixture, they "destroy one another's excesses" (334b11–12), and what emerges is "neither their matter nor either of the contraries actually existing simply, but rather something in between" (334b12–13). Thus, I take it, when the appropriate amounts of fire, air, water, and earth come together in a mixture, a new substance comes into being – blood, for example – that is in some sense intermediate between the original elements. Aristotle thinks the pattern holds generally. "Similarly," he writes, "the dry and wet and their like produce flesh, bone, and the rest in respect of a mean state," *κατὰ μεσότητα* (334b28–30).

Aristotle does not actually define the notion of a mean state here, but he says enough, I think, to allow us to make a reasonable speculation as to what he has in mind. Recall that in *Gen. et Corr.* II.3, Aristotle took the view that the four elements are characterized by pairs of contraries – fire by *dry* and *hot*, air by *hot* and *wet*, water by *wet* and *cold*, and earth by *cold* and *dry* – and we may take it that these contraries are the "excesses" referred to at 334b11–12. And the idea of a mean state seems, roughly put, to be this: We begin with certain amounts of fire, air, water, and earth. When these amounts come together in a mean state, their contrary properties manage to limit one other in various ways, in this way "destroying" one another and giving rise to a new substance with properties in some sense intermediate between the properties of the original elements. And, since earth, air, fire, and water can be combined in various proportions and in various ways,¹⁶ Aristotle can claim with some plausibility that he can construct the variety of homoeomerous substances his theory requires.¹⁷

In his theory of matter, then, Aristotle sees a mean

state as a mixture of entities characterized by contrary properties: a mixture of contraries, for short. *Politics* IV.9 provides us with a clear illustration of this idea. In *Politics* III.7, Aristotle classifies political arrangements into types according as (a) one person, a few people (typically the rich), or many people (typically the poor) rule and as (b) the rulers are good (in that they rule in the common interest) or bad (in that they rule in their own interest). Thus we have the six possible political arrangements displayed in the following chart:

	<i>Good</i> (common interest)	<i>Bad</i> (rulers' interest)
<i>One</i>	Monarchy	Tyranny
<i>Few</i> (rich)	Aristocracy	Oligarchy
<i>Many</i> (poor)	Polity	Democracy

In IV.9, Aristotle represents one of the good political arrangements, the polity, as emerging from the “mixing” of elements distinctive of two of the bad ones, oligarchy and democracy.¹⁸ Here is an illustration of one of the types of mixing Aristotle gives. Oligarchies rule in their rulers’ interest. In an oligarchy, the rich rule, and an oligarchy will accordingly have practices that benefit the rich. Since taking part in the running of a city by serving on juries is thought to be a good thing, it is accordingly oligarchic to encourage the rich to serve as jurors, e.g. by fining them if they do not. *Mutatis mutandis*, it will be democratic to encourage the poor to serve as jurors, e.g. by paying them to do so. A combination of these policies – encouraging the rich to serve by fining them if they do not and encouraging the poor to serve by paying them – will encourage everybody, rich and poor alike, to serve as jurors. Such a combination will be in the common interest, and is therefore appropriate in a polity. Thus we have two contrary policies, an oligarchic one favoring the rich and a democratic one favoring the poor, that “destroy one another’s excesses” when they are combined, producing a policy that favors no one and benefits everyone.¹⁹ And when oligarchic and democratic practices are brought together on a sufficiently large scale²⁰ – when they are “well-mixed,” in the language of 1294b17 – the result will be a new form of government, “between” oligarchy and democracy. A polity, then, is a mixture of the contraries oligarchy and democracy.

IV

Should the Doctrine of the Mean in the *Nicomachean Ethics* be understood in the same way? Can the virtues be seen as mixtures of contraries? Several scholars have argued that they can be. According to best version of this view, S. R. L. Clark’s,²¹ each virtue is a mixture or fusion of a pair of contrary tendencies. Clark suggests, for example, that the contrary impulses of fear (φόβος) and confidence (θάρασος) merge and give rise to the disciplined pursuit of the fine that is Aristotelian courage; in magnificence (μεγαλοπρεπεία), the contrary desires for display and conservation combine to produce taste in expenditure; etc. Clark’s account of virtues as mixtures of contraries can, moreover, readily be extended to situate each virtue between a pair of vices, and so give us an account of Location. For it is reasonable to suppose that the vices associated with a given virtue will underemphasize one of the two contrary tendencies whose mixture makes up the virtue, and overemphasize the other. Thus we may suppose that fear and confidence are given free rein in cowardice and rashness respectively; that in niggardliness and vulgarity the desire for conservation and the desire for display, respectively, exist unopposed; and so on. A virtue of character would be a mean state “between” its associated vices, then, in the sense that contrary tendencies that are, taken individually, distinctive of the two vices are mixed or fused in the virtue.

As I have noted, Aristotle does not explain in the ethical writings what he means by calling a virtue of character a mean state, and it is therefore appropriate to seek to understand the idea of a mean state in terms of its use elsewhere in Aristotle’s writings. Moreover, the account of Location that Clark proposes is plausible; Aristotle’s descriptions of the virtues and vices do apparently allow the virtues to be seen as mixtures between their associated vices. With an account of Location along these lines, finally, we could adopt Urmson’s suggestion that an action or emotion is intermediate if it is the expression of a mean state in this Locative sense, and thus have an independent account of Location and an account of Intermediacy that depends upon Location: a complete interpretation of the Doctrine of the Mean. It is accordingly worthwhile to inspect the details of Aristotle’s argument in *N.E.* II.6, where he actually tries to prove that the virtues are mean states, and then to assess the extent to which the argument bears out what Clark says.

V

Although Aristotle's definition of virtue of character is not presented until II.6, 1106b36–1107a2, he reaches the conclusion that virtues of character are mean states somewhat earlier, at 1106b27–28: "Virtue is therefore a mean state, since it aims at what is intermediate." The argument for this conclusion occupies the whole of II.6 up to that point. It breaks down into six sections, which may be summarized as follows:

Stage 1, 1106a14–26, appeals to general connections between function (ἔργον) and virtue (ἀρετή) to argue that virtue of character renders both those who have it and their activities good.

Stage 2, 1106a26–b5, distinguishes between what is intermediate in itself and what is intermediate relative to us, claiming that only the latter is relevant to the present discussion.

Stage 3, 1106b5–14, claims that in the case of activities (e.g., craft activities) that admit of excess, deficiency, and intermediacy what is good proves to be what is intermediate.

Stage 4, 1106b14–27, maintains that the result of Stage 3 applies to virtue of character: the activities characteristic of the virtues do admit of excess, deficiency, and intermediacy; and in this sphere, too, what is good is what is intermediate.

Stage 5, 1106b28, implicitly concludes that, since the virtues aim at what is good (Stage 1), and what is good is what is intermediate (Stage 4), the virtues aim at what is intermediate.

Stage 6, 1106b27–28, concludes that, since the virtues aim at what is intermediate (τὸ μέσον), the virtues are mean states (μεσότητες).

This summary should make the movement of Aristotle's thought clear. In its essentials, his argument to the conclusion that virtues of character are mean states is straightforward:

- (1) Virtue realizes itself in good agents and good activities. (Stage 1)
- (2) In the activities in which virtue is realized, what is good is what is intermediate. (Stage 4)
- (3) So, virtue aims at what is intermediate. (Stage 5)
- (4) So, virtue is a mean state. (Stage 6)

Here the move from (3) to (4) rests on what seems to be an implicit conceptual point to the effect that a mean state just is a state that aims at what is intermediate.²²

Given this point and the additional, explicit conceptual point that virtue expresses itself in good activities (Stage 1), Aristotle feels free to conclude that the virtues are mean states (Stage 6) once he has made it plausible that the virtues aim at what is intermediate (Stage 5). On this account of Aristotle's reasoning, Stages 2 and 3 are incidental to its main flow, Stage 2 guarding against a possible misunderstanding of the notion of intermediacy in the realm of the virtues and Stage 3 helping to make plausible the identification of goodness and intermediacy in the realm of virtue by pointing to another realm in which the same identification occurs.

VI

There is an important gap in Aristotle's argument that we must close before going on. Recall that the Doctrine of the Mean includes two subdoctrines: Location, the idea that a virtue is a mean state "between" two vices, and Intermediacy, the idea that virtuous actions and passions are intermediate actions and passions. Given the argument just discussed, Aristotle can reasonably claim to have established Intermediacy. But why does he think, as he apparently does, that he is entitled to the further, stronger conclusion, Location?

Aristotle does not answer this question directly. But he does give us a clue, I think, when he states Location and Intermediacy:

Virtue of character is a mean state between two vices, one on the side of excess and the other on the side of deficiency. Furthermore, it is a mean state in that while the vices either fall short of or go beyond what is proper in passions and in actions, the virtue finds and chooses the intermediate. (*N.E.* II.6, 1107a2–6)

Here the first sentence gives us Location, the second Intermediacy. But the statement of Intermediacy also includes the words "the vices either fall short of or go beyond what is proper in passions and in actions" (1107a3–5). I take it that with this remark Aristotle does not mean that each of the vices associated with a given virtue tends, in scattershot fashion, sometimes to fall short of and sometimes to go beyond what is proper. He means, rather, that one of the vices associated with a given virtue characteristically falls short of what is proper, while the other characteristically goes beyond.²³ If so, Aristotle can plausibly regard the vice that falls short as a vice of deficiency and the vice that goes

beyond as a vice of excess. And he can go on to locate the virtue “between” the two vices on the grounds that the actions and passions characteristic of the virtue fall between the actions and passions characteristic of its associated vices, respectively. Liberality, for instance, would count as “between” illiberality and prodigality if the level of expenditure distinctive of liberals falls between the levels distinctive of profligates and illiberal people respectively.

It should be clear from this account of Aristotle’s argument that there is no evidence – at least none within II.6 – for an interpretation of the Doctrine of the Mean as a mixture of contraries in the way that Clark and others have proposed. The only reasons Aristotle gives for the idea that the virtues are mean states are the claim that virtues aim at what is intermediate and the claim that what the virtues aim at falls between what its two associated vices aim at. He makes no attempt whatever to construe a virtue as a mixture of contraries. If we assume that the idea that the virtues are mean states is fixed by the argument advanced in its support, we must conclude that Aristotle does not intend, with the Doctrine of the Mean, to represent the virtues as mixtures of contraries.²⁴

Nor, for that matter, does he represent Intermediacy as depending on Location. Quite the contrary, in fact. With Stage 6 of the argument of II.6 as made explicit in the previous section, Aristotle moves from the idea that the virtues aim at what is intermediate to the idea the virtues are mean states: He makes Location dependent on Intermediacy,²⁵ not the other way round. So not only must we abandon the idea that Aristotle sees the virtues as mixtures of contraries, we must also abandon the suggestion that Intermediacy depends on Location.

VII

It is now time to take stock. We began by observing that the Doctrine of the Mean comprises two subdoctrines, Location and Intermediacy. Upon rejecting Moderation as an interpretation of Intermediacy, we followed up Urmson’s suggestion that Intermediacy depends on Location, and sought an independent account of Location. To this end, we looked at Aristotle’s uses of the idea of a mean state outside his ethical writings. We learned that in his theory of matter in the *Generation and Corruption* and in his account of politics in the *Politics* Aristotle views mean states as mixtures of

contraries. Returning to the *Nicomachean Ethics*, however, we found no evidence that he has this kind of mean state in mind in his argument to the conclusion that the virtues are mean states in II.6. So we are as much without an account of Location as we are without an account of Intermediacy.

All is not lost, however. We did learn that in II.6 Aristotle makes Location depend on Intermediacy: He argues from the claim that the virtues aim at what is intermediate to the claim that the virtues are mean states. So if we can formulate an account of Intermediacy, we will have accounts of both theses. Aristotle simply doesn’t tell us how to understand Intermediacy, and any proposed interpretation is necessarily speculative. I suggest, however, that Intermediacy can plausibly be understood as a claim, not about individual actions and passions, but about *patterns* of actions and passions. Specifically, I believe Aristotle’s claim is that, taken as a whole, the actions and passions of people with the virtue regulating a given field of operation assume a pattern that can be seen as falling between the patterns assumed by the actions and passions of people with the two vices in the same field. Gentleness – one of our counterexamples to Moderation in section II above – will serve as an illustration. Gentle people will experience anger to a degree that is appropriate to the provocation: little anger at small provocations, moderate anger at moderate provocations, extreme anger at extreme provocations. Like gentle people, irascible people will experience extreme anger at extreme provocations, but they will also experience more anger than gentle people at moderate and small provocations, and in this sense they display a pattern of excess. Meek people will, like gentle people, experience little anger at small provocations, but they will also experience less anger than gentle people at moderate and extreme provocations, and in this sense they display a pattern of deficiency. The pattern displayed by gentle people plainly falls between these two patterns.

If this is indeed what Aristotle is getting at with Intermediacy, we are now in a position to state the elements of the Doctrine of the Mean as they emerge from his argument in II.6. Aristotle assumes that the actions and passions regulated by each of the virtues admit of patterns characterizable in terms of excess, deficiency, and intermediacy. Intermediacy is then the idea that persons with the virtue in a given sphere of application will exhibit a pattern of action and passion

that falls between the excessive pattern exhibited by persons with one of the vices in that sphere and the deficient pattern exhibited by persons with the other vice. And Location is the idea that, since the pattern exhibited by persons with a given virtue falls between the excessive and deficient patterns exhibited by persons with its associated vices, the virtue is a mean state between a state of excess and a state of deficiency.²⁶

VIII

If this account of the Doctrine of the Mean is accurate, Aristotle may have an answer to a criticism leveled at the Doctrine of the Mean by Kant. In *The Metaphysical Principles of Virtue*, Kant writes:

[T]he difference between virtue and vice can never be sought in the degree of obedience to certain maxims, but must be sought only in the specific quality of the maxims (their relation to the law). In other words, the much-praised principle (of Aristotle) that places virtue in the mean between two vices is false. For instance, suppose that liberality is given as the mean between two vices, prodigality and illiberality. Then its origin as a virtue can neither be represented as the gradual diminution of the former vice (by saving) nor as the increase of expenditure by illiberals; also these vices cannot be viewed as if, proceeding as it were in opposite directions, they met together in liberality. But each of them has its own maxim, which necessarily contradicts that of the other. (404)

Here Kant says that Aristotle locates the difference between liberality and its associated vices in “the degree of obedience” to a single maxim associated with liberality, and he suggests that Aristotle thinks that if profligates and illiberals simply increase or decrease their obedience to this maxim they will approach liberality. The idea Kant imputes to Aristotle thus seems to be that liberality involves a maxim regulating an impulse – the desire to spend seems a likely candidate – that receives too much sway in prodigality and too little sway in illiberality.

For all we have seen so far, something like this might well be Aristotle’s view, but nothing that he says in *Nicomachean Ethics* II.6 requires it. In II.6, I have suggested, Aristotle locates each virtue between its associated vices on the grounds that the pattern of action and passion expressive of the virtue falls between the patterns expressive of the vices. He does not, however, explain why it is that the virtue and its associated vices give rise to the patterns of action and passion that they

do. On the view of the differences between liberality, prodigality, and illiberality that Kant attributes to Aristotle, the patterns of expenditure distinctive of liberals, prodigals, and illiberals would indeed emerge. But this is not the only view of the differences between the virtue and its vices that could explain these patterns.

In fact, I believe that Aristotle himself takes a view of the differences between liberality, prodigality, and illiberality other than the one Kant criticizes him for holding. As I argue elsewhere,²⁷ the basic difference Aristotle sees between liberals, prodigals, and illiberals is found in their different conceptions of property or wealth. Liberals correctly see wealth as something to be used in the building and living of a worthwhile human life; prodigals see wealth simply as something to be used; illiberals see wealth as something to be possessed. The different patterns of expenditure distinctive of liberals, prodigals, and illiberals are the natural expression in action of this more fundamental difference between them.²⁸

If this is the right view of Aristotelian liberality, then the different patterns of expenditure found in liberals, prodigals, and illiberals exist not because these people have different tendencies to indulge in the desire to spend but because they have different conceptions of the nature of wealth, and Kant’s criticism misses Aristotle’s point. To affirm the Doctrine of the Mean in the case of liberality, Aristotle need not assume, as Kant takes him to assume, that liberals, prodigals, and illiberals exhibit different “degrees of obedience” to some maxim. He need only assume that the pattern of expenditure characteristic of liberal people falls between the patterns characteristic of profligates and illiberals. And this is a point that Kant should concede.

IX

In coming to appreciate the philosophical significance of the Doctrine of the Mean, it is useful to consider another view of the relation between virtues and vices. The Doctrine of the Mean associates each virtue with a pair of vices, one of excess and one of defect. An alternative view would be *Contrariety*, the idea that each virtue is associated with but a single vice, its opposite or contrary. On such a view, courage is the contrary of cowardice, temperance the contrary of profligacy, justice the contrary of injustice, and so on. Plato seems to have believed *Contrariety*. In the *Euthyphro*, for

example, it is a fixed point of the dialectic between Socrates and Euthyphro that the pious and the impious are strict contraries (5d2–3; cf. also 7a8–9). The *Protagoras* takes the same view of other virtues (332a–333c),²⁹ and even in the later books of the *Republic*, where Plato acknowledges that vice can take a variety of forms (IV, 445c4–8), the vices are arrayed as progressively further removed from virtue (in Books VIII and IX), and the opposition between virtue and vice remains fundamental.

My suggestion is that Aristotle advances the Doctrine of the Mean because he believes there is a structure to vice that Contrariety cannot describe and organize. With Contrariety, one could structure a plurality of vices only in the way the *Republic* VIII and IX does, as removed from virtue in greater or lesser degree. There seems to be much that this picture cannot accommodate. Take courage, for example. There are circumstances in which rash people will fight while both courageous people and cowards will refuse to fight, and other circumstances in which cowards will run but both rash people and courageous people will stand and fight. It is not easy to see how these similarities and differences could be arrayed on a view that must see one of the vices as further removed from courage than the other in a single direction.

It is in the light of difficulties like this one, I believe, that Aristotle advances the Doctrine of the Mean. He wants to replace the Platonic conception of virtues and vices as contraries with his own conception, which sees each virtue as contrary not to just one vice but to two, one of excess and one of defect. The Doctrine of the Mean, he would maintain, provides a better way to study and to systematize the data provided by the virtues and vices than Contrariety provides. Again the advance Aristotle sees is clear from the case of courage. Cowards run all or most of the time; rash people fight all or most of the time; courageous people fight some of the time and run some of the time. This structure of facts – a mystery on the Platonic picture – is easy to understand if courage is between cowardice and rashness.

X

In *Nicomachean Ethics* II.8, Aristotle explicitly takes up the question of the contrariety of virtues and vices. Among the points he makes in this chapter is that sometimes one of the two vices the Doctrine of the

Mean associates with a given virtue is “more contrary”³⁰ to the virtue than the other is. Cowardice, for example, is more contrary to courage than rashness is, and profligacy is more contrary to temperance than insensibility is (1108b35–1109a5). There are, according to Aristotle, two different kinds of explanation that can be given for these differences (1109a5). The first explanation derives, as he puts it, “from the thing itself,” ἐξ αὐτοῦ τοῦ πράγματος (1109a5–6 and 11–12). Suppose A and B are the vices associated with a given virtue, V. Then A is more contrary to V than B is, according to Aristotle, if B is “closer and more similar” (ἐγγύτερον καὶ ὁμοιότερον) to V than A is (1109a6–8). Such is the case, Aristotle tells us, with respect to courage, rashness, and cowardice:

Since rashness, for example, seems to be closer and more similar to courage, and cowardice less similar, we regard cowardice as more contrary to courage than rashness. For what is further from the intermediate seems to be more contrary. (1109a8–11)

Aristotle does not explain in what respects rashness is “closer and more similar” to courage. His point, though, is probably that in the circumstances that call for courage, both rash people and courageous people will fight (if for different reasons), while cowards will run.³¹ Aristotle’s second explanation for how one vice associated with a given virtue is “more contrary” to the virtue than the other vice is derives, he says, “from ourselves” ἐξ ἡμῶν αὐτῶν (1109a12–13). Again suppose that A and B are the vices associated with virtue V. Then A is more contrary to V than B is if human beings are naturally drawn in directions associated with A (1109a13–14). So it is with temperance. Our natural interest in pleasure inclines us towards profligacy rather than insensibility, and so profligacy is more contrary to temperance (1105a14–19).

This account of the opposition of virtue and vice gives Aristotle some effective dialectical weaponry in his debate with the proponent of Contrariety. In the first place, he can disarm two linguistic points that might seem to weigh in favor of Contrariety. Aristotle himself concedes that there are cases in which one of the vices he associates with a given virtue goes unnamed – the vice of deficiency in the field of temperance is an example (II.7, 1107b5–7 and III.14, 1119a5–6 and 10–11) – and hence that there are cases in which ordinary language recognizes only the virtue and a single vice. And there are other cases in which the name of one of the vices that Aristotle recognizes in a given

field is the linguistic contrary of the name of the virtue – “liberality” and “illiberality” constitute an example, in Greek as in English – and this suggests that the virtue and that vice are contraries as well. These facts might be supposed to provide (mild) support for Contrariety, but Aristotle’s account of the opposition of virtue and vice permits him to explain them away. In the case of temperance, he can say that because we naturally incline towards pleasure, the vice of deficiency is rare, and this is why it has no name. In the case of liberality, he can say that because we naturally incline towards illiberality rather than prodigality (see IV.1, 1121b12), and because the behavior of liberals and prodigals is similar (see 1121a22–23), illiberality is “more contrary” to liberality than prodigality is. It is therefore not surprising that liberality and illiberality are named with linguistic contraries.

Aristotle can answer not only these linguistic challenges but also an important historical one: If the Doctrine of the Mean is true, why did previous thinkers, Plato among them, accept Contrariety? Aristotle’s account of the opposition of virtue and vice provides him with a dialectically telling response. Even though the virtues are in fact mean states between pairs of vices, Aristotle can argue that there are facts about human beings – their natural propensities – and about the virtues and vices themselves – certain similarities in the behaviors expressive of them – that give rise to the appearance that virtues and vices are contraries, as Contrariety says they really are. Contrariety is right about how things look, though not about how they are. Aristotle can therefore claim to have extracted the truth in Contrariety and to have placed it properly within the framework of his own position, thus both crediting and co-opting his opposition.

XI

I began by raising the question of why Aristotle insists on the truth of the Doctrine of the Mean even though he himself seems well aware of problems with it. Understanding the Doctrine of the Mean as an alternative to Contrariety helps to answer this question. First, Aristotle no doubt believed that the considerations he advances in *N.E.* II.6 in favor of the Doctrine of the Mean are more compelling than any that could be offered in support of Contrariety.³² Second, Aristotle can concede that the Doctrine of the Mean has its difficul-

ties with various specific virtues of character, yet still insist that it does a better job of organizing the material the virtues and vices provide, and of structuring its investigation, than Contrariety does. Aristotle tells us that we should expect no more precision from a discipline than its material allows (I.3, 1094b11–14), and that in ethics we must be satisfied with claims that are true only “for the most part” (*N.E.* I.3, 1094b19–20). For all its difficulties, Aristotle would claim, the Doctrine of the Mean is closer to the truth about the relation of virtues to vices than Contrariety is, and should accordingly be preferred over it. He would draw our attention, in particular, to the rich taxonomy of vices correlated with certain virtues, the discovery and systematization of which the Doctrine of the Mean helps to make possible.³³

Notes

¹ Note ἄρα at 1106b36

² I believe, however, that connections between virtue and reason are implicit in the discussions of the individual virtues of character in *N.E.* III–V. Reasons of space prevent me from developing this idea in this paper.

³ Aristotle employs the language of definition throughout these chapters. Thus II.5 begins with the observation that the question to be considered is, “What is virtue?”, τί ἐστὶν ἡ ἀρετή (1105b19); it ends with the remark that we have learned “what virtue is in genus,” ὅτι . . . ἐστὶ τῷ γένει ἡ ἀρετή (1106a12–13). Furthermore, Aristotle notes in II.6 that virtue is a mean state “in respect of its substance and essence,” κατὰ . . . τὴν οὐσίαν καὶ τὸν λόγον τὸν τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι (1107a6–7).

⁴ Thus a virtue is a ἕξις rather than a πάθος or a δύναμις. Commentators from Stewart (1892, pp. 187–189) through Hardie (1980, pp. 95–99) seek to understand Aristotle’s remark that “there are three things in the soul, passions, capacities, and dispositions” (II.5, 1105b20), by reference to Aristotle’s account of quality in *Categories* 8. Aquinas (1964, V: 290) and Irwin (1985, p. 313) take the simpler and more plausible view that passions, capacities, and dispositions are the different conditions of soul concerned with action. Another possibility is this: II.3 argues that the virtues are concerned with pleasure and pain. II.5 characterizes passions in terms of pleasure and pain (1105b21–23) and then characterizes capacities and dispositions in terms of passions (1105b23–28). Thus all three of the psychic items listed in II.5, at least as characterized there, are concerned with pleasures and pains, and it is reasonable for Aristotle to suppose that the virtues, which also have to do with pleasure and pain, are either passions, capacities, or dispositions.

⁵ It is a source of confusion in dealing with the literature on the Doctrine of the Mean that Aristotle uses two words, the adjective μέσον and the noun μεσότης, either of which can be translated as “mean.” Thus Rackham (1934) and Ostwald (1962) translate μεσότης as “mean state” and μέσον as “mean,” while Ross (1980)

and Irwin (1985) translate μεσότης as “mean” and μέσον as “intermediate.” To avoid confusion on this point, I always translate μεσότης as “mean state” and μέσον as “intermediate.”

⁶ It is not only the cardinal virtues that fail to fit Aristotle’s schema neatly. Indeed, of the eleven virtues discussed in *N.E.* III–V, only the social virtues of truthfulness, wittiness, and friendliness can be said to be straightforward illustrations of Location.

⁷ Thus Ross, 1949, p. 207. I deal with the problem in Young, 1988, p. 540.

⁸ Courage is unusual among Aristotle’s virtues in being concerned with two emotions, fear and confidence or cheer (θάραχος). In the *E.E.*, Aristotle acknowledges only two vices, combining excess in cheer and deficiency in fear under rashness and deficiency in cheer and excess in fear under cowardice. In the *N.E.*, he regards excess in cheer and deficiency in fear as distinct vices; arguably he should do the same with deficiency in cheer and excess in fear. I deal with these complications in Young, 1977, pp. 199–201, and Young, 1980, pp. 140–142.

⁹ Objections similar to those that follow are found in Urmson, 1973, pp. 160–162.

¹⁰ See *N.E.* VII.6, 1149a25–34.

¹¹ I question the truth of this assumption in Young, 1988, pp. 538–539.

¹² I develop this point more fully in Young, 1988, pp. 534–535.

¹³ Even if alcohol has healthful effects, temperance may not recommend moderation. If alcohol’s healthful effects were in part cathartic, for example, temperance might recommend occasional binges.

¹⁴ Urmson, 1973, p. 161. Urmson’s idea is endorsed in Hardie, 1980, pp. 375–377.

¹⁵ *Timaeus* 32a8, 32b3, 36a3, and 43d3; *Laws* 764a4. All the uses in the *Timaeus* are mathematical. At *Timaeus* 31b4–32c4, Timaeus is engaged in explaining the presence of the elements fire, air, water, and earth in the body of the universe. Earlier, he had argued that the universe, being visible, must contain fire and, being tangible, must contain earth (31b4–8). These elements, he says, must be bound together proportionally (31b8–32a7), and the three-dimensional geometry of the situation requires two further elements, air and water, for this task: “If the universe had been a surface, a single μεσότης would have sufficed to bind together itself and the other terms, but since the world must be solid, and since solid bodies are always compacted not by one but by two μεσότητες, the god placed water and air in the middle, between fire and earth” (32a7–b4). The third passage, 36a3, which is recalled by 43d3, is likewise mathematical, appealing to the idea of a harmonic mean in the construction of the world soul. The occurrence at *Laws* 764a4, if genuine, refers only to the middle of a town.

Considering how infrequently and narrowly Plato uses the term μεσότης, it is surprising that one scholar has been able to write a chapter of more than seventy-five pages on “Physiological Theory and ‘The Mean’ in Plato”; see Tracy, 1969, pp. 77–156. (Tracy translates μεσότης as “mean.”) It is even more surprising that in a review another scholar criticizes Tracy for not having “fully presented the extent to which Plato used μεσότης in his Dialogues”; see Andriopoulos, 1978, p. 80. (Possibly both Tracy and Andriopoulos assume that Plato would regard as a μεσότης whatever Aristotle actually calls a μεσότης. It will be clear from section VIII below that in the case of the virtues of character at least, this is an error.)

¹⁶ Although Aristotle does not say so in *Gen. et Corr.*, the modes of concoction described in *Meteorology* IV.2–3 are apparently the ways in which, in his view, the elements can come together in mixtures.

¹⁷ Think of the variety of baked goods that can be created from water, flour, eggs, and shortening.

¹⁸ Aristotle nowhere calls the polity a μεσότης, but he regularly describes it with forms of μίξις (see 1294a36, b1, b14, b17, and b35) and μέσον (see a41, b2, b5, and b18).

¹⁹ See IV.9, 1294a36–b1. Aristotle does not explain why the practices mentioned in IV.9 are oligarchic, democratic, and politic respectively, but it follows directly from the characterizations of oligarchy, democracy, and polity in III.7 that they are.

²⁰ Aristotle says that there are three ways to unite oligarchy and democracy. The first, as we have just seen, is to combine an oligarchic practice with a democratic one. The second is to adopt a practice that requires something intermediate between what oligarchic and democratic practices require: e.g., a moderate property qualification for public office would be intermediate between a high oligarchic qualification and a low democratic one (1294b2–6). The third is to borrow elements from each form of government. A high property qualification and the election of magistrates are oligarchic; a low property qualification and the appointment of magistrates by lot is democratic. A polity might elect its magistrates but have a low property qualification (b6–13).

It is not clear that the first mode of unification differs from the third. Newman (1887–1902, IV: 201–202) says they differ in that the first mode joins a complete practice of oligarchy to a complete practice of democracy, whereas the third mode joins only parts of practices. But, as is plain in Aristotle’s discussion of the first mode, the oligarchic practice is to fine the rich *and not to pay the poor* (1294a37–39), and the democratic practice is to pay the poor *and not to fine the rich* (39–41). Since the italicized phrases clearly describe parts of practices that are not retained in a polity, it would appear that the first mode, like the third, joins only parts of practices.

²¹ See Clark, 1975, pp. 84–97. Other versions of the approach are Burnet, 1900, pp. 69–73, and Tracy, 1969, pp. 231–237. Many of the criticisms of the approach that appear in the first edition of Hardie, 1980, pp. 143–151, are effectively answered in Clark, 1975, p. 88. In section VI below, however, I argue that Hardie’s most serious criticism of the approach is sound.

²² The noun μεσότης (= “mean state”) is formed from the adjective μέσον (= “intermediate”) through a process similar to that by which, e.g., “kindness” is formed from “kind” or “justice” from “just” in English.

²³ In this respect, Aristotle’s argument departs from Plato’s πλεονεξία argument in *Republic* I, which in its insistence that virtuous people are predictable while vicious people are not denies any structure to vice.

²⁴ Hardie (1980, pp. 143–151) makes this point as well.

²⁵ On this point, then, Urmson, 1973, has the movement of Aristotle’s thought exactly backwards.

²⁶ Thus the metric relative to which a virtue counts as between its associated vices is induced from the metric relative to which the pattern of behavior distinctive of the virtue is between the patterns distinctive of the vices.

²⁷ In ‘Aristotle on Liberality,’ *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy*, forthcoming.

²⁸ Aristotle is thus not far from Kant's own view of the difference between prodigality and illiberality, according to which prodigality is found "not in the excessive enjoyment of one's property, but in the bad maxim that makes the use of it, without regard to its maintenance, the sole end" and illiberality in the bad maxim whose end is "not . . . the enjoyment of one's property but . . . the mere possession of it, enjoyment being renounced" (404, n. 20).

²⁹ *Protagoras* 332a–333c also infers from contrariety in actions to contrariety in the capacities that give rise to them, anticipating Aristotle's explicit inference in *N.E.* II.6 from mediality in actions to mediality in dispositions, as well as his implicit inferences (see section VII) from excess and deficiency in action to excess and deficiency in disposition.

³⁰ Thus μάλλον ἐναντία at II.8, 1108b36, 1109a14, and 1109a16–17; ἐναντιώτερα at 1109a11 and 1109a18.

³¹ True, in other circumstances rash people will fight when cowards and courageous people will not, and in this respect cowards and courageous people are similar. I take it, though, that Aristotle's point must be that the star cases of courage involve fighting when one should rather than not fighting when one should not.

³² Plato tends to view virtues and vices as opposites for at least two reasons. First, he is inclined at least some of the time to suppose, with Socrates, that virtues are forms of knowledge. On such a view, one is virtuous to the extent that one has mastered the form of knowledge in which virtue consists, and vicious to the extent that one falls short of such mastery. Thus vice involves only deficiency, not excess, and virtue and vice are accordingly contraries. Second, even in the middle period, when Plato abandons Socrates' idea that the virtues are forms of knowledge, virtue remains so related to knowledge that virtue counts as an achievement, and vice as a falling short.

³³ I read earlier versions of this paper at Northern Arizona University, Washington State University, Pomona College, the University of California, Riverside, the Conference on Aristotle's Ethics at the University of California, San Diego, in December 1988, and to the Boston Area Colloquium on Ancient Philosophy at Clark University in April 1994; I am grateful to those audiences for comments and discussion that have substantially improved the paper. I also profited from written comments from D. Actenberg, D. Blankenship (my commentator at Clark), and P. Keller. In addition, I owe special thanks to J. Bogen, whose comments on a very early version of the paper sent it back into the drawer for many years, and to N. Young.

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The Claremont Graduate School
Claremont, CA 91711-6199
U.S.A.