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The Practical Import of Aristotle's Doctrine of the Mean

J.E. Tiles

I

If one is searching Aristotle's *Ethics* for practical guidance and expecting only straightforward 'do's' and 'don'ts', the doctrine of the mean will appear to endorse a general policy of moderation in both feeling and action: whatever you do, however you feel, neither overdo it nor underdo it. It is easy to lampoon this policy. Some circumstances call for no response; some call for an extreme response. If someone slights me unintentionally, a moderate amount of anger is too much; if someone commits an outrage against a close member of my family, a moderate amount of anger is insufficient.¹ As Aristotle himself stresses the way different circumstances call for different responses, it is very likely that it is not appropriate to read the doctrine of the mean as an endorsement of moderation. An alternative is suggested by the distinction drawn in recent times between making substantive ethical judgments and advancing a meta-ethical theory.² The latter tells us something about the general

1 See J.O. Urmson, 'Aristotle's Doctrine of the Mean', *Philosophical Quarterly* 10 (1973) 223-30. References will be to the reprinting in Amélie Oksenberg Rorty, ed., *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), and will hereafter appear in the text. In the present connection see pp. 160-1.

2 See Jonathan Barnes, Introduction to *The Ethics of Aristotle*, translated by J.A.K. Thomson, revised by Hugh Tredennick (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1978), 20. References will hereafter appear in the text.

framework within which our moral deliberations take place and our substantive ethical judgments are formed. Meta-ethical theories may not issue in any substantive ethical judgments, although it will be argued here that a correct understanding of the role of the doctrine of the mean illustrates how matters of ethical substance are in general influenced by meta-ethical considerations.

If the doctrine of the mean is to be understood as telling us something about the form our judgments and deliberations take, it will come as no surprise that the doctrine has a role to play in Aristotle's definition of moral excellence (*ethikē aretē*). Definitions, after all, are written from a meta-linguistic standpoint and express relationships between concepts which we use in making judgments. Aristotle's definition (1106b35-1107a1) says, as literally as one can translate it, that moral excellence is a disposition of deliberative choice (*hexis prohairetikē*) lying in a mean relative to us (*en mesotēti ousa tēi pros hēmas*). It does not say it is a disposition to choose the mean; it implies rather that it is a disposition which is itself a mean between dispositions to act or react too much and dispositions to act or react too little. A person with such an ideal disposition would ignore an unintentional slight since to react at all would be characteristic of someone prone to react too much. But such a person would respond vigorously to an outrage, since not to do so would be characteristic of a person who responded too little. To expect a person with an ideal disposition to respond always to a moderate degree is, J.O. Urmson (161-2) suggests, to confuse 'a disposition toward the mean' with 'a mean disposition'.

However, relocating the doctrine of the mean on a meta-ethical level in this way exposes it to the criticism that it is vacuous. The excellent person neither overreacts nor responds too little; that is to say, the person with the mean disposition habitually does exactly the right thing. If you want to be a virtuous person, then Aristotle's guidance boils down to the not very helpful, 'act as you should act' (Barnes, 25). Thus more than one scholar has concluded that the doctrine of the mean is empty; it is 'a tautology,'³ 'comparatively

³ Hans Kelsen, 'Aristotle's Doctrine of Justice', in *What is Justice?* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957). References will be to the reprinting in James J. Walsh and Henry L. Shapiro, eds., *Aristotle's Ethics: Issues and Interpretations* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1967). References will hereafter appear in the text. In the present case the relevant page is 109.

trivial and obvious,'⁴ 'platitudinous' and a 'practical futility' (Barnes, 26).

It is not surprising that when the doctrine of the mean is viewed as a meta-ethical thesis, it should appear to possess no substantive content. The distinction between ethics and meta-ethics arose within the framework of logical positivism and was shaped by the assumption that there is a sharp distinction between analytic and synthetic truths. Analytic truths are true in virtue of the conceptual relations which obtain between the terms that occur within them, e.g., 'All vixens are female' is an analytic truth because the concept of vixen includes that of being a female (fox). 'All vixens weigh less than 800lbs' is (if true) a synthetic truth because no fox as a matter of fact ever weighs that much. Even if ethical statements are not regarded as expressing matters of fact, there are conceptual relations between ethical concepts, which give rise to analytically true statements, and reports of these conceptual relations belong to meta-ethical discourse. Thus when Jonathan Barnes explains the difference between ethics and meta-ethics (23), he stresses the connection between analytic ethical judgments such as 'every murder is a wrongful act', and the meta-ethical judgment, 'the concept of *murder* includes that of *wrongfulness*'. Barnes goes on to link Aristotle's failure to distinguish ethical and meta-ethical judgments to Aristotle's unclarity over the difference between analytic and non-analytic ethical judgements.

Although it is now widely accepted that the doctrine of a sharp and context-independent distinction between analytic and synthetic truths cannot be sustained, it is nevertheless possible, and often useful, to make this distinction within a given context. What can no longer be assumed is that analytic statements are utterly devoid of content. The content of an analytic statement is revealed when the context changes and the words used to express it cannot be used in the new (possibly historically earlier) context to make a statement which is unquestionably true.⁵ Likewise there remains a potentially useful distinction between ethical and meta-ethical statements, but it can no longer be assumed that meta-ethical statements are wholly without normative implications. It will be argued below that

4 See W.F.R. Hardie, *Aristotle's Ethical Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), 133. References will hereafter appear in the text.

5 For a non-trivial example see the discussion of Ohm's law by Thomas Kuhn, *The Essential Tension* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 303-4.

while it is correct and useful to view Aristotle's doctrine of the mean as a meta-ethical claim, it is wrong to think that the doctrine is empty.

II

But even in advance of this argument, there is something surprising in the accusations that Aristotle's doctrine is empty; because the very same scholars, who declare the doctrine to be empty, also insist for various reasons that there is something wrong with Aristotle's doctrine. If a doctrine has enough content to be wrong, can it still be empty? Hardie, for example, insists, 'A man is not called brave because he kills neither too many nor too few of the enemy. A man does not avoid the extremes of buffoonery (*bōmolochia*) and boorishness (*agroikia*) by making neither too many jokes nor too few (IV 8)' (132). Hardie may have advanced this criticism because he was not sensitive to Urmson's distinction between 'a disposition toward the mean' and 'a mean disposition'. If one is looking for the former, a disposition toward the mean, an excellent person will be expected to do some amount, which is between too little and too much. But what Urmson appears to understand by 'a mean disposition' could, depending on circumstances, either never issue in action or feeling or issue in a great deal of strenuous action or feeling over an extended period of time. This is because Urmson (see p. 161) is trying with the phrase 'a mean disposition' to reflect Aristotle's claim (1106b21-2) that, to be characteristic of excellence, feeling and action must be with reference to the right objects, the right people, the right motive and in the right way.

It is important to appreciate in this connection that for Aristotle, acts are identified via the settled dispositions which they manifest. It is as a consequence possible for a man who habitually does too little, to do too much on just one occasion. Imagine, for example, a stingy man, who has never given to charity, but who on one occasion is struck with a sense of shame over his disposition at the same time as he is presented with an opportunity to donate to a very dubious undertaking. He donates a sum of money and, reverting to his established character pattern, perhaps never again parts with any of his wealth. His one act of charity is the act of a prodigal. He gives to a cause which on reflection a properly generous man of similar means would not consider worth a donation. In his one act of 'charity' this stingy man has acted excessively. To do the right (properly generous) thing, it is not sufficient for a stingy man *simply* to do more of what ordinarily he does too little. Similar examples can be given of cowards, who on one occasion act in a foolhardy manner, or of boring people who attempt to be witty on just one occasion and behave

like buffoons. 'A mean disposition' provides a standard by which to judge the appropriateness of actions. Our deliberations should refer to our conception of a person with such a disposition: would a properly generous person in these circumstances contribute to this cause? Would a courageous person actively resist in these circumstances, or exercise discretion? Would a real wit tell that joke in this company?

Hardie's criticism of the doctrine of the mean may, on the other hand, arise from a concern over what the doctrine has to offer to our conceptions of particular excellences. Barnes has a concern of this nature which he makes more explicit.

An inspection of the virtues in Aristotle's list reveals that the notion of a continuum is at best only partially applicable; virtuous choice does not have its attention limited to a single dimension; and many of the dimensions it is required to consider do not lie as continua. A generous man will give the right share of his income to the right recipients: if his income is a measurable quantity, the potential recipients are not — picking the appropriate charities is not a matter of avoiding too many and too few. (25)

The criticism here is that a single continuum cannot do justice to the complexity of the factors which must enter into our deliberations, when we are choosing whether and in what way to respond to situations. Barnes (*ibid.*) sees 'no trace of the literal sense of the term "mean"' in those passages (1106b21, 1109a25, b15) where Aristotle stresses the different factors that must enter the response of a virtuous person.

It is possible to reply on Aristotle's behalf that far from being a potentially misleading metaphor for what takes place when we confront the question of how to act in given circumstances, the doctrine of the mean offers a useful way of reducing what might otherwise be a bewildering complexity to a structure within which we can find our way. To appreciate the force of this response, it is necessary to bear in mind the difficulties we may have in applying our ethical concepts and principles to individual cases. Take for example the analytic truth that murder is wrong. Not all cases of intentionally bringing about the death of a human being count (for most people) as murders. Judicial executions do not; killing an enemy soldier in battle does not. But killing members of a non-combatant population that is regarded as hostile is in some circumstances regarded as murder (e.g., killing villagers in Mei Lai) and in some circumstances not (dropping bombs on Dresden). And cases of ending prematurely the life of a person, who is dying slowly and suffering intensely, are not easy to classify. Determining whether many cases of

intentionally terminating the life of a human being are murders depends on a bewildering complexity of circumstances.

In their book re-examining casuistry Albert R. Jonsen and Stephen Toulmin present it as a method for dealing with difficult cases.⁶ Far from deserving the disrepute which it acquired in seventeenth-century polemics, they argue, casuistry is an intellectually respectable response to difficult moral issues. The casuist reasons on the basis of paradigms framed in terms of rules, but rules which are recognized as holding with certainty only in typical conditions of agent and circumstances. Albert Jonsen has subsequently outlined casuistry as a method for dealing with difficult decisions in clinical ethics.⁷ One of three important elements of this method is what Jonsen calls 'taxonomy'. This is the 'lining up of cases in a certain order' with the most obviously and unarguably wrong (or right) on one side and the progressively more difficult cases assigned to positions which correspond to their difficulty.

The point of mentioning casuistry is not to identify Aristotle as a precursor of — let alone a contributor to — the tradition of casuistry (whose origins Jonsen and Toulmin trace back only as far as the Stoics) but to observe common concerns and a sharp contrast. First the common concerns: Both Aristotle and the casuists recognize that whatever rules we may articulate, they cannot be taken to provide complete guidance. They will hold at best 'for the most part' and we will be left to deal with the complexities of particular cases as well as we can. For Jonsen and Toulmin the point of reviving the tradition of casuistry is to break what they call 'the tyranny of principles', the belief that any moral guidance which our present practices cannot supply must come from refining the rules to which we may appeal. For what are *au fond* similar reasons Aristotle claims that ethics does not admit the same degree of precision (*akribēia*) as other sciences. Jonathan Barnes (20-1) identifies lack of generality as the source of this claim, although the problem is more precisely a lack of necessity. For Aristotle the distinction between *epistēmē* and *phronēsis* is sharp because the former deals with things which cannot be otherwise, while the latter must involve deliberation

6 See *The Abuse of Casuistry, A History of Moral Reasoning* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

7 See 'Casuistry as Methodology in Clinical Ethics', *Theoretical Medicine* 12 (1991) 295-307.

(about particular matters) and no one deliberates about what cannot be otherwise (1140a28-b3). Particulars are too complex and variable to have all questions about them settled by universal principles.

A crucial difference between Aristotle and the casuists is that instead of recommending, as casuists would, taxonomies of cases to provide a framework within which to reach decisions about difficult cases, Aristotle employs taxonomies of states of character (*hexeis*) so that cases are assessed in terms of whether a given response (action or feeling) falls within what would be expected of certain kinds of states of character. What both approaches signal is that there are questions about the general character of moral judgments (the domain of meta-ethics) which are not answered by an analysis of ethical concepts. Besides the content of concepts there are general questions to be asked about the way concepts are to be applied (questions which Kant would have recognized as about what he called 'the schematization of concepts').

It is important not to overlook what is involved in the application of our moral concepts. When deliberating about how to respond to a situation we may well have to find our way through what is initially a bewildering complexity of considerations. Recall all the dimensions of assessment which Aristotle identified (1106b18-24): we need to feel at the right time, with reference to the right objects, toward the right people with the right motive and in the right way and this applies to actions as well as feelings. How else are we to proceed if we do not try to reduce the complexity? Barnes, as we have seen, regards what is in effect the mapping of a multi-dimensional decision space (time, object, people, motive, manner) onto a single dimensional space (traits of character) as irrelevant to the task which Aristotle himself had described. Aristotle clearly did not regard it as irrelevant since he speaks of 'too much and too little, and in both cases not well' in the same breath as he indicates the complexity of the problem a person may face. Had he been pressed to explain the relevance of the reduction to a single dimension, it is quite possible he would have responded, 'how else are our deliberations to reach a conclusion, if we do not systematically reduce this complexity?'

III

This response may clarify the function of the doctrine of the mean, but it so far does nothing to alter the assessment that the doctrine is fundamentally empty. Does the advice — the advice to try to determine which people characteristically overdo it, which underdo it and which habitually get it just about right — tell us anything other than to follow the

people who get it right? What specific guidance do we derive from being told to observe that those who get it just about right can be located somewhere on a line representing varying degrees of two quite different ways of getting it wrong?

An answer is suggested by further consideration of why the doctrine is thought to be wrong. For example, Hans Kelsen also holds not only that the doctrine of the mean is empty (a ‘tautology’) but that it is in important ways wrong. He identifies Aristotle’s error in this way.

The statement that a virtue is the mean between a vice of deficiency and a vice of excess, as between something that is too little and something that is too much, implies the idea that the relationship between virtue and vice is a relationship of degrees. But, since virtue consists in conformity, and vice in nonconformity of a behavior to a moral norm, the relationship between virtue and vice cannot be that of different degrees. For with respect to this conformity or nonconformity no degrees are possible. A behavior can neither “too much” nor “too little” conform, it can only conform or not conform to a (moral or legal) norm; it can only contradict or not contradict a norm. (104)

Kelsen’s claim that the relationship of virtue and vice does not admit of degrees, is not altogether plausible. Even if virtue is entirely a matter of being law-abiding (conforming to moral or statute law), it appears perfectly possible to assess whether people are more or less so — more or less, that is, scrupulous in their observance of either the letter of the law or the spirit of the law or both. Aristotle’s doctrine of the mean cannot be faulted because it involves comparisons of more and less virtuous or more and less vicious.

Nevertheless, Kelsen’s insistence that virtue be conceived as conformity and vice as nonconformity to a norm has another consequence which is brought out in a related criticism by Sir David Ross. Ross referred to Aristotle’s belief that for every virtue there are two distinct vices as the ‘trinitarian scheme,’⁸ and he held this scheme to be wrong on the basis of assumptions very similar to Kelsen’s: there is only one way to go wrong, which is to fail to conform to the rule which specifies what ought to be done. (The criticisms of Kelsen and Ross appear to manifest the phenomenon which Jonsen and Toulmin condemned as ‘the tyranny of principles’.)

8 See *Aristotle*, fifth edn. (London: Methuen, 1949), 206.

To show that the doctrine of the mean does not even apply in Aristotle's paradigm case, Ross (*ibid.*) tried to show that courage does not lie midway between cowardice and rashness but that there were two distinct feelings, fear and love of danger, each requiring a rule which specifies the extent to which they should be felt. The case Ross tried to build could have been strengthened by noting several vices which do not appear to have corresponding opposite vices. Adultery, theft and murder are vices which Aristotle mentions (1107a12) in the chapter on moral excellence and the mean. But if adultery is too little marital fidelity, what is the vice of too much? If theft is too little regard for other people's property, what sense can we make of too much? If murder is too little regard for the sanctity of human life, can one have too much regard for human life? Surely here are conclusive counter-examples showing the inadequacies of Aristotle's trinitarian scheme and strength of the conception of norms, which Kelsen and Ross share.

With a little imagination it is possible to mount a defense of Aristotle's doctrine and the trinitarian scheme. The concept of marital fidelity is defined by one's relations to members of the opposite sex other than one's spouse. But is the vice confined to sexual intercourse (coitus)? Does it not shade off through forms of intimate fondling, less intimate expressions of affection, social dancing, into otherwise quite innocent forms of social intercourse? (Almost any behavior which might inspire jealousy, could raise a question of marital fidelity.) Could not a person become so obsessive about his or her marital fidelity as wholly to avoid any social interaction with other members of the opposite sex? This is admittedly a rare form of psycho-pathology, but not inconceivable, and Aristotle is quite explicit that pairs of vices need not be equally common or equally reprehensible (1107b7-9). Likewise we can imagine a person so observant of other people's property rights as not to appropriate something needed to save the life of a person because the owner could not be reached to grant permission. Those who go to extremes to avoid endangering the lives of others are hard to fault, but if we imagine a person, who refuses to drive a car for fear of being responsible for a fatal accident, may we not glimpse the limits of healthy respect for human life?

The nature of this defense should be explicitly acknowledged. It amounts to taking any purported counter-example, adjusting the conception of the continuum of feeling or action on which the apparently unpaired vice is located until two clear (if not equally common or equally reprehensible) blameworthy dispositions emerge, between which lies a praiseworthy disposition. 'Blameworthy' here must be taken in the sense of 'subject to criticism'. People who are so obsessive about their marriage

vows as to forego normal social interaction with members of the opposite sex other than their spouses are not vicious; they are silly, they are impoverishing their lives. But that is sufficient for Aristotle to classify their disposition as a *kakia* (cp. Urmson, 160).

Based on this strategy there are two responses to what Ross claims about the distinct feelings, which lie behind the vices of cowardice and rashness, and the distinct virtues of courage and discretion, which correspond to them. One response is simply to insist that Aristotle was right to assume fear to be continuous with the love of danger; the two cannot coexist, one gives way to the other. The other response is to admit that Aristotle was hasty and overlooked an important difference, but then to find respects in which a person can feel too little fear (as distinct from love of danger) and respects in which one can have too little love of danger (as distinct from feelings of fear). Either of these responses will appear from Ross's standpoint as stonewalling. But from an Aristotelian standpoint it begs the question to insist (as Ross does when he claims to find separate feelings and separate virtues for the vices of meanness and prodigality) that one can go wrong in only one way and consequently another dimension of feeling and another virtue must be identified for every apparently clear case of the trinitarian scheme.

On a level, which is clearly meta-ethical because it concerns the forms in which our moral choices confront us, there are two very different sets of assumptions being imposed *a priori*. If there is no obvious rule which articulates a recognized difference between virtue and vice, Ross and Kelsen assume that one can be articulated and then insist for every praiseworthy disposition of conforming to a rule there is exactly one blameworthy disposition, which is that of failing to conform. If there is no corresponding opposite to conduct recognized as vicious, Aristotle will look for a range of feeling or action on which to locate an opposite vice.

The practical difference made by adopting one or the other meta-ethical standpoint is not insignificant. Aristotelians will look for and find forms of response to be avoided that are likely to be overlooked by those, who like Ross and Kelsen operate with a conformity-to-rule conception. Aristotelians are presensitized to the possibility of there being too much of a good thing. They will not assume that because sobriety is praiseworthy, total abstinence is also praiseworthy, perhaps more so. Someone who applies the 'trinitarian' schema will recognize forms of response as subject to criticism, while those who do not apply the schema, will not. The practical import of the doctrine of the mean lies in the way it shapes our anticipations about where and how we can go wrong.

IV

We have seen that the doctrine of the mean is the locus of a dispute of substance between Aristotle and certain of his latter-day critics. The dispute is not over specific kinds of conduct (whether, e.g., abortion is always wrong) or specific traits of character (whether, e.g., indifference to civic affairs is a vice). The dispute is rather one about the general form of moral judgments and the general schema in which our moral choices present themselves. We have on the one hand the 'trinitarian' schema (too-little or too-much or about right?) and on the other hand a schema of two alternatives (conformity or non-conformity?). Because the issues turn in this way on differing conceptions of form, it appears appropriate to use the term 'meta-ethical' to mark the level at which the dispute has arisen. This appearance can be reinforced by a survey of the background to the term.

The term 'meta-ethical' originated in a philosophic movement, logical empiricism, which assumed that all claims that were true *a priori*, were either logical laws or could be justified by the analysis of concepts, specifically by a form of analysis which assumed that a concept could be exhaustively represented as a set of conditions for the application of a term expressing that concept. These assumptions were called into question by the challenge to the belief in a sharp and context-free distinction between analytic and synthetic statements. It became widely (although not universally) accepted by the intellectual heirs of logical empiricism that systems of belief and practice were structured not merely by the truths of logic (thought of as statements true in all interpretations of the language of first order logic) but also by which statements were held to be relatively immune to refutation by experience. Such non-analytic statements had the status of being true relatively *a priori*. It was acknowledged that in different cultures and in different historical periods systems of belief and practice could arise that were distinguished in this way from one another. Communication between people who participated in distinct systems was recognized as problematic, although arguments to the effect that it would be completely impossible were hardly conclusive in the face of apparent experience establishing the possibility (as well as the pitfalls) of partial communication.⁹

9 The literature covered by this thumbnail sketch of the history of analytic philosophy from the Vienna Circle through Quine, Putnam and Davidson is both too large and too familiar for citations to be appropriate here.

If we think of the primary subject matter of ethics as the practice of assessing conduct, it would appear that under the new dispensation about the analytic-synthetic distinction 'meta-ethics' is an appropriate name for accounts given of forms of this practice. And if we now accept (as the new understanding of the analytic-synthetic distinction encourages us to do) the possibility of radically different forms of the practice of assessing conduct, it will come as no surprise that these differences will affect the substance of assessments made within those practices. It should then come as no surprise that what Aristotle says about the mean does not make complete sense to those who do not fully appreciate the nature of his form of practice — that it appears to them both empty and wrong. From the attempt to adjudicate constructed in III above, it is clear that based on their different *a priori* assumptions both sides have available strategies for neutralizing apparent counter-examples in advance of their being generated by the other side. It would thus be a mistake to try to raise questions about which side has the correct view of the doctrine of the mean without considering the respective merits of two distinct systems of practice. An adequate comparison of the two systems is well beyond the scope of an article but it is possible to conclude with a sketch of what is at stake by first elaborating briefly on points already mentioned.

It is plausible to suggest that the failure of commentators to appreciate the import of Aristotle's doctrine of the mean is a product of important changes which took place when, after the time of Aristotle, the assessment of conduct came increasingly to be influenced by legal concepts and practices.¹⁰ Under this influence Ross and Kelsen are drawn to think of assessing conduct in terms of whether it conforms or fails to conform to norms thought of as rules or laws; whereas Aristotle, as we have observed, identifies and assesses conduct via settled dispositions. It is not that the conformity-to-rule conception cannot assess character and recognize virtues and vices (e.g., a 'law-abiding' or a 'criminal' disposition), but it will do so relative to norms which it conceives as rules or laws. If there is something untoward about the way a person conforms to a law, it is not that the disposition is excessive, it must be that the law

¹⁰ See the discussion of the 'law conception of ethics' in Elizabeth Anscombe, 'Modern Moral Philosophy', originally published in *Philosophy* 33 (1958), reprinted in her *Ethics, Religion and Politics — Collected Philosophical Papers Vol. III* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981). In the latter edition see especially pp. 30f.

is not correctly understood. There may be ways to compare degrees of conformity, but the idea of too much conformity is absorbed by the idea of a badly formulated or badly understood rule or law.

On the other side Aristotle's character-trait conception can employ rules or laws, but only as guides for the formation of character (or for the control of those whose character is badly formed). One cannot specify a set of rules conformity to which constitutes virtuous character. Virtuous character is what is needed to interpret rules, fashion rules for those who need them as well as deal with difficult cases. The standard is not a rule but the person with a crucial intellectual virtue — as the definition of moral virtue makes clear ('in the way in which the man of practical wisdom would determine it,' 1107a1-2). Practical wisdom involves the ability to sort out patterns of response (character traits) into those which overdo, those which underdo and those which get it about right and then, applying this schema to the complexities of the choices which face a person, determine the response characteristic of those who get it just about right.

There are, we saw in sec. II above, two ways for the conformity-to-rule conception to deal with the complexity of particular cases. One is to assume that for any particular case there is a rule which covers the case. The other is the tradition of casuistry which attempts to impose a taxonomy on possible cases. The doctrine of the mean reflects a practice which has some features in common with casuistry but casuistry is ultimately a practice structured by the conception of conformity-to-rule. The doctrine of the mean relies on reducing the complexity of particular cases — not as casuistry does by their distance from clear cases of conformity or non-conformity — but by whether they would be the responses (acts or feelings) of the person who habitually overdoes it or of the person who habitually underdoes it.

Criticism of Aristotle's doctrine of the mean should be conducted in the context of his understanding of the practice of assessing conduct. Any attempt to assess the relative merits of this practice as he understood it needs to take on board the concerns within which he articulated his understanding. Aristotle's ethical theory begins with a question about the quality of human life. A conformity-to-rule conception need have no other end in view than the maintenance of the social fabric. It is enough that citizens do not depart from certain norms; the quality of individual life does not become a concern until enough lives are involved in such a way as to affect the social fabric. Aristotle's concern is of course not divorced from social life, for humans are animals who by nature live in association with one another. But the different concerns dictate different

terms of appraisal. A person who is uncontrollably given to seeking pleasure can become a social nuisance; a person who never indulges in pleasure may be a social failure but not a social nuisance. The former may be vicious; the latter only foolish. But the latter also lives an impoverished life and from the standpoint of seeking the best quality of life, which a human can achieve, sets an example to be avoided. The doctrine of the mean, in other words, not only has practical import (the shaping of anticipations about where and how we can go wrong), its import makes it highly suited to the framework of concerns — concerns with human flourishing — within which Aristotle wrote his ethical treatises.¹¹

Jonathan Barnes, unable to see the point of the doctrine of the mean, conjectures (26) that the doctrine would not have appeared in a third version of the *Ethics*. Aristotle may not have achieved the same degree of reflective clarity attempted here about the role that the doctrine of the mean performed in his thinking about ethics. Nevertheless it is interwoven with his overall project in a way that makes it very unlikely that he could have jettisoned it without a very radical reformulation of that project.¹²

11 A different formulation of what is at stake is suggested by Charles Taylor, who opens *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989) p. 3 with the contrast between 'moral philosophy which focuses on what it is right to do rather than on what it is good to be'. See also pp. 83f. on the 'vogue of theories of obligatory action'.

12 I am grateful to Janet Sisson and Roger Shiner, whose perceptive criticisms stimulated an extensive overhaul of the penultimate draft of this article.