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# *Aristotle, Virtue and the Mean:* *Introduction*

Janet D. Sisson

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In 1994, the editorial board of APEIRON issued a call for papers for a special issue of the journal on Aristotle, Virtue and the Mean. Current interest in virtue ethics as an approach to moral thinking is increasing, and it seemed appropriate to examine an ancient source in which virtue and the distinct virtues form a basis for ethical theory. The idea was to reconsider Aristotle's theory of excellence in character (*ēthikē aretē*), as distinct from his doctrine of practical wisdom, and in particular the central doctrine that virtue is a disposition to choose the mean. The board of APEIRON were very pleased with the response and the interest of the papers submitted, and this volume is the result of that call. The papers were written separately, and respond to a general climate of opinion, rather than to one another. This introduction owes far more to them than can be indicated by mere references; any mistakes in the interpretations of the individual papers are my responsibility alone, due I hope to no more than a need to tease out some initial threads from a fascinating web of discourse.

Books II to V of the *Nicomachean Ethics* are concerned with the particular moral excellences (*ēthikai aretai*). Aristotle first discusses the general definition of *ēthikē aretē*; in II 6, he argues that it is 'a state concerned with choice, lying in a mean relative to us, this being determined by reason (*horismenēi logōi*) and in the way in which the person of practical wisdom (*phronimos*) would determine it.'<sup>1</sup> Moral excellences are distinguished

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1 Quotations are from the revised Oxford translation, with occasional slight emendations of my own.

from intellectual virtues in that the former are the excellences of that part of the soul which does not possess reason, although it may be responsive to it.<sup>2</sup> Intellectual virtues are the excellences of the rational soul (or the soul considered purely *as* rational), while moral virtues are related to passion and action, neither of which belong to the purely rational soul.<sup>3</sup> Aristotle goes on to say that *ēthikē aretē* is also a tendency to find and choose means of relevant kinds and that it is therefore a mean 'in respect of its substance and the account which states its essence.'

Opinions have differed on the philosophical interest and usefulness of this account of moral virtue as an excellence that lies in a mean. All the contributors to this volume consider that criticisms of Aristotle's thesis can be answered, and that ethical thinking is the richer for the incorporation of insights drawn from Aristotle's discussion of the virtues.

Some of the questions that arise are: Is Aristotle's view one that gives a trivial, formal description, that needs to be supplemented by some fuller account of the actual principles on which someone might act? What is the *horos* that is to be determined by the *phronimos*? What is meant by the expression 'relative to us'? Does Aristotle's view of ethics depend too heavily upon the preconceptions of its time to be of interest today? Is it relativistic? And is it therefore objectionable? Or do we have something to learn from Aristotle about ethical responses and variant ways of regarding our lives and our relations with others? Can our understanding of ethics be illuminated by discussion of Aristotle's very specific thesis that virtue lies in a mean?

Two aspects of Christian conceptions of ethics contrast sharply with Aristotle's account. In the first place, ethics is viewed as a matter of principles; the Ten Commandments are perhaps the central example here. They are specific, storable, rules laid down forbidding certain actions under any circumstances. Sir David Ross viewed these principles as internalized *prima facie* duties, and these had the same formal structure as a set of moral rules in the sense that they were to be followed on every occasion, and judgement was required only when disobedience to one duty or another was unavoidable.<sup>4</sup> In Aristotelian ethics, there are

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2 *EN* I 13, cf. Plato *Republic* IV.

3 *De Anima* III 4, 429b22ff, 9, 432b26ff.

4 W.D. Ross, *The Right and the Good*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1930)

no codes of rules, and the only guide to judgement offered is the *logos* of the *phronimos*. Secondly,<sup>5</sup> the Christian virtues are each opposed to a single vice, so they form a pair of contraries, while on Aristotle's view the specifically moral virtues are opposed not to one but to two possible vices, which form the extremes between which the virtue in question is a mean.

It therefore seems cogent, from a perspective like that of Ross, to criticize Aristotle for ignoring the role of principles of morality. The lack of such principles, except perhaps in the case of justice, appears obvious when one reads Aristotle from the perspective of a Kantian view of ethics, where duties are grounded in Categorical Imperatives. Nothing plays the role of an imperative in Aristotle's system: Ross disguises this in that he frequently used 'rule' to render *logos*, in his older Oxford translation, so that Aristotle sounded more like a modern deontologist. This criticism presupposed that principles have a foundational role in morality. If we are to charge Aristotle with ignoring principles, then we need independent reasons for believing that principles should not be ignored.

The assumption that rules of conduct are central to morality is clearly questionable. To the particularist, morality is best studied by attention to whether particular kinds of behaviour are to be recommended in particular situations and to justifications given in those exact circumstances, not by a search for general rules of conduct; there are no easily followed, authoritative Ten Commandments that apply in all, or even most situations, except where these arise from consideration of a wide array of cases.<sup>6</sup>

J.E. Tiles in 'The Practical Utility of Aristotle's Doctrine of the Mean' argues that the demand for principles of conduct rests on a misapprehension: it is often thought that conformity to moral standards is like conformity to law, that the actions of a moral person should be based on a universal principle, one that could (in principle at least) be stated without reference to particular persons, places, times or circumstances. In Tiles's view, this is not the way that Aristotle approaches moral

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5 Dennis McKerlie reminded me of the importance of this contrast.

6 Among recent particularists, one may mention Jonathan Dancy, whose *Moral Reasons* (Blackwell 1993) gives wide-ranging support to the position, with discussion of Ross's views.

reasoning. His approach is to look at particular circumstances. In his development of the theory of virtue, he is not trying to discover rules, but to give a way of describing in a simplified way the complex process of coming to a decision, or making a judgement, amid the complexity of actual situations. Particular situations require particular answers, which involve weighing up all the different aspects involved.

In Tiles's view, Aristotle's approach to ethics is distinctively different from that of most modern writers; the differences lie both in meta-ethics, as we have already noted, and in the overall understanding of how philosophy is to be conducted. Are ethical theories to be regarded as purely investigations of concepts and logic? What difference does it make that ethical beliefs are not merely theoretical, but are practical, that they influence decisions and actions?

For Aristotle, practical thinking is importantly different from theoretical thinking: science is concerned with the universal, while practical reasoning must be concerned with the particular. In terms familiar in modern philosophy, one cannot make this distinction: in science, true general principles are correct only if every instantiation is true, while in practical thinking, if **D** is what is to be done, then it must be possible to produce a general rule **R** of the form: given circumstances  $C_1, C_2, \dots, C_n$ , do **D**. If the rule **R** is to be a principle of action that has moral weight, it will be universal, in the sense that it demands that in every relevantly similar situation **D** is also the action of choice. Universalizability is not mere generality, but places a constraint (a necessary condition) upon the acceptability of principles, if it is to become a guide to action. One way is to use some such device as a Kingdom of Ends, or some equivalent theoretical construction, to distinguish between principles on formal grounds. Alternatively, the constraint may be applied by individuals to the maxims of their own conduct, so that each asks: if I were on the receiving end of this conduct, how would it seem to me? How would I judge the situation? Would it seem fair to all involved? Such an approach is indeed an effective way of presenting moral matters, yet it is not the logical but the social force of the universalization that matters.

Critically, we may note that in neither case is there more than a test of proposed maxims for individual actions, so that it becomes hard to see how a principle by itself provides a justification. This leads us back to Aristotle; for him, as for modern particularists, judgements about cases ground the guiding principles, not the reverse; a degree of moral imagination, not formal rigour, forms the secure basis for action. Virtuous characters are those who perceive actual circumstances with a

sensitivity which will allow them to act appropriately. The doctrine of the mean should shed light on this capacity.

Aristotle does not think that science captures the world in every particular: he is aware that science is idealized, and does not support in every case the validity of the inference from (in science) all **A** are **B** and this is **A**, to this is **B**. In the ideal, **B** may belong to every **A**, but given the unidealized nature of the actual world, it is possible to find an **A** who lacks **B**, even if not so severely as to destroy it. Animals can be born without some of their parts, thus being of defective nature. Failure of instantiation forces a modern theorist either to amend the theory or to revise an observation, but an Aristotelian scientist might equally look for some explanation of the failure in terms of the underlying matter that prevents the whole creature or artifact from expressing correctly the form to which it approximates.<sup>7</sup>

Practice is necessarily concerned with the particular, and the particular is not something that can be completely captured within science. An admitted slippage between theoretical ideals and the actual world is accentuated by the normal difficulties of actual life. We do not approach the world with rules for every contingency, but must use judgement to make the best of circumstances; we are often imperfectly informed, and in general cannot foresee everything that may be a consequence of our actions. Practical decisions always involve interaction with the defective material world, and hence do not allow of rigorous principles. But something can be said in general; we can expect not rules but tendencies that serve to help, to act as guidance. Knowledge of tendencies and likelihoods will be needed by the practically wise, who must also exercise their trained perceptive faculties in each case to arrive at reasoned decisions appropriate to an actual situation.

Aristotle then differs from many contemporary moral theorists in his view of how ethical principles and actions are connected: for him, every principle is at best a guideline; in complex circumstances one must weigh up many variables to come to a responsible decision. In 'Aristotle's Right Reason', Alfonso Gómez-Lobo takes this point to be decisive against conceiving of the *logos* by reference to which the mean is determined as being a general rule or principle (17-18, 28-9). He argues that the text will not bear this interpretation, but that '*logos*'

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7 Cf. *Phys* II 8; *de Gen An* IV 3-4.

should be taken as a particular practical proposition which specifies a *horos* or limit (31), a justificatory description of the particular action to be chosen.

Gómez-Lobo interprets Aristotle as assigning a critical role to judgement on individual occasions. The ethics of character and virtue is distinctively different from the ethics of rule and principle, not least in being far more responsive to the situated nature of many moral decisions. We are encouraged to look outwards to the circumstances of the actual case, not inward to pre-existing principles, although these will have a role to play in the thinking of the *phronimos*.

The vice of a rule-bound morality is dogmatism and Aristotle's account clearly avoids that: the vice of situation-oriented ethics might seem to be relativism, but it seems equally clear that Aristotle is no Protagoras. As Gómez-Lobo stresses, Aristotle knows that one can be mistaken in ethics, and not because one does not follow local custom. Errors are due to faults of character, or deficiencies in practical wisdom, not to replacing shared rules with private ones.

In 'Moral Vision, *Orthos Logos*, and the Role of the *Phronimos*', David Glidden imaginatively reconstructs the place of Aristotle's theory in relation to the society that is its audience. He brings out ways in which the ideas of the *Nicomachean Ethics* might stand in reference to the society within which they were produced. The idealized theory of the virtues stands to our actual behaviour and choices as does the best part of ourselves to our more normal selves. We can see from both points of view, but may act from a perspective we can also criticize.

Glidden discusses at length problems of relativism and absolutism, defending Aristotle against post-modern rejections of all systems of morals that are not purely social in origin. We should treat Aristotle's writings neither as expressive of a generalized universal perspective, nor as of purely local interest. Aristotle's work is situated in that most important of areas, where the actual practices of a given society are examined morally, without simply being taken as right or wrong because they conform to an assumed universal moral code.

In his piece Glidden invites the reader to engage imaginatively with the text in a way which makes the question, 'What has Aristotle's account to say to us?', become of felt relevance, not just of intellectual interest. The force of the images he uses clearly provokes the question of whether we too can see ourselves as representatives both of the many and the wise, so able to engage in socially responsible self-criticism. Glidden (123) is in sympathy with Bernard Williams's view in *Shame and Necessity* that the Greek moral concepts of shame and

autonomy rely upon a critical internalized other which is an ethical construction, and not just a generalization on what others might say.<sup>8</sup>

The mean is situation-relative and person-relative, but not in such a way as to encourage the thought that whatever seems right to us, is right for us. Rather, the precepts that a traditional Greek upbringing would instill in a youth can appear in a novel light that makes it clear why they are worth supporting. Reason is the enemy of relativism *tout court*. 'When in Rome, do as the Romans do' is often sensible advice, as is, 'Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's'. What makes it sensible or not is the kind of reasoning that is given in support.

In 'The Mean Relative to Us', Stephen Leighton distinguishes two ways of interpreting the phrase 'relative to us'. In one, the expression is taken only to refer to the circumstances of an action, but in the other, it takes into account differences in the agent as well. Leighton argues for the second of these interpretations of Aristotle's intent, that who we are is important in deciding exactly what action we should perform in the circumstances. Our moral identity and not just the external circumstances count in the particular case, in deciding what action here and now for us is the one that lies in the mean relevant to this kind of situation. That the mean is itself relative to something variable in us, to character itself, is both philosophically preferable and more in accord with the text of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

Even though Aristotle does not recommend specific principles of action, it might seem that the notion of the mean encourages us to adopt a meta-rule, 'Be moderate'. That the mean aimed at need not always be moderate, is now commonly accepted. But the idea that moderation is essential or plays a major role as a guide to action and life in general is found in the poets and in such traditional precepts as *mēden agan*. Richard Bosley in 'Aristotle's Use of the Theory of the Mean', traces some of the historical background and the cultural resonances that accompany the notion of moderation. The middle way is recommended by Theognis and by the Pythagoreans, who are thus precursors of Aristotle's theory. But Aristotle's own theory clearly goes further.

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8 Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Los Angeles and Berkeley: University of California Press 1993), Chapter IV: '[the internalized other] is conceived as one whose reactions I would respect; equally he is conceived as someone who would respect those same reactions if they were appropriately directed to him' (84).

That excellences are in a mean undermines the idea that to each virtue there is just one vice, and introduces a more complex understanding of the relations among virtues and vices. Good and bad moral traits of character stand to one another as contraries not contradictories, and do not form a simple dichotomy. The grammar of terms for moral character becomes more complex, with each virtue contrasted with at least two alternative characters; in fact the change is subtler still, permitting many varieties of character, with different moral and practical connotations.

This change is in a certain sense not one that can be argued for, nor does Aristotle supply us with argument, but we should find that the suggested structure enables us to improve our ability to understand and work with the concepts involved. We can take the virtues to be preferred ways in which we stand to our emotions, and, because the underlying physiology also makes use of similar structures, we can use our knowledge of physiology to inform our moral training.

Physical traits were thought to depend on the balance of powers in the body: for Aristotle the mean does play this role sometimes. A treatment of this is found in George Terzis's 'Homeostasis and the Mean'. Terzis relates the discussion of the mean to the physiological writings and suggests that in the proposed training the person who wants to be virtuous will seek to perform the actions that promote the desired state of character. 'My aim', he says (176), 'is to show how this idea [of homeostasis] enables us to view Aristotle's doctrine of the mean relative to oneself as a perfected version of one's own characteristic psychophysiology.'<sup>9</sup>

It is clear to those who read the *Nicomachean Ethics* without preconceptions that Aristotle is often offering advice not so much on how to choose or identify morality, but on how to train oneself and others to live well. A good life (the moral life) is the child of good customs, and the parent of customs that are good both for the individual and for society. The professed audience for the *Ethics* is the student of the art of politics,<sup>10</sup>

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9 Compare also here, D. Hutchinson in 'Doctrines of the Mean and the Debate Concerning Skills in Fourth-Century Medicine, Rhetoric and Ethics', in R.J. Hankinson, ed., *Method, Medicine and Metaphysics* (Edmonton, AB: Academic Printing and Publishing 1988), 17-52.

10 EN I 2, 1094a26-b11

whose interest lies in knowing how to produce good citizens and what practices the legislator should encourage to this end.

Mark McCullagh in 'Mediality and Rationality in Aristotle's account of Excellence of Character', argues that the *Nicomachean Ethics* is addressed to an educator, more than to the person who wants to be good directly. The notion of the mean is relative to a complex understanding of the ways of behaving that normally contribute to a better life, and the possibility of inculcating the underlying affective states that will enable someone to act in accordance with right reason.

McCullagh claims that the person of practical wisdom (henceforth: the *phronimos*) will have a general grasp of which kinds of character trait will most conduce to living a good life, based on his knowledge acquired from experience of which kinds of situations occur in lives and will need to be met by an agent who wants to live a good life. Reactions that tend to promote long-term good results can be classified in terms of relevant excesses and defects, and thus provide the background for a decision about how to inculcate generally desirable character traits.

In his presentation, McCullagh introduces a formal aspect that is not present in the text, except implicitly, but which makes good sense of the procedure adopted in the *Nicomachean Ethics*: Aristotle is trying to simplify a complex situation by reference to certain formal ideas. McCullagh thinks of the various virtues as representing axes along which a wise person can pick out areas or types of response that are generally preferable, and so help the student of the good life to aim his or her training in the best way. In this way, the relevant part of the soul<sup>11</sup> can be brought to that state in which it will gladly concur with the demands of practical wisdom, and hence allow the person to live a life of virtue, the most natural and hence the best life for a human being.

William Welton and Ronald Polansky too seek to show, in 'The Viability of Virtue in the Mean', that the discussion of the Mean is neither trivial and empty nor is it without relevance to moral guidance. They investigate another source of the mean doctrine, its use in discussions of the arts. Their argument draws upon parallels in arts and sciences to suggest that to have the conception of virtue as involving more and less, as an art does, is already to have more that matters to moral theory than is given by mere acquaintance with right actions. The study of character

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11 That which is needed for *praktikē tis <zōē> tou logou echontos*. (EN 1098a3f.)

gives depth to Aristotle's discussion, and renders the idea of the mean as a position between extremes, not a misplaced quantitative notion, nor a demand for moderation, but a general way of describing character, and an entrée to a mode of reflecting on the best in human action.

These three sources — physiology, skills or arts, mathematics — converge in the treatment that Aristotle gives of the place of the traditional notion of *meson* in ethics. In the volume most attention is devoted to the customary, ethical, scientific and rhetorical aspects of the idea, and I therefore here give an outline of some of the mathematical evidence, to complete the picture. Aristotle is transposing a notion drawn from mathematics to the discussion of moral philosophy and moral psychology. This application was not new to him, but takes a road that perhaps begins with the Pythagoreans who are said to have defined justice as a square number.<sup>12</sup>

By the time that Aristotle is writing, the Greeks were aware of several distinctly named means. Archytas distinguished three: the arithmetic, the geometric and the harmonic. During the fourth century, the theory of proportions, of which the treatment of the various means forms a part, was developed by Eudoxus, and would presumably be familiar to many in Aristotle's audience. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, it is clear that Aristotle is interested in the contrast between the arithmetic mean and the theory of proportions, which he refers to as geometric. The use of the theory of proportions is clearest in *EN V*, where Aristotle uses different kinds of means to distinguish the different kinds of justice, arithmetic for retributive justice and geometric (proportional) for justice in distribution.<sup>13</sup> In formal ways, the virtue of distributive justice is the most obvious instance of the general definition of moral excellence.

In fourth-century geometry, constructions are the equivalent of algebraic functions. It is in this way that Aristotle can handle situations which involve a number of different variables. To develop this alternative, we move from simple division of a line to the theory of proportions. We are looking for a length that stands in a certain proportion to another length or lengths, thus making a third or fourth amount, which stands in a fixed

12 *Magna Moralia* I 1, 1182a14. Cf. *ibid.* I 33, 1194a29ff.

13 *EN V* 3, 1131a29ff; 4, 1131b32-2a2. See also Paul Keyser, "A Proposed Diagram in Aristotle *EN V* 3, 1131a24-b20 for Distributive Justice in Proportion." *APEIRON* 25 (1992): 135-144.

proportion to the original lengths. In the example of food and physical training (1106a36-b5), Aristotle suggests that when we are looking for a mean relative to us we consider the amount of food required as proportional to the person who is to eat it. Hence, on the mathematical conception, we would be thinking of us as forming in some way a further length or variable, to which the correct amount of food would need to be related.

The difference can be illustrated geometrically. In the diagrams below I give first two well known geometrical constructions, those of the so-called Arithmetic and Geometric means. The constructions would be familiar to Aristotle's audience. The diagrams illustrate two ways in which one may construct a single line to stand in a certain fixed proportion to two other lines.



**Arithmetic Mean** of  $a$  and  $c$

$$a - b = b - c$$

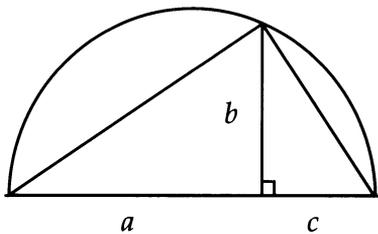


**Construction:** Extend  $a$  to  $a + c$  and bisect the line so constructed.  $b$  is the required length.



**Geometric Mean** of  $a$  and  $c$

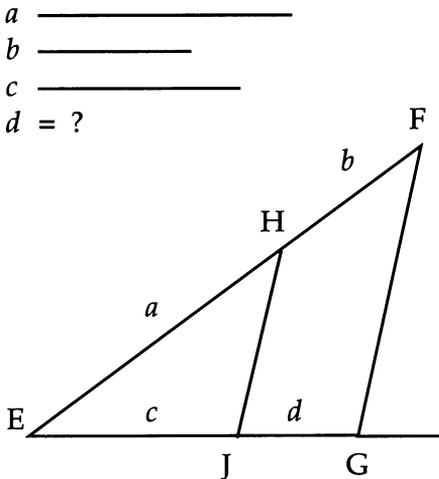
$$a : b :: b : c \text{ - or - } b.b = a.c$$



**Construction :** extend  $a$  by a length equal to  $c$ , and draw the semicircle on  $a + c$  as diameter; then draw the perpendicular  $b$  from the junction of  $a$  and  $c$  to the circumference of the circle.

But we can also imagine being asked to draw a line that stands to another line in the same proportion as a third line stands to a fourth: the second case is in fact a special instance of this last. This construction is a part of the theory of proportions, an area of current interest in mid-fourth-century Athens, at least for the mathematically sophisticated. The next diagram illustrates one of many possible constructions for the so-called fourth proportional:<sup>14</sup>

**Problem:** to draw the line  $d$  such that:  $a : b :: c : d$ .



**Construction:** draw two lines  $EF, EG$  at any angle. Let  $EH = a, HF = b, EJ = c$ . Join  $HJ$ . Draw  $FG$  parallel to  $HJ$ .  $JG$  is the required length,  $d$ .

**Proof:** since  $HJ, FG$  are parallel,  $a : b :: c : d$  by *Elements* VI 2.

On the view sketched above, the geometrical theory provides a set of abstract conceptual relationships that can also represent the conceptual structure of a theory in the moral domain. I shall not pursue the parallels in detail here, but will relate the discussions in some of the papers to this structure. In the first place, if we treated this on a strictly arithmetical fashion, we would be tempted to think that Aristotle thinks that there is always just one fixed answer to the question, What shall I do?, the same

14 Euclid *Elements* VI 12

for all. The fourth proportional, the one to be discovered, is clearly the required course of action. But are we forced to interpret the construction strictly, so that we must arrive at a single right action to be determined for each case? Perhaps the output of the construction could be taken to be indeterminate, at least as indeterminate as the specifications of the other terms, which are not clearly to be represented arithmetically.

Who or what are we to take as the other three terms? Does the right action involve a further proportion, between the agent's position in relation to the action, and that in which the *phronimos* would stand? Does the relation of the *phronimos* to the action provide a standard by reference to which the relation of agent to action can be judged, or a criterion for which action is the only correct one?

Some of these possibilities are canvassed by Leighton, and his suggestion amounts to saying that although the *phronimos* provides a standard, this will be varied when the position of the agent is considered. Thus to judge an action, I need to consider not only what the *phronimos* might do, but what practical reasoning (the *phronimos*) demands for a person in my situation. If I am a slave or a woman, practical reasoning can set a standard, but one which (according to Aristotle) I can never work out for myself.<sup>15</sup>

Within these parameters one may also see how some of Richard Bosley's questions arise, although he does not present them in this context. Is the mean adaptable and flexible? Is it wide or narrow? When applied to ethics, does it demand a single action or allow for a variety? In our reading of Aristotle, these may be taken in part as questions about the interpretation of a geometrical analogy: how are we to relate the moral world to the geometric, where our most advanced scientific thinking is to be found? Shall we take the lengths to be replaced by quantitative amounts or as providing an analogy for the relation of agents of different characters to the circumstances of a situation? In the former case, we seem restricted to a single determinate action for each case, in the latter, we may take the relevant proportion in a less rigid manner. As Welton and Polansky remark (100), 'the mean as a quantitative notion is relatively easily understood and evaluated because it likens the project of doing good action to skilled artistic production or playing of sports'. Perhaps too the proportional lengths might represent the physiological

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15 *Politics* I 13, 1260a4-24

states of the agent, especially those called *pathē* (emotions) which would be characterized in ancient physiology as involving a ratio of the various elements to give an account of their matter.

Since Aristotle is not specific on the desired interpretation, more information is needed to find a best reading. We could also regard this as calling for further philosophical work, assuming that Aristotle is not dogmatic here, but giving us work in progress. Following Terzis, we can see that the theory of the mean allows ethics to be related to the physiological account of the emotions, and so to facilitate our understanding of methods of inculcating values and an appropriate ethical orientation. With Welton and Polansky, we can see Aristotle drawing on parallels with artistic and physical skills to explain wrong action as subject to criticism through excess and defect.

Finally, Aristotle also treats the Mean as a contribution to the theory of Practical Reason, as is suitable for a descendant of such common precepts as *mēden agan*. Thomas Tuozzo in 'Contemplation, the Noble and the Mean' takes the mean to be a subsidiary mode of reasoning that will lead to contemplation, so treating the mean in its contribution to the theory of practical reasoning.

I shall argue that for Aristotle a complete account of the nature and value of virtuous action makes reference to contemplation, and therefore choosing virtue for its own sake involves choosing it because of its relation to contemplation. ... The connecting link between virtuous actions being chosen for its own sake ... and its being chosen for the sake of contemplation ... is provided by the notion of its being chosen for the sake of the noble. (Tuozzo 130-1)

Tuozzo argues that, contrary to a common complaint about the *Nicomachean Ethics*, the primacy of contemplation is not ignored in the discussion of the ethical virtues, and that the aim of the good life is indeed contemplation, but this will not involve those consequences often seen as unacceptable: if it is the condition of one's soul that counts towards happiness and not merely free time, then one should seek to have one's soul in the best condition possible, the noble condition, where action for the sake of the noble is a pre-requisite for being able to contemplate at all, and hence the two are not in conflict.

To return to our original question: Is the mean trivial? Traditional societies throughout history have recommended moderation, and the Greeks were no exception. Moderate behaviour helps to preserve that

harmony in the individual and his or her social relations which makes societies flourish. But our reflective selves need more than mere advice, however sensible, to allow us to achieve as much of the noble as we can aim for; we need understanding and judgement, we have to develop our characters so that we respond appropriately to situations, we cannot be practically wise without developing the judgement that makes our responses to problems morally and practically successful. Aristotle brings the fruits of Greek scientific and mathematical thinking to bear on his characterization of moral virtue: the political scientist is thus able to reflect on the best way to educate the kinds of citizens who will live the best lives in the best state, while the individual citizen has material within which rationally to place his or her efforts to live a better and happier life. The mean is then a useful and insightful way of considering action in relation to judgement and character. It is clearly more than a historical curiosity, for it is more complex and subtle than many of the views that have succeeded it. As Welton and Polansky argue, 'The mean ... specifies what we should seek in action, passion, and state of character. Such clarification serves the practical purpose of providing some target or guide ... that practical wisdom and well developed character enable us to realize' (100).

C.E. Stevens, the Oxford ancient historian, used to claim that as a student he found himself unable to criticize any of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, because it seemed to him so obviously correct. A philosophical friend had to help him memorize the standard objections, so that he could sit his final examinations without disgrace. While few may find that the *Ethics* speaks so directly to them, to read Aristotle's work with attention is to reconsider one's own attitude to the relation of ethical behaviour to character, training and practical knowledge.<sup>16</sup>

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16 I thank John A. Baker, Trudy Govier, and Roger A. Shiner for comments on drafts of this introduction, and also Richard Bosley for insights into the mean provided by many conversations.