

Write a critical commentary on the following passage: “Virtue then, is a state that decides, consisting in a mean, the mean relative to us, which is defined by reference to reason, that is to say, to the reason by reference to which the prudent person would define it. It is a mean between two vices, one of excess and one of deficiency [...] That is why virtue, as far as its essence and the account stating what it is are concerned, is a mean, but, as far as the best and the good are concerned, it is an extremity. Now not every action or feeling admits of the mean. For the names of some automatically include baseness.” (II.6, 1107a15-18).

In this early passage in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle summarises his famous Doctrine of the Mean, arguing that virtues (and the actions which virtuous agents aim at) are found between two extremes, with the happy intermediate state being where ethical excellence (*ethike arete*) lies. There are two aspects of this account which are particularly deserving of scrutiny: first, the nature of the mean and in what way it is “relative to us”, and second, the connection between virtue and deliberation about the mean. An appreciation that Aristotle’s conception of a mean (or *meson*) is far more complex than the mathematical connotations in English imply can help us understand why Aristotle emphasises reason and decision in this passage, while also revealing the underlying triviality of his view, in that it does not give us much fresh insight into either virtue or correct action.

The passage quoted above follows a section where Aristotle sketches out, by analogy with an athlete’s training, the kind of mean he is talking about. Just as the right quantity of food for a trainer to prescribe is not necessarily the arithmetic average of some amount which is too much and some other which is too little but may instead depend on the context, he says, the mean aimed at by virtue is similarly not “one and the same for all” (1106a30-b8). One might take this to be an endorsement of some form of moral relativism: perhaps Aristotle is claiming that the path of virtue and excellence

Commented [u1]: This is an incredibly minor question, but what is meant here by ‘early’? I presume this is not a claim about textual history. I just stumbled across it because, stylistically, it seemed somewhat emphasised, so I was wondering whether this bears some importance.

Commented [RS2]: I found it hard to pin down in my head what exactly is the kind of object which Aristotle thinks is a mean, and then the relationship between that object and {virtue, feelings, decisions, actions}.

Commented [u3R2]: Good, let’s discuss this in the tutorial.

Commented [u4]: As you bring up in your comment, we might wonder whether this is the best formulation to choose to articulate Aristotle’s point.

Commented [u5]: Excellent; it is good you choose certain aspects about the passage that allow you to structure your discussion. This is particularly important for this form of ‘critical comment.’ If you can spare some more words, it might be nice to offer a hint towards why you think these aspects are particularly worthy of discussion (are they especially puzzling, philosophically rich, salient for the remainder of the argument in Book II, etc.).

Commented [u6]: Stylistically, this is very nicely put and makes clear that you offer a perspective that allows at once to understand the internal structure of the view as well as its shortcomings.

Commented [u7]: Good. Here it might be helpful simply to rely on Aristotle’s own distinction between a ‘mean in the object’ and the ‘mean relative to us’, which is illustrated by this example. In general, I think briefly discussing this distinction (as you do here, through this example), serves as a nice introduction to the issue, which also later allows you to draw on questions concerning, for instance, the threat of a pervasive form of relativism to Aristotle’s view. Using Aristotle’s own distinction in addition to discussing the example seems to me to potentially improve this part of the exposition of the view.

differs significantly between each of us, like how different athletes all have their own regimen. The qualification that virtue consists in a mean “relative to us” does seem to provide decisive support for this interpretation. As Brown (1997) argues, however, concluding that Aristotle is a relativist about *ethike arete* is a misreading of both this passage and the wider context. Note how Aristotle makes clear that the mean is defined in terms of the reason of the prudent person – their judgement is taken as the normative standard by which all decisions are judged. So, it would be perplexing if agent-relative considerations somehow had a bearing on what the mean is. Things become clearer if we recall Aristotle’s lengthy discussion about function (*ergon*) and the good life in Book I, where he concludes that flourishing is the same as performing one’s *ergon* well. In this light, it is far more natural to read the phrase “relative to us” as referring to the specific human *ergon* and mode of flourishing (i.e., the exercise of reason), and thereby capturing Aristotle’s conviction that virtue is good for the possessor (Brown 1997, p88). Since all humans have the same *ergon*, the mean differs between individuals only because of differences in the specific situation. If our athlete were a runner, then his trainer would recommend a different diet to if he were a wrestler; likewise, if you are wealthy the mean in generosity is different to if you are impoverished (Brown 1997, 86). Whilst the mean is not the same for all, that does not imply that there is relativism about *ethike arete*, or no right course of action in any given scenario.

We can further our understanding of the mean and why it is not “one” by looking at how Aristotle refers back to it when discussing the individual virtues in later books. The idea that the mean encapsulates more than a mere action is a recurrent theme: he says that one must show bravery about “the right things, for the right end, in the right way, at the right time”, and makes a similar comment about generosity (1115b16-17 and 1120b3-5). As Hursthouse (2006, 108) puts it, hitting the mean requires the

Commented [u8]: The point that there is a reading of the idea of the mean being ‘relative to us’ that is unsatisfactory in the way you describe is well taken, but we might wonder whether the term ‘moral relativism’ adequately describes the key worry behind this objection (this might very well be more of a criticism of Brown than of your adoption of the term here). We can talk about this in the tutorial, but perhaps the term ‘subjectivism’ captures the challenge better. It seems to me that moral relativism is a view that arises in general in response to a diversity or plurality of moral standards, irrespective of how these standards are fixed or arise; but here it seems the worry is related in particular to a way in which we might understand Aristotle to say that the standard for right action is grounded, namely by appeal to the particularities of a given subject.

Commented [u9]: Adding to my previous comment: This seems to undermine precisely the idea that the ethical standard is determined by any subject; rather, it is determined by the reason of the *phronimos*. But note that we can still say that the ethical standard is relative to the reason of the *phronimos*. Surely there is a point where this dispute is merely terminological (whether subjectivism or relativism is the better term to describe the worry), but it might be worth thinking about how to present it most forcefully and lucidly.

Commented [u10]: I understand what you mean here, but the term agent-relative, as you surely know, has particular usages in analytic ethical theory that we you might not want to import here. For instance, when we are saying that an ethical theory is sensitive towards agent-relative duties, demands, or reasons, what we mean is that it matters morally whether a particular, and not just any, agent performs the morally demanded action (most people think deontology is like this, while most consequentialist theories don’t; example: if taking care of your parents is an agent-relative duty, it matters that *you* fulfil it, but on an agent-neutral reading, this moral demand can be fulfilled by anyone). In any case, it seems that this understanding of the agent-relative/agent-neutral distinction is clearly not what is at play here nor what you have in mind.

Commented [u11]: :)

Commented [u12]: Good, you have explained this line of reasoning very nicely.

appropriate choice of a great many different parameters. In this light, it is clear that the mean is not merely the taking of an optimal course of action, but also about being guided by the rational faculties towards promoting the proper end of flourishing – hence Aristotle’s explicit mention of how virtue involves “decid[ing]” (Lorenz 2009, 185). There is therefore a crucial distinction to be drawn between doing the virtuous action, on one hand, and acting virtuously, on the other. Aristotle concerns himself primarily with the latter, which is harder to achieve and requires that actions and feelings flow from deliberation aimed at the right goals. This ability to decide well, developed through careful practice and habituation, is what marks out a virtuous individual.

Having clarified what the Doctrine of the Mean really claims, let us now turn to a brief evaluation of Aristotle’s account. One attraction is that it provides a clear justification for why we ought to admire and praise the virtuous: they have achieved the feat of solving an extremely complicated task, in aiming at the fine and taking carefully considered actions to promote that goal. However, his account also has two significant flaws. First, the doctrine just seems trivial: certainly, one should not have an excess or deficiency in a character trait; excesses and deficiencies are, by definition, bad. We have established that Aristotle doesn’t hold the (implausible) view that the correct intermediate value is just a numerical midpoint, but this means that his claim that one attains an extremity in the “the best and the good” by cultivating a character without excesses or deficiencies borders on vacuous – reframed in the language of optimisation, it is hardly groundbreaking to say that the maximum value of a function is attained when its inputs are neither too large nor too small. Moreover, the Doctrine of the Mean contributes almost nothing in the way of practical guidance about how someone aiming at virtue should conduct themselves, even though Aristotle is clear that one of the aims of the *Nicomachean Ethics* is to furnish readers with such advice. Although he goes on to discuss various specific virtues of character in

Commented [u13]: Good. This might have been a point where you could have connected some of the ideas about habituation with the argument for why virtue is a mean, which are supposed to form a union in the way Aristotle presents his view in Book II.

Commented [u14]: I think this is a reasonably attractive feature that you have identified. In light of stressing this, however, it is perhaps a little curious that particular facts of the matter concerning admiration of praise serve as evidence or premises in Aristotle’s argument for why virtue is a mean in the first place. Also, are there any other aspects of the idea that you find instructive or meaningful? What do you think Aristotle took to be most significant about this view?

Commented [u15]: While I think the point that ‘excess’ and ‘deficiency’ themselves already have a negative evaluative character is well taken, I would want to know which aspect of the doctrine in particular is trivial. We might say that it is not trivial to say that we can in fact *correctly apply* these evaluative terms and that they aptly pick out aspects of this world. But perhaps this is something that Aristotle does in fact assume or presuppose in order to argue for the idea that human excellence must consist in avoiding these negatively evaluated states as well. Sure, there is something vacuous about saying ‘deficiency is bad’, but perhaps not so much about saying ‘there *are* things that are deficient and excessive, hence excellence is a mean’. Whether Aristotle properly justifies this assumption is obviously another question, one that you might very well negate. I am not sure you will be happy with this ‘objection,’ but perhaps we can discuss it in the tutorial.

Commented [RS16]: (I could also mention here how it’s rather ad-hoc how he deals with murder/adultery not admitting of a mean)

subsequent books, these later recommendations do not hinge on any insight from the Doctrine of the Mean (Hursthouse 2006, 105). Indeed, Aristotle suggests that an imperfectly virtuous agent would do well to aim towards a vice which is opposed to their current defect of character, as opposed to trying to reach the mean and excellence directly (e.g., 1109b1-5) – but practical guidance is rather separate from the central claim of this passage that virtue consists in aiming at the mean between two vices. As laid out in the quoted passage, then, the Doctrine of the Mean not only fails to tell us anything new about the character of a virtuous individual, it is also unhelpful in showing aspirationally virtuous agents what path to take.

To conclude, the Doctrine of the Mean as presented in this passage is about the use of reason and deliberation to reach the right action in pursuit of the right goal, ultimately promoting human flourishing. While few would object to the idea that a virtuous individual meets these conditions, the doctrine provides extremely limited substantive insights into what the mean comprises in any given situation, or how individuals ought to attain this *ethike arete*.

Bibliography

- Brown, Lesley. 1997. 'What is the Mean Relative to Us in Aristotle's Ethics?', *Phronesis* 42, 77–93. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4182546>
- Hursthouse, Rosalind. 2006. 'The Central Doctrine of the Mean,' in Kraut (ed.) *Blackwell Guide to Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, Blackwell. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470776513.ch4>
- Lorenz, Hendrik. 2009. 'Virtue of Character in Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics', *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 37, 177–212. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780199575565.003.0005>

Commented [u17]: I might be missing something here, but your second objection as stated above, is that the view “contributes almost nothing in the way of practical guidance”—but here you seem to suggest that it *does* offer practical guidance but does not *theoretically explain* the claim that virtue consists in aiming at the mean.

Commented [RS18R17]: I could've been clearer here; explained more in the tutorial. But yes, the point is that the framework of the doctrine of the mean isn't any use to the agent making decisions since Aristotle tells them they might as well just aim at the opposite extreme to what they're at.

Commented [u19]: I suppose that, with reference to Hursthouse and your dismay at the dissatisfactory character of the explanation of how the mean relates to virtue, you have addressed the concern that it is not particularly theoretically informative, but I don't quite see how you have established the claim that it is “unhelpful in showing aspirationally virtuous agents what path to take.” It seems you have merely paraphrased the advice at 1109b1-5 without giving any reason why this is fully unhelpful or of little worth.

Commented [RS20]: I'm curious about how much time in the exam you're meant to spend on these commentaries (& how long they should be), and what that means about having more of a conclusion than I did here. (Also whether you should have a strident line of argument, etc etc.)

Commented [u21R20]: Yes, excellent question! We will discuss this in the tutorial. See also my final comment below.

Rohan,

This is a well-written piece, and I think you have overall done an excellent job at fulfilling the ‘critical commentary’ prompt. Depending on the quotation given in the exam, it will not be possible for you to address each and every aspect of it. Structuring your comment and discussion by indicating what you consider to be most crucial—and explaining and *justifying* why these issues are most important—will be indispensable in doing well at this exercise. Your exposition of the key idea and doctrine behind the passage is good; here it is just important to be as precise as possible in one’s formulations and the relations that one draws to other aspects of the Ethics. I have indicated a few points above where this could be improved. When it comes to the critical appraisal, there are a few more possibilities of improvement: First, the claim which you announced in the introduction, that clarifying some misconceptions about the doctrine reveals its inherent triviality, has not really made an explicit appearance after that. In principle, claims and ideas like this can connect the expository and critical part of your comment very nicely, so I would encourage you to keep them in mind as you write the piece and make them explicit. Second, the positive appraisal might be given more space. While it is good and perhaps even demanded that you take a clear position on the issue, there might be some more room for your reception of the passage to be more charitable. Lastly, while the general thrust of your objections is very good and interesting, I think that both should have been rendered more precise and sketched out a little more. Some of this we can do in the tutorial, and we can also talk more about how best to approach this kind of writing task under exam conditions.