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## **Precision and Relativity in Aristotle's Account of Virtue as the Mean**

### **Abstract**

*The paper discusses Aristotle's account of virtue as the mean, according to which our responses should aim at what is intermediate in respect of feelings and actions, by focusing on the problem of hitting the mean in virtuous responses. The problems with achieving precision in hitting the mean are due to the fact that one has to hit the intermediate by responding appropriately to a wide range of circumstances, which are mutable, situation-dependent and discernment of which rests on perception. It is argued that the precision involved in finding the mean is best understood from the analogy with medical or dietetic practice. Hence, Aristotle's use of medical examples is closely analyzed in order to clarify some difficulties and to answer at least some of the questions raised by Aristotle's doctrine of the mean.*

### **Key words**

virtue ethics, mean, hitting the mean, precision, medical and dietetic practice, Aristotle

Aristotle seems to believe that it is hard to be virtuous. According to some of his remarks in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, the right conduct is a difficult task to achieve. One can agree easily on different grounds. But the reason that Aristotle mentions is not likely to be among them, at least not in an obvious way. For, he believes that it is so because it is difficult to hit the mean.<sup>1</sup> Not all difficulties with becoming a good person and acting like one may come down to this problem. My discussion is, however, concerned with this aspect of "hitting the mean", assuming that it is central, at least in as much as the doctrine of the mean is central to Aristotle's treatment of the virtues of character.

On Aristotle's account of virtue as the mean, our virtuous responses should aim at what is intermediate in respect of feelings and actions. The difficulty with achieving this is expressed by the demand that in hitting the intermediate one must respond appropriately to a wide range of circumstances, which are mutable, situation-dependent and discernment of which rests on perception. This is what Aristotle recognizes as the reason why it is hard to be virtuous.

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Cf. II.9, 1109<sup>a</sup>24–25: "Hence it is hard work to be excellent, since in each case it is hard work to find what is intermediate." All referen-

ces to Aristotle are to the *Nicomachean Ethics* and all translations are by Irwin (1985).

What we might recognize as a difficulty in interpreting Aristotle's doctrine of the mean is how to understand this description of seemingly composite task, i.e. the task of hitting the intermediate and the task of accommodating one's response to circumstances. So we look for more clarification on how does one accomplish both in one act and what, after all, is the intermediate in responses that are appropriate to a number of different circumstances. In discussing the first difficulty one should try to deal with the second, and I will approach both by concentrating on the notion of precision involved in hitting the intermediate. I will try to discern this notion, primarily but not exclusively, from the background provided by medical and dietetic context from which most of Aristotle's examples, which were meant to clarify the problem, come. I do not wish to claim (or to deny, for that matter) that Aristotle's understanding of virtues in terms of the mean is in all, or even predominantly, dependent on medical analogy. I only assume that to understand the medical analogies as used by Aristotle in this context can help us understand his treatment of the problem of attaining precision in hitting the mean. Another thing I will discuss is a special kind of relativity involved in Aristotle's doctrine of virtue as the mean, which apparently introduces some looseness in requirement for precision and can help us be more successful in finding the intermediate.

## I

Aristotle's treatment of the virtues of character occupies books II to V of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, starting with the general account in book II. They were previously (in book I) identified as virtues of the part of the soul which is not rational, but shares in reason by being obedient to it. They have to do with pleasures and pains, yet they are not feelings. Nor are they capacities (in the sense of capacities for feelings), but they are states or dispositions (*hexeis*). The virtues of character are good dispositions in respect of feelings and actions. And these good dispositions are specified further as being in the mean. From the general characterization of human virtue as "the state that makes a human being good and makes him perform his function well" (II.6, 1106<sup>a</sup>21–24), through the identification of virtue of character with a mean disposition, we come to the understanding of virtue of character as a disposition in the mean which manifests itself in intermediate responses (both in actions and in feelings). And these responses are intermediate by being manifested at the right time, to the right people, at the right place, in the right way, and generally right in respect of circumstances.

Thus to respond e.g. with anger can mean both acting correctly or wrongly. In a given situation, to respond with much anger may be a right thing to do while not being angry at all may not be so (e.g., in a situation when the member of one's family has been seriously offended). For the latter would be a case of not being angered by the right things, at the right times, towards the right people or in the right way (IV.5, 1126<sup>a</sup>4–6). What is important is this: while both responses, with much anger and with no anger at all, can in given circumstances be right responses, to respond with *too much* anger or with *too little* is never right, that is, the right response can never be given a description in terms of "too much" or "too little". It is because being very angry or not angry at all can both be intermediate responses, given the circumstances, but being too much and too little angry cannot. For "too much" and "too little" should be understood in a sense of "more or less than appropriate", and vice is defined by such excess or deficiency. Thus, in virtuous responses, one must aim at these intermediate responses. And the problem with "hitting the mean"

comes from the fact that “it is hard to define how, against whom, about what, and how long we should be angry, and up to what point someone is acting correctly or in error.” (1126<sup>a</sup>32–35)

However, it is not immediately clear why does Aristotle approach this subject of responding appropriately in respect of particular circumstances with the notion of the mean. One might think of good responses as right, or appropriate, or even as proportionate to the circumstances, but they are not “in the middle” in an obvious way. Surely, one would not be saying much by saying that a good response is the right one. But in what way are we to understand it as intermediate, so as to be the right response? I will discuss this problem later, in chapter IV.

In his discussion of how the virtue of character consists in the mean Aristotle is first concerned with showing that it is not the mean in arithmetical sense that applies here. He begins with explaining the difference between the arithmetical mean and the ethical mean, or, in his words, the mean in the object and the mean relative to us. This introduction of the notion of mean in distinction from the arithmetical mean seems natural enough. For, arithmetical mean, as the midpoint between two equally distant extremes, is clear to everyone, and the mean relative to us does not share any of its essential features. Thus, it is only natural to try to establish the notion of the mean relative to us in contrast with the arithmetical mean. Yet, this does not seem to provide a clear picture, and at least some aspects of the mean relative to us are left open to different interpretations.

One thing to consider is the meaning of the phrase “relative to us”. Two interpretations seem to propose themselves here.<sup>2</sup> First, perhaps it is to be understood by reference to the circumstances in respect of which any response can be estimated to be in the mean.<sup>3</sup> In this case, the mean relative to us is the mean appropriate to circumstances. However, “intermediate” character of it is thereby not explained, and we fail to see how the “mean response” is different or more specific description of what is simply the right response. The other way to understand the phrase “relative to us” is to take it to refer to the agent (as well as to circumstances, if not exclusively).<sup>4</sup> In this case, one can take “relative to us” to refer to individual, or, alternatively, to species, taking “us” to refer to us as human beings. While Aristotle would allow that in some cases the facts about the agent are relevant and should be included into determinants of the right response, they are not substantially different from other circumstances that enter the response. Not much speaks in favor of individual agent relativity,<sup>5</sup> and if any version of agent relativity were accepted, it should not amount to individual relativism assuming virtue to be different for every one of us. It should amount either to extending the relativity to the state of character, or to understanding “relative to us” as a normative notion.<sup>6</sup>

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For a fuller survey of the possible interpretations of the phrase “relative to us”, see Brown (1997), n. 12.

3  
For the understanding of the mean as relative to circumstances, see Urmson (1988).

4  
The second course is taken by Leighton (1995).

5  
For some arguments against it, see Brown (1997).

6  
See on this Brown (1997), according to whom “‘the mean relative to us’ should be explained not as ‘relative to individuals’ ... but as ‘relative to us as human beings’ ... Aristotle uses the phrase to convey a normative notion, the notion of something related to human nature, needs or purposes.” (p. 78)

I take no sides in this debate, for two main reasons. First, I do not think that we should understand the phrase “relative to us” as referential in this way, that is, as clearly pointing to either circumstance relativity or agent relativity. As it will become obvious in the next chapter, its purpose is primarily to distinguish relative from absolute mean. In other words, it should be thought of as a kind of negative determination. Second, the relativity which interests me here and which I will discuss later (chapter V) is a different aspect of the mean which is not connected with this opposition between absolute and relative mean. I propose to approach the notion of the mean relative to us, first, by considering the significance of the comparison with the arts and medicine and, second, by taking a closer look to the chapters 8 and 9 of Book II which, I believe, suggest another type of relativity involved in the specification of virtue as the mean between two vices.

## II

The account of the mean relative to us is given first in distinction to the mean in the object:

“By the intermediate in the object I mean what is equidistant from each extremity; this is one and the same for everyone. But relative to us the intermediate is what is neither superfluous nor deficient; this is not one, and is not the same for everyone.” (II.6, 1106<sup>a</sup>29–32)

Let me just state two points of difference between the two types of the intermediate.<sup>7</sup> (1) Intermediate in the object is (a) one thing, while the intermediate relative to us is not, and it is (b) the same for everyone, while intermediate relative to us is not the same for everyone.<sup>8</sup> (2) In relation to its extremities, the intermediate in the object is equidistant from its extremities, while the intermediate relative to us is not, but it is what is neither in excess nor in deficiency.<sup>9</sup>

In order to make it more clear what the intermediate relative to us amounts to in practice, Aristotle will first illustrate it with a medical example and then move to the elaboration of how it comes into play in the field of the productive arts (or crafts). Thus to explain what the intermediate relative to us is, one should turn to crafts and medicine as the fields in which it finds the most obvious application. It does not make the notion of the intermediate as applied to virtues in any way secondary or derivative. As Aristotle suggested earlier in the text, the matters of human character, actions and feelings stand to the matters of human production as a domain of mostly invisible processes to that of visible.<sup>10</sup> Simply, the application of the intermediate in human production is more immediately obvious than in connection with human actions and feelings.

The medical example presented by Aristotle does not come, strictly speaking, from medical practice, but from the practice of gymnastic training. However, it is concerned with prescribing the appropriate diet, and this dietetic aspect of their practice is common to both doctors and trainers, for proper dieting is equally important for strength and for health. The activity of prescribing the right diet in order to preserve or to restore strength or health seems to be helpful when we try to understand how in the field of human conduct the responses are to be aimed at the intermediate. I believe that even in some passages in which Aristotle does not mention it, we can detect this activity as his model for understanding the intermediacy.<sup>11</sup>

Thus we find Aristotle introducing the example of appropriate dieting (which traditionally includes exercise as well as food and drinks) into the discussion

of the virtues of character in the place and context which precede the introduction of the notion of the mean. The context here is the discussion about the way the virtues of character are acquired. They are acquired by habituation, and to specify what the right sort of habituation is, one should look at the dieting example.

“First, then, we should observe that these sorts of states naturally tend to be ruined by excess and deficiency. We see this happen with strength and health, which we mention because we must use what is evident as a witness to what is not. For both excessive and deficient exercises ruin strength; and likewise, too much or too little eating or drinking ruins health, while the proportionate amount produces, increases and preserves it. The same is true, then, of temperance, bravery and the other virtues.” (II.2, 1104<sup>a</sup>11–19)

The significance of this passage lies in the fact that it anticipates the doctrine of the mean before its formal introduction. At this point we are not yet acquainted with the definition of virtue as a state lying in the mean, or with the notion of the mean relative to us, so this discussion is not meant to refer to it. Yet the notions of excess and deficiency clearly belong to the context of the mean relative to us and we may ask how these notions enter the discussion in present context. The disposition to act virtuously develops from repeated activities, in the process in which the virtues of character are acquired by doing virtuous actions; that is, we become just by doing just actions, temperate by doing temperate actions, brave by doing brave actions, etc. (II.1, 1103<sup>a</sup>34–<sup>b</sup>2). Thus to explain how virtues are acquired, one has to refer to virtuous actions themselves, for they are already involved in the process of habituation. To illustrate the nature of such actions, before the doctrine of the mean has been introduced, Aristotle turns to another context in which excess and deficiency are of the same importance in acquiring the desired state. The point of kinship is not in the process of habituation, for we do not acquire health in the same way the virtues are acquired. Rather, it is in the fact that virtues and health are acquired and ruined by the same actions. In cases in which both production and destruction come about from the same material, it depends upon the degree (or amount) whether one or the other will arise. That is why both health and virtue are states that are ruined by excess and deficiency. This is the basic common feature that health and virtue share, and the rationale for introducing dietetic (or medical) analogies in the context of the doctrine of the mean.

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Throughout the text I use ‘mean’ and ‘intermediate’ interchangeably, which can appear puzzling. In general, I speak of “the mean”, but I switch to “the intermediate” mostly in discussing particular passages that I quote in Irwin’s translation. Irwin translates *meson* with ‘intermediate’ (and has ‘mean’ for *mesotês*), and I try to adjust discussion terminologically with the text quoted. No difference in meaning is assumed.

8

One can take (a) and (b) as two different points, but I take them as two aspects of the same point, because they presuppose each other: it is not possible for (b) to hold without (a) to be the case. So (b) cannot be independent characteristic. See further Hursthouse (2006), pp. 101–102.

9

The parallel passage in the *Eudemian Ethics* speaks of excess, deficiency and mean that can be “relative to one another” and “relative to us” (*Eudemian Ethics* II.3, 1220<sup>b</sup>21–23). It seems that Aristotle has the same contrast in mind as in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (see Wood (1982), p. 111).

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Cf. II.4, 1104<sup>a</sup>11–14.

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For a discussion of Aristotle’s use of the analogy between virtue and medicine, see Hutchinson (1988), pp. 40–46. For a more general survey, see Jaeger (1957). See also Lloyd (1968).

Not surprisingly, then, when the notion of the mean relative to us is introduced, Aristotle will turn to dietetic example to explain what it is (or, perhaps, to explain how it differs from the arithmetical mean). To follow Aristotle's example, ten and two are taken as extremes. The intermediate in the object (arithmetical mean) will be what is equidistant from each of them, that is, six.

“But that is not how we must take the intermediate that is relative to us. For if, e.g., ten pounds [of food] are a lot for someone to eat, and two pounds a little, it does not follow that the trainer will prescribe six, since this might also be either a little or a lot for the person who is to take it – for Milo [the athlete] a little, but for the beginner in gymnastics a lot.” (II.6, 1106<sup>a</sup>36–<sup>b</sup>4)

In interpreting this passage we are naturally concerned with how it should be understood in the context of human conduct. In other words, we look to it as an illustration of how the intermediate relative to us figures in the context of virtuous actions. In fact, the discussion here is still more general, and the Milo example is meant to show what the intermediate relative to us generally amounts to. So we should consider it first as such an illustration.

What do we learn about the mean relative to us from the Milo example? We do find all the points indicated in the preceding description confirmed here of the intermediate involved in prescribing food. It is not one, for in one case, say, four pounds and in other eight will be appropriate amount of food to prescribe. So it is different for different persons, and not same for everyone. And what makes four and eight pounds of food in a particular case the intermediate is that it is neither too much nor too little amount of food to take for the first and the second person respectively. If this example seems clear and obvious, it is because we readily recognize the difference between Milo (the wrestler famous for his enormous appetite) and the beginner in training. But what are we to recognize about them in relation to the food prescribed in order to understand what the intermediate relative to us is? The first thing we think of is that the same amount of food is not appropriate for both of them. At best, this tells us that, assuming that intermediate is what is appropriate, the intermediate is different in different cases. This is an important point, but it does not tell us what makes it the mean, and not just the right amount.

What is actually said about Milo and the other person is that the same amount of food is a little for Milo and a lot for the other one. This is more than to say that the mean is different for each. It says that six pounds of food, which is the midpoint between two and ten pounds, is not the intermediate either for Milo or for the beginner, being deficient for one and too much for another. This is the closest we come to the specification of the intermediate in this example. Thus the Milo example shows some things about the intermediate relative to us: that it is *not a midpoint* in the sense of the arithmetical mean, that it is *not one* determined point in the continuum, and *not the same for everyone* and in every situation. Hence, the example closely illustrates the points previously stated about the mean relative to us by showing what it is not, and it does this primarily in distinction with the arithmetical mean. The “definition” of the mean relative to us itself has this form of a negative determination, describing it as what is neither excessive nor deficient.

The form of the account has to do with the nature of the intermediate relative to us. And for the Milo example to cast more illumination, one should think of the wider picture that comes with it. The experienced trainer will know what the intermediate for Milo is and he will prescribe it correctly. Yet he will not be able to say what in the field of training and dieting can be generally determined as intermediate. This is because it is different in every particular case,



and the particularity involved is such that it cannot be captured by a description or covered by a rule (or rules) that can be simply applied in each case.

### III

Thus, we have seen that the usefulness of a dietetic example for the elucidation of the notion of the mean relative to us rests on the features shared by dietetic and ethical situation. In the previous chapter, I have tried to identify two such features. On the one hand, in both the ethical and the dietetic context, excess and deficiency play an important role. On the other hand, what we find in both contexts is a complex situation having to do with particulars. This is why the Milo example, considered in its dietetic context, is relevant for ethical discussion. This brings us to a further point of analogy between the ethical and dietetic context, i.e. the problem of precision.

As the result of the fact that medicine is concerned with particulars, i.e. matters lacking in fixity, the central issue that the practitioners in the dietetic context have to deal with is the problem of limited precision attainable in prescribing food or therapy. Practical matters, too, are unstable and mutable. Hence, precision becomes an issue in ethics as well. Because only a limited degree of precision is attainable in practical matters, it is not possible, nor would it be appropriate, to give a precise account of such matters. This common feature of ethics and medicine is frequently stressed by Aristotle, e.g. at II.2, 1103<sup>b</sup>34–1104<sup>a</sup>10:

“But let us take it as agreed in advance that every account of the actions we must do has to be stated in outline, not exactly. As we also said at the start, the type of accounts we demand should reflect the subject-matter; and questions about actions and expediency, like questions about health, have no fixed [and invariable answers]. And when our general account is so inexact, the account of particular cases is all the more inexact. For these fall under no craft or profession, and the agents themselves must consider in each case what the opportune action is, as doctors and navigators do.”

There are two aspects of the problem with precision, both in medicine and in ethics. One concerns the question of how precise an account of the matters ethical (or medical) can be given, considering the nature of such matters. Any such account will necessarily lack in precision. Neither as a body of knowledge nor as a system of rules to be applied can it capture all specificities that are situation-dependent. The other aspect concerns the precision attainable in practice. This aspect of the problem, which we may call the problem of aiming at and hitting the mean (or the due measure, as is more common in dietetic context), is related to the first one. As in the former case, the problems with precision in practice come from the lack of fixity and dependence on the specificities of a concrete situation. There is, however, an important difference. While any account in the field of ethics or medicine should be in outline only, that is, one should not even attempt to give a precise general account, when it comes to practice, neither doctors nor virtuous agents can afford not to try to attain precision. For, in both cases the success depends on whether or not they actually hit the mean.

One could argue that the Milo example does not touch upon any of these problems. And it does not explicitly. The question of precision, however, makes an important part of the dietetic context from which the example is taken, and it is implied. In other words, when the same problem of determining the mean in prescribing food or therapy is considered by trainers or doctors, they are faced with the limitations on precision attainable in determining the due

measure in diet. This issue necessarily appears in connection with activities which have to take into account different and mutable circumstances and to get a lot of things right to achieve the desired end. Aristotle is not only aware that this task of achieving precision in estimating the right thing to do in a given situation makes the crucial part of medical practice, but he considers it even more difficult to accomplish in the case of a virtuous action. We find explicit confirmation for this in his discussion of justice:

“Knowing how actions must be done, and how distributions must be made, if they are to be just, takes more work than it takes to know about healthy things. And even in the case of healthy things, knowing about honey, wine, hellebore, burning and cutting is easy, but knowing how these must be distributed to produce health, and to whom and when, takes all the work that it takes to be a doctor.” (V.9, 1137<sup>a</sup>12–17)

Admittedly, the Milo example does not reveal much of this dietetic background. However, in the following discussion about how experts and craftsmen aim at the intermediate, the issue of precision will come to light more clearly. It appears most clearly in the following sentence:

“And since virtue, like nature, is better and more precise than any craft, it will also aim at what is intermediate.” (II.6, 1106<sup>b</sup>14–16)

In view of Aristotle's claims that practical matters, being variable, do not allow for precision, this statement may confuse us.

Both virtue and crafts aim at the intermediate and they are successful only by hitting the intermediate. That virtue is more precise in this might not be obvious, unless we recognize that the point is rather that virtue is more demanding in respect of precision. In so far as it is much harder to find the intermediate in a complex ethical situation, while at the same time virtue is activity superior to crafts, virtue is more precise than any craft. Again, this can be best recognized by comparing both crafts and virtue to dietetic situation.

According to Aristotle, in making their products craftsmen also aim at what is intermediate. This becomes obvious (for it may not be so obvious at first) in our thinking about good products as such that nothing can be added to them or taken away from them (1106<sup>b</sup>9–11). Hence they belong to those things, like health and strength, which are ruined by excess and deficiency, but preserved by the mean. Nevertheless, such products are in some points different than, e.g., health and strength (or virtue), although Aristotle does not explicitly point to the difference in this passage.<sup>12</sup> We should, however, have the differences in mind.

In focusing on what is intermediate, craftsmen look to the intermediate and guide their production towards it in order to make the product conform to it (1106<sup>b</sup>8–9). The intermediate here is the standard to which each product should conform. In most crafts precision is thus associated with the production of a thing that is finished and perfected to such a degree that it corresponds to an accepted standard. In most crafts this can be accomplished simply by following a set of rules.

There is an important point of difference between artistic production, on the one hand, and medicine and virtuous action, on the other. Most crafts are engaged in producing a definite product. Such product is their function, while in the case of virtue, function is the virtuous activity itself. There is no end of this activity outside the activity itself. Now, in medicine, there is another aspect of “not having separable product as an end”. We recognize that medicine is not, as opposed to most crafts, engaged in producing artifacts as separable,



external products. By this we do not mean that the end of the doctor's activity is not separable from his activity or that it is not something outside his activity. For, clearly it is. Here it is not, as it is in case of virtue, the doctor's activity itself that is the end. Still, we can say that in medicine there is no separable external product. The doctor's activity aims at producing health, and health is not such a product that a doctor can make it out of some material as a completed independent thing. It is a state to which the diseased body should be brought. Health is a result that is dependent upon the condition of the body which should be restored to health. Hence, doctors cannot proceed in the way other artists mostly do, by following a set of standard and accepted rules that would lead, if applied correctly, to the desired end. An important part of bringing about health is to determine what should be done in a particular case. What doctor will typically have to do is to try to hit the intermediate, that is to determine the appropriate diet, by taking into account various factors such as the individual patient's constitution, the ills he suffers from, the state of his body, his dietary habits, his bodily strength, his reactions to a certain diet and so on. This is more demanding than in the case of other crafts, and precision is here more difficult to achieve.

Thus, in both crafts and medicine, precision in achieving a desired end has to do with hitting the intermediate, and medicine is in that respect more demanding. When we come to virtues, the situation is even more complex. Virtues of character are concerned with feelings and actions. As opposed to the artistic productions, in virtuous activities there is no external product which one can produce by conforming it to a definite standard. Good actions themselves are the function of virtuous activity, and they are not independent "results". Actions are good only if they come from a good state of character and manifest feelings in an appropriate way. Thus to say that virtue is in a mean seems to include that state of character is in a mean, and that feelings and actions are in a mean.

We can get confused about these matters reading the *Nicomachean Ethics*. We find Aristotle, in different places, saying both of state and of feelings and actions that they are in a mean. This may, but does not need to, imply that for a virtue to be a mean, both state of character and feelings and actions are equally supposed to be in a mean. To get clear about this issue, let us consider more closely what the idea that virtue is in a mean actually amounts to.

Judging from the definition of virtue, virtue as a state is in a mean:

"Virtue, then, is a state that decides, [consisting] in a mean, the mean relative to us, which is defined by reference to reason, i.e., to the reason by reference to which the intelligent person would define it." (II.6, 1106<sup>b</sup>36–1107<sup>a</sup>2)

This definition seems to suggest that virtue can be defined as a mean simply by saying that it is a state lying in a mean, without any reference to feelings and actions.<sup>13</sup> Perhaps this should be taken as meaning that if a person's state of character is settled in a mean, her actions and feelings are also in a mean. Thus actions and feelings are in a mean only derivatively, manifesting the state of character which gives rise to them.

Now, actions and feelings are introduced in the text following the definition:

12

The difference between production and action is elaborated in Book VI (4, 1140<sup>a</sup>1–24).

13

For a view that it is a settled state of character that is primarily in a mean, see Urmson (1980), p. 161.

“It is a mean between two vices, one of excess and one of deficiency. It is a mean for this reason also: Some vices miss what is right because they are deficient, others because they are excessive, in feelings or in actions, while virtue finds and chooses what is intermediate.” (1107<sup>a</sup>3–6)

As opposed to the above picture, this passage does not seem to suggest that feelings and actions are in a mean only in so far as they exhibit the state of character that is itself in a mean. It is not quite clear whether it is intended as giving an additional reason why virtue is a mean, or as a further explanation of what was defined as a mean in the first place. In any case, from this passage it follows that it is primarily feelings and actions that are in a mean, and that they are so not because of the state that issues them, but because of what they aim at. Virtue is said here to be a mean because it chooses what is intermediate, and what it chooses as intermediate consists in feeling or in action.

Virtue is a mean primarily in so far as it chooses, or aims at, what is intermediate, and it does that in respect of feelings and actions. This is more clearly stated in an earlier passage:

“Now virtue is concerned with feelings and actions, in which excess and deficiency are in error and incur blame, while the intermediate condition is correct and wins praise, which are both proper features of virtue. Virtue, then, is a mean in so far as it aims at what is intermediate.” (1106<sup>b</sup>24–28)

If this is what the idea of virtue as a mean amounts to, how are we to understand the definition of virtue as a state consisting in a mean? Well, it is a definition, and as a definition it starts from a genus; and by a genus, virtue is a state. This need not be interpreted as saying that as a state, virtue is in a mean. Literally it reads: virtue is a prohairesis state, being in a mean relative to us. It is not *qua* state that virtue is in a mean, but *qua* prohairesis state, i.e. *qua* state issuing in choices (or decisions). Intermediacy has primarily to do with choices in so far as they are concerned with feelings and actions, as Aristotle explicitly says more than once. To be sure, good actions and appropriate feelings must issue from a settled state of character. Actions that do not come from a stable character are not virtuous actions, no matter how exactly they hit upon the intermediate. Yet if we are to call a state of character intermediate it is primarily on account of the responses which such a state gives rise to. When Aristotle determines virtue as a mean between two vices, one of excess and one of deficiency, we are inclined to think of a *state* that is thus determined. Virtue's being in a mean is explained by the fact that vices miss, while virtue finds and chooses, in feelings and in actions, what is intermediate. So we can think of virtue as a mean state only in so far as it is a disposition, in respect of feelings and action, to choose responses that are intermediate by being neither in excess nor in deficiency. Hence, it is in actions and feelings that intermediacy should be looked for, and in respect of which virtue aims at the intermediate, for it is they that can be in excess, in deficiency or in a mean.

In aiming at the intermediate in respect of feelings and actions we are clearly in a different and more complex situation than craftsmen are when they look for the intermediate in their production. In virtuous activities there is no definite product, but the intermediate should be chosen and found in our actions and feelings. And there is no standard to which we can conform our actions and feelings. We can think of the *phronimos* (“the intelligent person”), or of the right reason (*orthos logos*), as a standard. The *phronimos* makes the standard in the sense of the agent who always responds correctly and is thus determinative of the right reason. Yet, whether we think of the *phronimos* or of the right reason as a standard, neither is a kind of definite standard to which one can look and guide one's actions towards it by approximating one's

feelings and actions to it. It is not a standard in a way of a directive telling us how to make the right choices, but rather in a way of a corrective telling us whether the choices we make are the right ones. And it is certainly not a standard determining what the intermediate is at which one should aim in any given situation.

#### IV

We have seen what is involved in “hitting the mean” in the fields of crafts, medicine and virtuous activity. Now the following question proposes itself: How are we to determine what, in the field of virtuous activity, the intermediate is? It is in actions and feelings that we aim at the intermediate, and for two reasons: because virtue of character is concerned with feelings and actions, and because it is feelings and actions that admit of excess, deficiency and an intermediate condition (1106<sup>b</sup>16–18). That our feelings can be excessive or deficient is not in need of much clarification. And we can think of the intermediate condition in respect of our feelings as some point between that, being neither in excess nor in deficiency. Yet, Aristotle's attempt to explain the intermediacy in this context is marked by the switch in terminology, for it seems that it cannot be explained in terms of excess, deficiency and intermediacy alone:

“We can be afraid, e.g., or be confident, or have appetites, or get angry, or feel pity, in general have pleasure or pain, both too much or too little, and in both ways not well; but [having these feelings] at the right times, about the right things, towards the right people, for the right end, and in the right way, is the intermediate and best condition, and this is proper to virtue. Similarly, actions also admit of excess, deficiency and the intermediate condition.” (1106<sup>b</sup>18–24)

When we come to the point when the notion of the intermediate is applied to virtue, it appears that more is involved in the notion than can be expressed by quantitative terms such as “too much” or “too little”. The intermediate condition that is proper to virtue is still understood as being neither excessive nor deficient, but it is properly described as a condition responding appropriately to a number of circumstances. How can responding appropriately in respect of particular circumstances be understood as a mean condition? How do we hit the mean in having our responses conformed to a number of circumstances? And where in this attunement does the quantitative notion of mean, as neither too much nor too little, come into play? Another passage is perhaps more helpful in clarifying the relation between the intermediate and the issue of getting the things right in respect of all circumstances. In II.9, 1109<sup>a</sup>24–30 Aristotle's point is to show why it is so hard to be virtuous. It is because it is hard to hit the intermediate. And this is hard because in order to find what is intermediate, one's responses should be felt or done to the right person, in the right amount, at the right time, for the right reason and in the right way.

Suppose I am angry with the right person, for the right reason, in the right amount and at the right time. I am responding appropriately. What is the mean that I am thereby hitting? Obviously, it is the mean between feeling too much anger and too little (and acting accordingly). Now, one can wonder how would I be missing the mean, and having excessive or deficient response, if I was angry with the wrong person, or at the wrong time. In considering such questions, we should always look for the excessiveness and deficiency on the part of the feelings and the actions they motivate. Suppose I am angry (and act accordingly, whatever that may imply) at the wrong person, say, not at the person who insulted me, but at someone who is that person's friend. Accord-

ing to Aristotle's account, I would be missing the mean by being angry too much. For, the anger that would be appropriate to feel at the person who insulted me is excessive if felt in the same degree (or at all) at the other person, i.e., not the right person.

The notion of the mean is a quantitative notion defined as what is neither too much nor too little, and it is feelings and actions that admit of such degrees, being excessive, deficient or in the mean.<sup>14</sup> The relevant circumstances are not excessive etc., they are just as they are. Yet to determine what the mean in a given situation is, one cannot refer to feelings and actions themselves; one has to refer to the circumstances. That my response in a given situation is in the mean is not to be determined in virtue of my affective disposition or my ability to act, but it depends on whether it is felt (or done) to the right person, at the right time, for the right reason and so on. Only in respect of getting these things right can feelings and actions be determined to be in the mean. This explains how the intermediacy in feelings and actions relates to having one's responses attuned to a number of circumstances.

The situation in which doctors find themselves when prescribing a therapy or a diet is similar in many points. Doctor also aims at the intermediate in prescribing a therapy, accommodating therapy at the same time to a number of circumstances. He must prescribe the right combination of the right sorts of food (or drinks, exercises etc.) to the right patient, i.e. the therapy that is right for the individual patient, with regard to her constitution, the strength of her body, and to the ills that she suffers from. There are other things that he needs to take into consideration, e.g., the season of the year or the age of the patient, and other things that he will have to get right about a therapy, e.g., when to take it, at what intervals. While in taking account of the relevant circumstances doctor has to be as comprehensive as possible, in aiming at the intermediate (or the right measure) in therapy he has to be as precise as possible. For, there is one right therapy to be prescribed, and to restore a patient to health doctor has to hit this by determining the right measure and avoiding the excess and the deficiency. The definiteness of the target that should be hit and the indefiniteness and complexity of circumstances in respect of which it should be done, makes the doctor's task a hard one to accomplish, and he will often miss the mark and make at least small errors in one direction or the other. This is how Greek medical authors understand the complexity of a situation in which doctors find themselves, and how they explain why even good doctors make mistakes.<sup>15</sup> In Aristotle's account of virtue as the mean we find similar language of definiteness and indefiniteness, hitting and missing the target, uniqueness of good.

“Moreover, there are many ways to be in error, since badness is proper to what is unlimited, as the Pythagoreans pictured it, and good to what is limited; but there is only one way to be correct. That is why error is easy and correctness hard, since it is easy to miss the target and hard to hit it. And so for this reason also excess and deficiency are proper to vice, the mean to virtue; ‘for we are noble in only one way, but bad in all sorts of ways’.” (II.6, 1106<sup>b</sup>28–35)

In medical context this whole complex of problems is more explicitly explained as having to do with precision. There are, however, signs of the same concern in Aristotle's account of virtue as the mean, as shown, among other things, by terms like aiming, hitting and missing, by pointing to the fact that it is hard to be virtuous, by speaking of the mean as a target which can be hit only in one way but missed in countless ways. And there is the claim that virtue is more precise than any craft. This claim, as we saw, is unclear. Aristotle insisted that any account we can give about practical matters, that is, any

general account, can be in outline only and without precision. In such account precision could not be attained, and should not be looked for, because it is not appropriate for it. The claim that virtue is more precise than crafts refers not to such an account, but to the precision with which virtue is able to find the mean. Even so, however, it seems that precision is more easily attained in production in which craftsmen, to hit the intermediate, can look at a definite standard and conform their product to it. In aiming at the intermediate, however, virtue is more precise at least in so far as there is a wide range of circumstances to consider and many things to get right, without having any specific guidance in a way of a definite standard, so that virtue has to be more precise to find the intermediate, and it is more precise in any case when it actually finds it.

## V

Another thing I want to consider is what I would call the relativity involved in Aristotle's doctrine of the mean. By this I do not mean the relativity to which the words "relative to us" refer. As we have seen, the words 'relative to us' are used to distinguish the mean at which virtues aim from the arithmetical mean, as the relative from the absolute mean. What I mean by 'relativity' here is not a definite feature or an aspect of the mean in question, but rather a number of practical consequences that follow from the mere relation in which virtue as a mean stands to vices as excess or deficiency. This relativity has an impact on our understanding of what the intermediate in a given situation is and how it can be found. It is in this context that some looseness in requirement for exactness in hitting the mean is allowed, as expressed by these words: "Still, we are not blamed if we deviate a little in excess or deficiency from doing well, but only if we deviate a long way, since then we are easily noticed." (II.9, 1109<sup>b</sup>18–20) Although this seems to allow less strictness in requirement about hitting the exact mean, we are again faced with difficulties when we have to determine how much we can deviate from the mean in one direction or other.

To account for this latter problem (with defining the degree of permissible deviation) Aristotle points to our dependence in practical judgments on perception and their having to do with particulars:

"But how far and how much we must deviate to be blamed is not easy to define in an account; for nothing perceptible is easily defined, and [since] these [circumstances of virtuous and vicious action] are particulars, the judgment about them depends on perception." (1109<sup>b</sup>20–23)

The fact that situational judgments depend on perception is the reason why it is hard to give a general account of permissible degree of deviation. In the account attempted in ch. 8 and 9 of Book II of the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle approaches the problem by considering the ways in which virtue as the mean stands, or sometimes appears to stand in relation to vices, and tries to give, in

14

It is a question of dispute in what way and to what extent is Aristotle's doctrine of the mean conceived to depend on quantitative notion of the mean. For a quantitative interpretation of the doctrine of the mean, see Urmson (1980). For a criticism of his interpretation, see Hursthouse (2006). Cf. also her (1980–81).

15

See the Hippocratic treatise *On Ancient Medicine*, esp. ch. 9. Cf. also footnote 20 below.

view of such considerations, some suggestions about how one can be more successful in hitting the intermediate condition.

One can think of vices as opposites of virtues and assume, moreover, that there is a vice corresponding to every virtue. On Aristotle's understanding, however, we must think of triads. Thus, there are three conditions: virtue, which is the mean, and two vices, one of excess and one of deficiency (II.8, 1108<sup>b</sup>11–13). Now, the opposition that holds between the three conditions is double. For each is opposed to each other, the intermediate to each of the extremes, and each extreme both to the intermediate condition and to the other extreme (1108<sup>b</sup>13–15). With simple opposition, virtue is clearly contrasted to vice, having defined position of one of the opposites. With double opposition, virtue as the mean condition does not have this firm position. The intermediate state is defined by two extremes, but in comparison to either one of them the intermediate state is either excessive or deficient. That is, in comparison to the deficiencies the intermediate states are excessive, and in comparison to excesses they are deficient.

This does not amount to real relativity in the sense that, depending on whether we compare it to one extreme or the other, the intermediate response can be qualified as either excessive or deficient, with the effect that there is nothing intrinsically good about it. The intermediate response will only appear excessive or deficient if compared with only one of the extremes. Thus, for instance, the brave person appears rash in comparison to the coward, and cowardly in comparison to the rash person. The apparent excessiveness or deficiency of the intermediate response comes as a result of a tendency to see things from simple-opposition perspective. From the perspective of one of the extremes (but not taken as such) in comparison with the intermediate condition, the intermediate can appear as the other extreme, e.g., the coward or the rash person can see themselves as brave in comparison to the brave person, who becomes rash (relative to coward) or coward (relative to rash).

There is, however, another feature of the double opposition which Aristotle treats as an objective fact in case of some triads: asymmetry of the extremes relative to the intermediate condition. This amounts to the fact that extremes are not equally opposed to the intermediate condition: in some cases it is the deficiency, in others the excess that is more opposed. Thus, cowardice, the deficiency, is more opposed to bravery than rashness, the excess; on the other hand, it is the excess, intemperance, which is more opposed to temperance than insensibility, the deficiency.

There are two reasons why in some cases one extreme is more opposed to the intermediate than the other. One reason, Aristotle says, derives from the thing itself, that is, in such cases one extreme really is closer and more similar to the intermediate condition than the other, e.g. rashness is closer to bravery than cowardice. While it is not quite clear what this asymmetry derived from the object amounts to,<sup>16</sup> Aristotle believes that in such cases, one extreme actually is more in error and other is less so.<sup>17</sup> The other reason is derived from ourselves. This amounts to the fact that we have stronger natural tendency to one of the extremes, and it is this extreme towards which we have natural inclination that is more opposed to the intermediate condition. For example, we are more inclined towards intemperance than towards moderation because of our natural tendency to pleasure, and that is why intemperance is the more opposed extreme.<sup>18</sup>

While this may seem to further complicate things with finding the intermediate response, Aristotle's intention is to show how this asymmetry, if taken



into account, can help us be more successful in finding the intermediate. How can this help us find the intermediate? It does so simply by the fact that in such cases, with one extreme being more opposed to the intermediate than the other, one is at least provided with a direction in aiming at the intermediate. For, to hit the intermediate one should keep away from what is more opposed to it. Hence, we should recognize our natural tendencies, which are the inclinations to the more opposed extreme, and then force ourselves in the opposite direction. Or, knowing that one extreme is more in error, we shall reach the intermediate condition by pulling away from it.

Thus, the asymmetry of the extremes provides us with quite a general directive that could be followed in aiming at the intermediate. While practical judgments, being concerned with particulars and depending on perception, cannot be captured by rules and given a general account, here we have at least one directive that can be stated quite generally and regardless of particular circumstances.

Now that a general principle of human action is formulated (even if the application of such a general principle is limited to the cases in which there is a clear asymmetry of the extremes), we can consider how it can be used in ethics and to what extent it can influence practical judgments.

By moving away from the extreme that is more opposed towards the intermediate and acting in the direction opposite to our natural inclinations, we will be, according to Aristotle, best able to reach the intermediate condition. However, when it comes to the point of having one's response attuned to specific circumstances, general principle is not of much assistance. For it cannot help us define the way we should respond, to whom, for what reason or at what time. To respond to a concrete situation implies to respond to a number of requirements which no single rule can cover. Not even a complex system of rules would do; even if we had a rule for every aspect involved in making appropriate responses, concreteness of particular situation would still elude such system. In this, practical judgments depend on perception.<sup>19</sup>

But what is the value, then, of the general advice to move away from the more opposed extreme? Its value seems to depend on the assumption that we can allow some deviation in our responses from exactly the right ones. Allowing this comes with some reservation, in a way of concession we must make when faced with difficult task of hitting the intermediate. Thus the advice to move away from the more opposed extreme has the value of the second-best approach.

<sup>16</sup>

Some ideas are suggested by Taylor (2006), p. 123.

<sup>17</sup>

Cf. II.9, 1109<sup>a</sup>33.

<sup>18</sup>

In the discussion of particular virtues Aristotle's explanations of the asymmetry, although mostly in line with the two reasons stated here, show how this schema can be adopted in a wider sense when applied to particular cases. See, e.g., his explanation why the excess is more opposed to mildness (which is the mean concerned with anger): "We regard the excess as more opposed [than the deficiency]

to mildness. For it is more widespread, since it comes more naturally to human beings to exact a penalty from the offender [than to overlook an offence]; and moreover irritable people are harder to live with." (IV.5, 1126<sup>a</sup>29–31)

<sup>19</sup>

Cf. 1109<sup>b</sup>12–16: "In summary, then, if we do these things we shall best be able to reach the intermediate condition. But no doubt this is hard, especially in particular cases, since it is not easy to define the way we should be angry, with whom, about what, and for how long."

“For since one extreme is more in error, the other less, and since it is hard to hit the intermediate extremely accurately, the second-best task, as they say, is to take the lesser of the evils. We shall succeed best in this by the method we describe.” (II.9, 1109<sup>a</sup>33–<sup>b</sup>1)

Yet, we can deviate in one direction or the other only to a limited degree, possibly so little that it could not be noticed.<sup>20</sup> But if we want to determine how much we can deviate from the intermediate and not to be blamed – that is, not to step into too much excess or deficiency – here again no general account can be given. Once again, it can be determined only in view of particular circumstances, and the judgment depends on perception.<sup>21</sup>

Thus, in conclusion, no general advice can tell us what to do in a concrete situation. To respond appropriately we need to rely on perception to grasp particulars correctly. To respond correctly is to have one's feelings and actions so attuned to particular circumstances that they are, in view of those circumstances, neither in excess nor in deficiency. Precision with which this should be accomplished implies that a definite point be hit by exactly discriminating it from any excess or deficiency that could arise from any one of the relevant circumstances not being appropriately responded to.

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**Maja Hudoletnjak Grgić**

**Preciznost i relativnost u Aristotelovom poimanju  
vrline kao prave mjere**

**Sažetak**

*U članku se raspravlja o Aristotelovom poimanju vrline kao prave mjere, prema kojemu bi naše reakcije trebale težiti onome srednjemu u osjećajima i djelovanjima, fokusirajući se na problem pogađanja sredine prilikom reakcija na temelju vrlina. Problemi postizanja preciznosti u pogađanju te sredine javljaju se zbog činjenice da pojedinac mora pogoditi sredinu prikladno reagirajući na širok spektar okolnosti koje su promjenjive, ovisne o situaciji i razlikovanje kojih ovisi o percepciji. Smatra se da se preciznost vezana za pronalazak prave mjere ponajbolje razumijeva preko analogije s medicinskom ili dijetetskom praksom. Stoga se Aristotelovo korištenje medicinskih primjera pozorno analizira s ciljem razjašnjenja nekih problema i odgovaranja na barem neke od pitanja koje otvara Aristotelovo učenje o pravoj mjeri.*

**Ključne riječi**

etika vrlina, prava mjera, pogađanje sredine, preciznost, medicinska i dijetetička praksa, Aristotel

**Maja Hudoletnjak Grgić**

**Präzision und Relativität in Aristoteles' Auffassung der Tugend  
als der vernünftigen Mitte**

**Zusammenfassung**

*Das Referat diskutiert Aristoteles' Herangehen an die Tugend als den Mittelweg, wonach unsere Reaktionen hinsichtlich der Gefühle und Taten nach dem Mittleren trachten sollten, indem sie bei tugendhaften Reaktionen auf das Erzielen der Mitte fokussiert bleiben. Die Schwierigkeiten mit der Erreichung der Präzision beim Treffen dieser Mitte liegen in der Tatsache, dass der Einzelne den Mittelweg einzuschlagen hat, indem er angemessen auf ein ausgedehntes Spektrum von Umständen reagiert, die wandelbar und situationsbedingt sind, und deren Wahrnehmung auf der Perzeption ruht. Man vertritt die Ansicht, dass die Präzision, involviert bei der Findung der Mitte, bestens in Analogie zu der Medizin- bzw. Diätpraxis zu begreifen sei. Daher wird Aristoteles' Nutzung der medizinischen Beispiele eingehend analysiert, mit dem Ziel, einige Probleme zu klären, sowie zumindest etliche Fragen zu beantworten, die Aristoteles' Doktrin von der gesunden Mittelmäßigkeit anbringt.*

**Schlüsselwörter**

Tugendethik, Mittelweg, Treffen der Mitte, Präzision, Medizin- und Diätpraxis, Aristoteles

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There is a very close parallel to this discussion in medical literature. In the Hippocratic treatise *On Ancient Medicine* (dated by most scholars in late 5<sup>th</sup> c. BC), the author argues that in aiming at due measure in prescribing food precise knowledge is so difficult to acquire that slight deviations in one direction or the other should be allowed. He also points to the fact that in case of diseases that are not serious errors made by doctors go unnoticed, while in case of serious diseases they are evident to all. Here, as in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, the problems with precision are accounted for by the fact that doctors have to rely on per-

ception in hitting the right measure. Yet the medical author seems to be more ready than Aristotle to accept the knowledge with minimal deviations as the best one can hope to acquire. Cf. 128.13–17 Jouanna: “Hence it is difficult to acquire knowledge so precise that one errs only slightly in one direction or the other. And I would strongly praise this doctor, the one who makes only small errors; perfect accuracy is rarely to be seen” (translation by Schiefsky [2005]).

21

Cf. 1109<sup>b</sup>20–23.

**Maja Hudoletnjak Grgić**

**Précision et relativité dans la notion aristotélicienne de vertu  
en tant que juste mesure**

**Résumé**

*L'article discute de la notion aristotélicienne de vertu en tant que juste mesure, d'après laquelle nos réactions devraient tendre vers l'intermédiaire dans les sentiments et les actions, en se focalisant sur la difficulté à atteindre le milieu au moment des réactions vertueuses. La difficulté à atteindre cette précision en visant le milieu est due au fait que l'individu doit le faire en réagissant de manière adéquate à tout un spectre de circonstances changeantes, dépendantes de la situation et dont le discernement dépend de la perception. On considère que la précision liée à la découverte de la juste mesure se comprend le mieux à travers l'analogie avec la pratique médicale et diététique. C'est pourquoi on analyse attentivement l'emploi par Aristote d'exemples médicaux, dans le but de clarifier certains problèmes et de répondre à quelques-unes au moins des questions ouvertes par la doctrine d'Aristote.*

**Mots-clés**

éthique de la vertu, juste mesure, atteinte du milieu, précision, pratique médicale et diététique, Aristote