

# The Archer and Aristotle's Doctrine of the Mean

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How should we assess the doctrine of the mean in Aristotle's moral philosophy? Is it a dead end, false or at best trivially true? Or does the claim that moral virtues lie in a middle region between pairs of opposing vices offer an important insight into human goodness? Commentators have differed sharply on the question. J. O. Urmson (1973) has argued that the doctrine is plausible when rightly interpreted. Richard Bosley (1991) has made out a neo-pragmatist case for the mean's significance in ethics.<sup>1</sup> A moral philosopher who is by contrast rather disdainful of the idea is Bernard Williams: "[O]ne of the most celebrated and least useful parts of his system, the doctrine of the Mean [...] oscillates between an unhelpful analytical model (which Aristotle does not consistently follow) and a substantively depressing doctrine in favor of moderation. The doctrine of the Mean is better forgotten".<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Barnes (1978) declares the theory a practical and theoretical failure and suggests Aristotle would likely have come to abandon it eventually. False, trivial, or insightful: disagreement persists about the doctrine's significance.

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<sup>1</sup> Bosley (1991). I have tried to do something along roughly the same lines in Koehn (2003), and in the following discussion I draw upon Bosley's work.

<sup>2</sup> Williams (1985: 36).

## A Critique of the Mean

The claim that moral virtues are means minimally entails that each virtue must be flanked by a corresponding deficiency and excess. A vigorous critique of this claim has been offered by Rosalind Hursthouse. In her paper 'A False Doctrine of the Mean' Hursthouse rejects the idea that doing or feeling as one should can either be captured by, or can necessarily generate, concepts of too much and too little.<sup>3</sup> Wicked persons may enjoy things that are wrong without having an excessive or deficient disposition (FD 64). It is the fact that an action or feeling is wrong or dishonourable that is essential, according to Hursthouse. Whether or not it can be described as an excess or deficiency is accidental.

In what follows, I will argue that the criticisms by Hursthouse are largely unfounded. First, however, we need a somewhat more detailed statement of her reasoning. Hursthouse claims the following: to each moral virtue there corresponds at least one vice, but not necessarily exactly two opposed vices. In fact, she thinks the symmetry of exactly two vices to a virtue would be a peculiar and mysterious coincidence if it were true (FD 60, 71). People can go wrong, not just in two ways but in countless ways (FD 68). Vices themselves may involve emotions or actions directed towards the wrong objects, in the wrong way or at the wrong time; but again, there is no reason to describe all these ways of going wrong as excesses or deficiencies. Thus, for example, although the moral virtue of temperance seemed to Aristotle to be a good example of a mean, Hursthouse says it is "manifestly false" that there are exactly two opposing vices corresponding to temperance. Rather, there are at least the vices of gluttony, drunkenness, lasciviousness and a particular lack of scruple (as when one helps oneself to scarce food rations that belong to other people). To exhibit this last vice is to perform wrong or dishonourable acts, yet not necessarily to be guilty of any excess or deficiency (FD 69).

Temperance aside, courage is another moral virtue that lies in a mean, according to Aristotle. But Hursthouse objects that courage cannot helpfully be characterized as a virtue associated with, say, cowardice and rashness. Her point is illustrated with a hypothetical person whom she calls a "fearless phobic" (FD 67). This character is frightened of the dark, of enclosed spaces and of mice, but is unafraid of death, pain or physical damage. What is wrong with people like the fearless phobic, says Hursthouse, is that they fear the wrong objects (relatively harmless things) and fail to fear the right objects (seriously dangerous things). It is misleading to say that fearless phobics fear too few or too many things, or too seldom or too frequently, or that they have too much or too little fear. Fearing a wrong object, Hursthouse says, guarantees both fearing the wrong amount and fearing on the wrong occasion: "What fearing death the 'right amount' comes to is fearing death in the right way, and what *that* comes to is fearing an ignoble dishonourable

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<sup>3</sup> Hursthouse (1981) (henceforth FD), pp. 60-61. The Hursthouse claims have been discussed by Bosley (1991), Howard Curzer (1996) and Giles Pearson (2006) among others. Debate has centered in part on whether Aristotle's doctrine applies only in quantifiable contexts and whether this renders it largely inapplicable in practice. I will address these concerns below.

death but not fearing an honourable one.” (FD 68) And again: “Courage is not a virtue because it is a disposition in a mean, but rather because it is a right disposition in respect to fear.” (FD 69) The objects, where vice is concerned, are not too many nor too few, but “just plain wrong” (FD 71).

In a much later paper Hursthouse returns to her theme, claiming that there is no truth to the doctrine of the mean as ordinarily understood, that as applied in Aristotle's scientific writings it is “whacky”, unworthy of his genius, and so forth, while in the ethical works it exerts a distorting influence.<sup>4</sup> The most we can salvage from the Aristotelian notion of a virtue as intermediate is the image of a bull's eye in the middle of a target, from which center one can depart in various ways (CD 127–9). This is the central doctrine of the mean, such as it is. Talk of deficiency and excess must be discarded.

### *Sufficiency*

Hursthouse is too quick to dismiss the doctrine of the mean, as becomes clear when one thinks harder about what the doctrine actually requires. We face two questions: first, whether Hursthouse has provided an accurate reading of Aristotle, and second, to what extent the doctrine of the mean is reasonable in ways that Aristotle himself might or might not have foreseen. My aim is to speak mainly to the latter question, though in the course of offering a rational reconstruction of Aristotle's view I hope to shed some light on the former also.

We can best understand the notion of a mean in terms of sufficiency for an end, a teleological understanding which is entailed by Aristotle's account. The point has been stressed by Richard Bosley, to whom the following sketch is largely indebted.<sup>5</sup> We may think of sufficiency as a special case of adequacy for some goal. In order to make the structure of a mean more explicit, let us call that which is sufficient the *subject* of sufficiency, that for which the subject is sufficient the *objective*. Anything sufficient must be so for some objective, the idea of sufficiency without an objective—just sufficiency but not sufficiency for anything—being unintelligible. We can distinguish between a subject's being sufficient *by itself* and being sufficient *in its own way*. A subject is sufficient *by itself* if it alone can realize an objective; or it may be said to be *in its own way* sufficient, within some environment of other factors. For example, achieving a relatively high score on a certain test might be sufficient in its own way to satisfy a college entrance requirement, that is, as part of a whole range of factors which range would be sufficient by itself for admission. (There are some issues of overdetermination here which will be set aside for present purposes.) Certainly, we often do assert that a subject is sufficient for some objective while presupposing a set of other background factors in the subject range. It is also important to notice that we often continue to speak as if a thing is sufficient when its objective is unrealized in the absence of a suitable background. For instance we might describe a musical performance as sufficiently skilful for enjoyment even if some audience member does not actually enjoy it because of deafness or a headache. On a larger

<sup>4</sup> Hursthouse 2006 (henceforth CD), pp. 96, 98.

<sup>5</sup> In Bosley (1991), and in many conversations with this author.

scale, we might say that a certain practice or way of life was in its own way sufficient for happiness, even if some interfering factor or abnormal condition like disease or poverty prevented the realization of that objective.

Corresponding to sufficiency, and completing a natural triad, we have excess and deficiency. Like sufficiency, deficiency and excess also require a subject and an objective in order to be intelligible. The triad in question can be expressed thus: too little, enough and too much of something for some objective. This triad is a conceptual one; a deficient or excessive subject does not always have to be a practical possibility wherever there is a case of sufficiency. In an easily understood sense, what is enough can be said to lie between too little and too much: when there is excess, something must be diminished or taken away. When there is deficiency, the subject must be supplemented or increased somehow in order for the objective to be realized. A mean between deficiency and excess, then, is something that is enough, a case of sufficiency requiring both a subject and an objective.

Equipped with the working idea of a mean as a case of sufficiency we are already in a position to draw some consequences. Here is one. From what has been said so far it is possible to see that a subject which is sufficient need not be a balance or a harmony of opposites, as one might be tempted to suppose. It need not, that is, be a certain amount of one thing balanced against a certain amount of another thing. For example, a simple musical tone that lies in the mean of being neither too high nor too low to be audible by humans need not be a harmony nor a balance of opposites nor a blend in any ratio of high and low tones. What is important is that a sufficient subject be adequate to realize the objective in view, not that it be a combination or mingling of any sort. Of course a balance or harmony of elements sometimes is sufficient for some objective under consideration, as when strings in due proportion produce pleasure when plucked together; but it is not necessary that a mean always be expressed by a blend or ratio.

A second consequence of the view that subjects in a mean are sufficient for an objective is that there is no reason to think a subject must be quantifiable, either in the sense of being distinguishable into discrete units or being measurable on some scale analogous to either a distance (ratio) scale or a temperature (interval) scale. All that is required is that the subject said to be deficient, sufficient, or excessive admit of more and less in some respect.<sup>6</sup> Thus, for example, granting that we cannot measure anger or pleasure into units of intensity, we can still speak about an anger or pleasure sufficiently intense for some objective, or someone being too little or too much angered or pleased. Even if subjects are assigned a merely ordinal ranking it can still be true that a given member of a set of subjects is sufficiently high or low on the scale for some objective.

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. *NE* II.6 1106a25 “everything that is continuous and divisible”. I am unsure how to interpret Hursthouse’s remarks about the mean requiring quantifiability. She writes, “And, it seems, where you can count or measure, you can mark points on a continuum from 0 to whatever, and thereby speak of the more or “too much” and the less or “too little” and the mean between them” (CD 106). But it is not completely clear whether she is endorsing the view that a mean requires both measurement and a continuum.

A third conclusion which can reasonably be drawn from the sufficiency view is that the mean is sometimes broad and not necessarily a point. That is, sometimes there is a range of acts, dispositions and so on which are all sufficient for the ends of moral praise. To use a health example, there is not a single volume of food measurable to the last atom which is the right amount to eat for dinner. A range of quantities fall within the mean of sufficiency, though of course not any amount at all. Aristotle himself is not entirely explicit about the issue. At 1106b28ff in connection with Pythagorean views of the limited and the unlimited he suggests that there are many ways to err, but only one way to go right:

ἔτι τὸ μὲν ἀμαρτάνειν πολλαχῶς ἔστιν (τὸ γὰρ κακὸν τοῦ ἀπείρου, ὡς οἱ Πυθαγόρειοι εἶκαζον, τὸ δ' ἀγαθὸν τοῦ πεπερασμένου), τὸ δὲ κατορθοῦν μοναχῶς (διὸ καὶ τὸ μὲν ῥάδιον τὸ δὲ χαλεπὸν, ῥάδιον μὲν τὸ ἀποτυχεῖν τοῦ σκοποῦ, χαλεπὸν δὲ τὸ ἐπιτυχεῖν)<sup>7</sup>

He may only be intending to assert that the mean is one thing while deficiency and excess are many, or possibly that the same virtue can be associated with different pairs of excess and deficiency. However, although hitting the mean in every way and in every case is indeed difficult, it is also true to say that there may be many ways to practice the same virtue.

Obviously if a virtue is a case of sufficiency for some objective — ultimately, for eudaimonia, on Aristotle's view (cf. 1097b1ff) — there should be no particular surprise in finding that one may do too little or too much to exemplify a given virtue or to be praised for it. That sufficiency should be flanked by deficiency and excess is no more astonishing than that one integer should be immediately followed by another. To understand a claim of sufficiency is to understand as much, so the astonishment of Hursthouse at the idea of virtues being flanked by pairs of opposing vices is itself a bit surprising.

### Hitting a Mark: The Good Archer

Now consider an archer aiming at a distant target. Knowing that the archer's goal is to strike a particular mark we are presented with an objective in respect of which something may be judged for adequacy or sufficiency. We will naturally take the subjects of evaluation to be acts, abilities and dispositions involved in shooting arrows. Should the goal be achieved under normal conditions, the shooting activities and skills of the archer will be judged as good or sufficient in their own way for the end in view.

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<sup>7</sup> Bywater text. "Again, there are many ways to err (for the bad is belongs to the unlimited, as the Pythagoreans said, while the good belongs to the limited). But there is a single way to choose right (and thus the one is easy and the other difficult, as it is easy to miss the target but difficult to hit it)." (Based on the Oxford Translation of W. D. Ross, revised by J. L. Ackrill and J. O. Urmson).

Hursthouse mistakes the significance of the archer example. She thinks it provides an objection to the doctrine of the mean, whereas in fact it nicely brings out the plausibility of the doctrine. What can obscure the point however is a failure to distinguish clearly which subject ranges and objectives are under discussion. It is tempting to regard hitting the center of the target as both mean and objective, but the objective of a given mean must be something beyond that mean. If hitting the target is the objective in view, then it is in fact the shooting action of the archer that is being evaluated: for instance, the drawn bow must not too slack nor too tight, pointed neither too high nor too low and not too far to the right or left (cf. *NE VI.1*). Each of these pairs indicates a subject range of sufficiency—possibly working together, since an excess or deficiency of arc could be compensated for somewhat by tightening or slackening the pull. More generally, acts of shooting, the skill of archers, and by extension the archers themselves are judged with reference to the objective of accurate shooting. Their goodness or excellence with regard to this objective just is their sufficiency for realizing it.

A spatial representation might be helpful here:

Objective: Hitting the Target

Deficient | Sufficient | Excessive

Subject Range: Aiming and shooting actions, including raising and lowering the bow, stretching and relaxing the bowstring, pointing the arrow tip along a horizontal axis, etc.

Here a good shot will be an act of shooting which is adjusted so as to reach the goal. If on the other hand instead of the archer's acts and states we consider the position of the arrow on the target as itself a subject of evaluation, then hitting near the bull's eye will in turn be judged for some further objective, such as victory, esteem or a prize. Then rather than being the process producing a result, a good shot will be that result itself: namely an arrow strike sufficient for a victory. We would then have a different structure:

Objectives: High score, victory, praise, esteem, prize, reward

Deficient | Sufficient | Excessive

Subject: Position of the arrow in a range of left to right, high and low on the target.

When the arrow finds its mark the archer, having done enough to achieve this effect, can be said to exemplify the mean. And the archer's shooting acts and states are likewise in the mean of sufficiency, though obviously this is not to be interpreted as a claim that there were neither too many nor too few shootings.

But, someone might respond, aren't there at bottom just two options with respect to the arrow and the bull's eye, namely Hit and Miss? And, the closer to the mark the better

for the purpose of scoring. There is no such thing as “too close to the mark”. We seem to have here a binary situation rather than a triadic one, and if so then the language of deficiency and excess is accidental or superfluous.

This tempting objection leaves the situation underdescribed. Indeed an arrow either hits or misses a mark at which it is shot, but it can either exceed or fall short in various ways, so the single word “miss” can reveal either deficiency or excess. If victory and hitting the mark are really distinct things, and the hitting would be sufficient for victory, then it may happen in practice that an arrow cannot strike too closely to the center point for the objective of victory. Even so, one can imagine instances in which we might want to say that the shooting was too accurate. Someone with preternatural ability to hit the mark with each and every shot might be eventually disqualified from the sport as a result of spoiling it for everyone else: being just too accurate for the purposes of worthwhile competition.

Hursthouse has not shown that states and acts involved in good shooting are not sufficient for the objective of striking the bull’s eye, but she has drawn attention to the fact that we often speak as if one and the same thing can go wrong in several ways. A shooter can go wrong in one and the same shot by inadvertently aiming both too high and too far to the right, for example. Rightly understood, this must entail some plurality in the subject range. If there are two ways to go wrong there must be two respects that are judged: raising the arrow tip as well as moving to one side, for instance. That is, wherever there are various ways to go wrong there will be various subjects of evaluation, though they are part of the same activity of shooting. Similarly, when playing the piano one can play a passage both too fast and too loudly: here there must be both a certain volume and a certain speed in the playing. Or, an after dinner toast can be both overly long and draw too much attention to the speaker. Then there are two respects in which the speech goes too far to satisfy the objective of taste: both its length and its self-promoting tendencies exceed.

The archer trope has some limitations as an image of virtue, but whatever it shows, it does not show that we can discard the language of excess and deficiency in judging an archer’s success. The position of an arrow is not right or wrong in itself (whatever that could mean), but depends upon the goals in view. It may be true that the closer to the mark an arrow strikes, the more likely it is to be sufficient for winning this match. The closer, the better, perhaps, in this regard. But the arrow’s striking some preordained mark is not to be identified with the goodness or sufficiency of the shooting act. Alternatively it may be taken as the goal itself, for which acts and states of the shooter are evaluated as good or bad. In either case, the goodness or badness in view is a case of deficiency, sufficiency or excess.

But now an embarrassing fact must be mentioned. Although he argues at length in support of the doctrine of the mean, Aristotle muddies the waters with his view that goodness is said in many ways, according to different categories (*NE* 1096 a 21–23), and that virtue is moreover chosen for its own sake as well as for the sake of eudaimonia. Indeed, he thinks that it is characteristic of virtuous agents that they choose virtuous acts for their own sake (καὶ προαιρούμενος δι’ αὐτὰ 1105a32). He is tempted to think of

the good as that which is an object of choice or desire (cf. *NE* I.1), and he holds that there are some things which are good in themselves (καθ' αὐτά, *NE* 1096 b 14–16), with other goodness being somehow derivative from the good in itself.

In other words, while there is a goodness of virtuous things which consists in their being good for eudaimonia, they are also supposed to enjoy a goodness καθ' αὐτά, a way of being good which is thought by Aristotle to be prior to goodness for some objective. He never clearly characterizes the objectives of moral virtue in nonmoral terms. To go back to the archer, Aristotle sometimes talks as if the target itself has a special intrinsic primary goodness, with the goodness of the archer's acts for hitting the target being somehow secondary. But if it is true that the virtuousness of individual acts, dispositions and so forth consists in their adequacy or sufficiency for something other than themselves, then saying a particular act can be good in itself is likely to lead to confusion. If you hold that a thing can be good in itself you may be inclined to think that more and more of it must be better and better. Other things being equal, the more, the better, of the good in itself, one would think.

I cannot defend this claim here, but I believe that Aristotle is misled when he takes the good to be primarily the object of choice or desire, and secondarily that which is chosen for (and presumably suited to realize) its object. Moral goodness must be understood as goodness for certain ends, and goodness for must be understood in terms of adequacy. If the claim that goodness-for-an-end is posterior to a supposed goodness-in-itself is mistaken, then Aristotle obscured some of his own most brilliant insights by wrongly characterizing the good as being fundamentally the objective of choice or desire, when in fact it is fundamentally that which is adequate to realize an objective.

### Temperance and Courage

Setting aside the deep tension in Aristotle's theory brought by his view that goodness is said in different ways, let us examine some specific virtues that Hursthouse mentions. Grant that intemperance takes various forms, including overdrinking, lust and gluttony. The question that we need to consider is whether temperance and its associated vices really are best accounted for in terms of a mean.

Consider lust. "Had, having, and in quest to have extreme", Shakespeare says of it, and "Past reason hunted and no sooner had/Past reason hated" (Sonnet 129). This suggests excess of one sort or another, but in the case of lust or lechery it is clear that the vice is not simply a matter of possessing or acting on an overly strong sexual feeling. A roué might undertake a seduction out of boredom, or just to exercise a skill, without being in the grip of any especially powerful desire. Lust can indeed appear in many forms: disloyalty to a spouse, a roving eye and a rude mouth, squandering money on prostitutes, taking advantage of a young or vulnerable person, neglecting duties for sex. These and other behaviors are all instances of the vice because they have something in common: not unusually strong sexual desire, but rather an excessive readiness to engage in sexual activity, or inhibitions that are too weak in certain respects.

In several passages when Aristotle mentions sexual intemperance it is in connection with adultery (μοιχεία, cf. 1117a1, 1129b21, 1130a29). He also says in a well known passage that there is no excess of μοιχεία itself (1107a15ff), that it is always wrong. He makes this point about the impossibility of a mean amount of adultery directly before observing that there is no mean of excess or deficiency. So it looks as if he thinks that adultery itself always involves an excess or deficiency of some sort. But is it plausible? The question is, whether excess/deficiency is somehow presupposed by the definition of adultery, insofar as adultery is blameworthy. Unfortunately, Aristotle does not elaborate on this point, but it seems reasonable to think that insofar as adulterous activity really is morally objectionable it is so because it involves insufficient loyalty to a spouse, a lack of self-control or of respect for the feelings of others, too little deference to the social conventions surrounding marriage.

Saying that it is possible to have sexual relations with the wrong person or at the wrong time is no objection to the view that sexual intemperance is an instance of excess or deficiency. The lecher's preoccupation with sex or readiness to have sex may well show itself in having sex with the wrong person or at the wrong time. Of course, it would be crude to think that there is a single and simple excess that covers all the different cases. There are failures of knowledge, weaknesses of will, more or less involuntary surrenders to temptation, habitual vice, pathological cases and so on. Aristotle is praised for the subtlety of his analyses of moral success and failure. But in the various instances, whether or not the disposition is in a mean is determined for Aristotle by its sufficiency for the ultimate objectives of eudaimonia, as the sufficiency of medical activities is governed by the objective of health.<sup>8</sup> It seems that the doctrine of the mean after all has the flexibility to capture what we want to say about this form of intemperance. *Mutatis mutandis*, the same holds for gluttony and drunkenness.

Although it might seem tempting to discard talk of the mean when talking about appetites and targets of those appetites, the idea that some targets of appetite are wrong is not enlightening until we know what the objectives in view are. "Just plain wrong" may be suitable when instructing a child, but in a philosophical inquiry one would hope for a more developed account of the ends in view. Taking some examples from NE VII.5, Hursthouse observes that charcoal, earth and human flesh are wrong objects of the food appetite.<sup>9</sup> But why is this? Is it "just plain wrong" to eat charcoal? Is the wrongness of eating charcoal a simple fact, introducing no further goals as objectives of evaluation? Of course not. Under ordinary conditions, earth and charcoal are wrong things to be serving for dinner because earth and charcoal are difficult to digest, are generally lacking in nutrition, and have too little or too much of various tastes to be enjoyed. Indeed they are enough to excite revulsion in most people. As for human flesh, while it might be edible, its consumption would indicate some abnormal lack of natural feeling. So, while the wrong-

<sup>8</sup> Cf. *Eudemian Ethics* VII.15 1249a21-1249b14.

<sup>9</sup> Among various bizarre or diseased behaviors, the eating of earth, charcoal, human flesh and other such things is mentioned in NE VII.5 to illustrate brutish (θηριώδης) behavior.

ness of eating charcoal, say, does not consist in eating too much or too little of it, various forms of excess and deficiency are responsible for the wrongness of charcoal as a food: it is in virtue of charcoal's excess or deficiency in various respects that it is a wrong object of appetite. The targets of the appetite therefore may fall into a mean, and as for people who find themselves with an appetite for indigestibles such as charcoal or earth, if they do too little to resist or diminish that appetite for harmful things they might be outside some mean as well.

Let us now turn to the "fearless phobic" proposed by Hursthouse as a counterexample to the claim that courage is a mean. The fear of mice is mentioned by Aristotle as another example of "brutishness" (*θηριώδης*).<sup>10</sup> While a degree of mutual anxiety is common between humans and mice, the fearless phobic is one in whom mice produce terror and intense loathing. This debilitating fear is directed towards some mouse-related situations that will not unduly alarm a reasonable or well adjusted person. Hence, such a person wrongly fears some things, or fears some wrong things. It does not follow that this person cannot be characterized as suffering from some excess or deficiency. The subjects being judged for sufficiency would include certain fears, and by extension the persons experiencing and acting on such fears. Fears admit of more and less: we can easily imagine a range of feelings and emotions that varying from mild discomfort to gibbering, trouser-filling panic, and evidently the more extreme states could interfere with a normal life. A phobia is not in itself a moral vice, but there could be something blameworthy about a person who indulges, or at least makes no effort to control, a ridiculous or harmful terror, and such a person might reasonably be judged to be excessive, deficient or both in respect of fear, confidence and self-control.

On the other hand, it is certainly possible to have an inordinate fondness for mice. Would it ever be possible for someone to have too little fear and dislike of them? Yes: mice may transmit disease and damage property, for example. Cornered mice will bite. In situations where they have become a serious problem, we might criticize someone for taking inadequate measures or of being too blasé about them. Once again we must look to the objectives in view and judge the subject range according to the situation, taking background factors into account. The notion that there are objects of fear which are simply wrong is itself too simple and fails to take account of the goal-directed structure of such evaluations.

Objections to the doctrine of the mean often turn out to be due to certain characteristic confusions. For example, the virtue itself (the sufficiency of a thing) is frequently confused with its subject (that which is claimed to be sufficient). This mistake is encouraged by ordinary expressions which slide back and forth between virtue and subject. Thus, "kindness" is sometimes used to refer to a virtue, such that to call a person "kind" is necessarily to praise that person for a sufficiency of mildness and affection. But sometimes, kindness is taken to be a disposition or state of which there could reasonably be said to be too much. Someone who confuses these different uses might wrongly think

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<sup>10</sup> A discussion of Aristotle's examples may be found in Thorp 2003: 673-694.

that more and more dispositional kindness (or giving or boldness in the case of generosity and courage) must necessarily be better and better. Similarly, tolerance. It is possible to be overly tolerant and indulgent, as well as not tolerant enough, for moral praise. Tolerance is therefore a subject of some moral virtue. Someone who has not seen that it is the sufficiency of tolerance which is virtuous might puzzle over whether tolerance itself is a virtue.

A related error is the confusion of excesses with extremes, mean amounts with middling amounts. Thus in regard to the word “moderate”: calling a certain amount “moderate” is sometimes to praise it as a mean or sufficient amount, but at other times it merely indicates a middling degree which might well be deficient for some purposes. This can lead to the common mistake of thinking the Aristotelian doctrine of the mean is committed to an excess of caution or conventionality, a deficiency of imagination, or a tepid “middle of the road” policy: the “substantively depressing doctrine in favor of moderation”, as Williams (1985) would have it, as if what was really needed to accomplish some goal might be something or other that was excessive for that goal.

But is it not often true that some things are wrong in any amount? In some situations it would be inappropriate to feel any anger at all, say, or any sexual desire or any fear. Pearson (2006) argues that talk of too little or too much may commit one to a misleading implication that some quantity is appropriate. For example, saying that an individual embezzled too much money would leave a misleading impression that embezzling some amount of money was appropriate. Similarly, it would be misleading to say of someone that he or she fears a dark room too much if any fear would be inappropriate.

While some of these cases (e.g. cases of theft) are like the adultery example noted by Aristotle, where excess or deficiency is built into the description of the situation, it must be granted that where any fear, anger, etc. is inappropriate it would be misleading to say that a zero amount of that emotion or desire is a mean amount. For firstly, zero is not an intermediate between two amounts of emotion. And secondly, in the absence of a thing there is really no sufficiency of that thing for some objective. A nonexistent thing is not a cause, nor is the absence of a thing really a sufficient factor, even if mentioning an absence might be explanatory in some way. Still, if what it is to be morally virtuous is to be adequate for the objectives of moral praise, then if in some case the subjects of a given virtue fall into a range of more and less with the possibility of too much and too little, the doctrine of the mean will apply in that case.

## **Conclusion**

Even sympathetic critics of Aristotle sometimes underestimate his doctrine of the mean. There is a view, represented here by Hursthouse, that the doctrine is false or largely inapplicable: that moral virtues do not in general lie within an intermediate region flanked by opposing vices. I claim, to the contrary, that Aristotle's doctrine is more widely applicable than such critics acknowledge, especially if value takes the form of adequacy for an

objective. In particular, deficiency and excess are not accidental to moral evaluation for temperance and courage. Likewise in the case of health and diet, judgments about right and wrong acts presuppose goals that the right and wrong acts are right or wrong for. Most important when applying doctrine of the mean to cases of goodness, is to clearly distinguish the subject (what is said to be sufficient), the mean of sufficiency itself (the virtue—temperance, generosity or courage as the case may be), and the objective in view.

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### The Archer and Aristotle's Doctrine of the Mean

It is sometimes claimed that Aristotle's doctrine of the Mean is false or unhelpful: moral virtues are not typically flanked by two opposing vices as he claimed. However, an explicit restatement of Aristotle's view in terms of sufficiency for an objective reveals that the Mean is more widely applicable than has sometimes been alleged. Understood as a special case of sufficiency, it is essential to many judgments of right and wrong. I consider some objections by Rosalind Hursthouse to Aristotle's theory and argue that they are based on a misunderstanding. However, there is indeed a tension in Aristotle's view of goodness, hinted at in his claim that the good is "said in many ways".

KEY WORDS

doctrine of the Mean, virtue, morality, goodness, judgments of right and wrong