Mediality and Rationality in Aristotle's Account of Excellence of Character[1]

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Introduction

Aristotle defines moral excellence, which is what we have when we are such as 'both to delight in and to be pained by the things that we ought' (II 3, 1104b13),[2] as

> a state concerned with choice, lying in a mean relative to us, this being determined by reason and in the way in which the man of practical wisdom would determine it. Now it is a mean between two vices, that which depends on excess and that which depends on defect; and again it is a mean because the vices respectively fall short of or exceed what is right in both passions and actions, while excellence both finds and chooses that which is intermediate. Hence in respect of its substance and the account which states its essence [it] is a mean ... . (II 6, 1106b36-7a6)

This doctrine has appeared to many readers to have little to offer other than truisms of one sort or another: that one should get angry with neither too much nor too little intensity; or that one should get angry

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2 I use Ross's translation (in Barnes 1984) throughout.

neither too often nor too seldom; or that one's character should be neither too much towards irascibility nor too much towards inirascibility, etc. However, Aristotle introduces the doctrine by telling us that it will 'make plain' what it is to be such as to do one's work well (II 6, 1106a21-5). This suggests that he did not view it as truistic.

I will argue that there are no compelling reasons for viewing the doctrine as truistic. Seeing how it is not truistic will require seeing how the appeal (in the definitional passage) to rational determining functions in a non-trivial way. It is not that the man possessing practical wisdom determines the particular locations of the mean states by making judgements such as, 'The mean with respect to feelings of fear and confidence is *right there*'. What he contributes, rather, is knowledge that he has because he has practical wisdom; and it is the content of this knowledge that combines with certain of Aristotle's claims about character and habituation to determine the particular locations of the mean states. This knowledge, it will turn out, is knowledge of the likelihoods with which actions of different types would be required in a typical human life lived according to right reason. It does not violate Aristotle's conception of general ethical knowledge as inexact at best, since this sort of knowledge — of likelihoods and typicality — does not try to meet the standard of exactness that Aristotle says general ethical knowledge cannot meet.

The doctrine is aimed, I will argue, at the moral trainer. It is intended to 'give what help we can' to someone interested in the question of how one 'produces and increases and preserves' the virtues (II 2, 1104a10-17); and these are the tasks with which a moral trainer would like some help. The doctrine of the mean is meant to bridge a gap between practical wisdom and the art of the moral trainer. We should be reluctant to attribute to Aristotle the thought that a truism, or a set of truisms, could do this. The doctrine of the mean tells the moral trainer how to use some of the knowledge that he has (in virtue of having practical wisdom) to determine the locations of the mean states that are the moral excellences; and it tells him how to go about instilling them.

Problems With the Doctrine

The doctrine of the mean, as Sarah Broadie says, 'often gets a disappointed reception. It seems at first to offer special illumination, but in the end, according to its critics, it only deals out truisms together with a questionable taxonomy of virtues and vices' (1991, 95). In this section I will look at the reasons why the doctrine can appear disappointing.

One reason is that some of Aristotle's remarks that are difficult to see as anything but truisms might seem to be appeals to the doctrine or expressions of it. For example:

> moral excellence ... is concerned with passions and actions, and in these there is excess, defect, and the intermediate. For instance, both fear and confidence and appetite and anger and pity and in general pleasure and pain may be felt both too much and too little, and in both cases not well; but to feel them at the right times, with reference to the right objects, towards the right people, with the right aim, and in the right way, is what is both intermediate and best ... Similarly with regard to actions also there is excess, defect, and the intermediate ... excess is a form of failure, and so is defect, while the intermediate is praised and is a form of success ... Therefore excellence is a kind of mean, since it aims at what is intermediate. (II 6, 1106b16-28)

The meanings of 'too much', 'too little' and such expressions make truistic the conclusion that excess and defect are forms of failure. If one says that something was done (or felt) too much (or too little, or too often, or too seldom), it adds nothing to this to say that it was not done successfully. Aristotle seems in such passages to be arguing from (1) to (2) and from (2) to (3):

1. All passions and actions in which there is excess or defect are unsuccessful.
2. All successful passions and actions are ones in which there is neither excess nor defect.
3. All successful passions and actions are medial.

The inference from (1) to (2) is a simple matter of *modus tollens*: from $(x)(Fx \supset Gx)$ to $(x)(\sim Gx \supset \sim Fx)$. The inference from (2) to (3) is not so simple. It is not clear whether it suffices for something to be medial, simply that it display neither excess nor defect. It could be that there is neither excess nor defect because the success of the passion or action is not explainable in terms of its being neither too much nor too little of something. For example, a mathematical proof is successful (let us say) in virtue of being logically valid; but it is very difficult to see logical validity as a matter of having some quality to a certain degree, let alone to a medial degree. What could logical validity be neither too much nor too little *of*? Perhaps

some readers have seen the doctrine as amounting just to (2).[3] (2) certainly would not qualify as anything other than a truism. I will call the reading of such passages as saying that the doctrine comes to nothing other than (2), the truistic reading of the doctrine.

We might want to respond to this reading as follows. Aristotle is in this passage talking about particular emotional responses and actions. The doctrine of the mean, however, is presented in the definitional passage as a doctrine about what it is to be excellent in respect of *character*. Rosalind Hursthouse (1981) has brought out the implausibility of the idea that the excellence of a particular emotional response or action could be explained by its being medial in other than a derivative way, namely, as arising from a medial character.[4] I will assume that Hursthouse's point is well taken. To those who have thought — sometimes with disappointment, sometimes not[5] — that Aristotle does hold the thesis Hursthouse argues against, such an approach might seem not to keep faith with his thought. But whether or not he did hold such a thesis, it is clear that his main point in Book II is that excellent *characters* are medial, since character is itself the main focus of that book. So it will be no great loss if we can only see a derivative sense in which individual actions and passions are medial. We can, if we take Hursthouse's point, look on Aristotle's remarks about the mediality of particular excellent passions and actions as ill-fated attempts to extend the application of the

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3 Peter Losin (1987, 340) seems to view it this way.

4 Hursthouse takes J.O. Urmson (1973) to be committed to this idea. Urmson does say (161) that medial actions are medial only derivatively, but then appears to reverse this order of explanation in his account of the doctrine (163), according to which the mediality of a disposition is a matter of its issuing in emotional responses that are medial in the sense (he claims) of being the right amount Having reversed the order of explanation he then becomes liable to Hursthouse's objection that she cannot see how appropriateness to the occasion could always be specified as a sort of mediality.

5 Hursthouse's disappointment is echoed by Broadie (1991, 101). Christine Korsgaard, on the other hand, writes as if the view that Hursthouse attacks makes sense: 'the doctrine that virtue is a mean ... suggests ... that a certain degree of response to a given object and for a given person is appropriate' (1986, 261); 'the mean simply is whatever reason directs in a given case' (269). David Pears, too, in his discussion of courage as a mean, concerns himself with the mediality of particular actions and passions: 'a medial fear does not have to be controlled, because it makes a correct contribution to the action' (1980, 180). Finally, Richard Kraut (1989, 339-41) reads the doctrine as concerned in the first instance with particular actions and passions.

concept of mediality beyond the application it finds in the doctrine of the mean itself.[6]

However, this response does not dispose of the passage in which Aristotle makes inferences similar to (1), (2) and (3) but which undeniably concern character. After saying that the excellences are states (II 5, 1106a12), he elaborates on this (II 6, 1106a25-b6) and appears to infer from (4) to (5) and from (5) to (6):

4. All states in which there is excess or defect are non-excellent.

5. All excellent states are ones in which there is neither excess nor defect.

6. All excellent states are medial.

An inference from (4) to (5) is implied when Aristotle says that the master of any art 'avoids excess and defect' (II 6, 1106b4-5); the inference from (5) to (6) follows from the auxiliary assumption that excellent states are such in virtue of instantiating some quality or qualities that are 'continuous and divisible' (1106a26), and shows up when Aristotle says that the above-mentioned master 'seeks the intermediate' (1106b5). As we saw above, the auxiliary assumption is implausible for some qualities. (So although we should agree — because it is truistic — that the master mathematician avoids excess and defect in his proofs, we might not want to agree that there is some intermediate he seeks.) Again, the inference from (4) to (5) is a trivial *modus tollens* inside the qualifier. And again it might seem that all there is to the doctrine of the is (5), in which case the truistic reading would be vindicated.

Another reason that some readers have been disappointed with the doctrine is that Aristotle himself might appear to express a misgiving about it in Book VI:

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6 Note that it is not clear that in these passages Aristotle took himself to be expounding the doctrine of the mean rather than just trying to extend the application of its central concept. For we cannot simply infer, whenever Aristotle says that something lies in a mean, that he takes himself to be invoking the doctrine of the mean as set out in the definitional passage. There is more to the doctrine than just a certain word. For Aristotle to be invoking the doctrine there has to be an explanatory hookup with the definitional passage's claim about excellence of character.

> there is a standard which determines the mean states which we say are intermediate between excess and defect, being in accordance with right reason. But such a statement, though true, is by no means illuminating; for in all other pursuits which are objects of knowledge it is indeed true to say that we must not exert ourselves nor relax our efforts too much nor too little, but to an intermediate extent and as right reason dictates; but if a man had only this knowledge he would be none the wiser .... (VI 1, 1138b23-30)

Richard Kraut takes Aristotle to be admitting here that in his presentation of the doctrine of the mean in Book II, Aristotle 'said nothing helpful in advising us to aim at what is intermediate' (1989, 330). What help there is in the doctrine becomes apparent, according to Kraut, only when Aristotle tells us what reason is, in Book VI.

This view of things can be encouraged by the definitional passage itself. It might be thought that that passage shows that the doctrine is not really worth calling a doctrine of the *mean*, since in it Aristotle says that the moral excellences lie in — allegedly medial — states that are 'determined by reason and in the way in which the man of practical wisdom would determine it.' But if they are determined by reason, then why did Aristotle not just leave it at that? What work could be done by saying that the states are medial? It would seem that all that could be meant was that the two criteria — mediality and determination by reason — coincide. But this could be informative only if the reader had an independent grip on the criterion of mediality, and Aristotle says almost nothing about how that criterion works. So it would seem that the doctrine says nothing helpful until supplemented with the account of reason. I will call this the rationalistic reading of the doctrine, because it takes the appeal to determination by reason to be doing all the work.

So we have two readings on which Aristotle's doctrine is far from offering what Broadie called 'special illumination': the truistic reading on which it consists in an unilluminating trade on the notions of excess and defect; and the rationalistic reading, on which the portentously introduced notion of mediality 'says nothing helpful' — the appeal to rational determining does all the work. After explaining the purpose of the doctrine, and after elaborating a reading of it that shows how it answers to that purpose, I will show why these readings are insupportable.

The Purpose of the Doctrine

Aristotle begins his account of moral excellence by saying that it 'comes about as a result of habit' (II 1, 1103a16). This entails, for Aristotle, that 'we become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts' (II 1, 1103b1; see also II 4, 1105a18-20, b8-11). If we knew only this, it would perhaps seem a simple matter to get someone's character into an excellent state: just have him or her do a lot of just acts, a lot of brave acts, a lot of temperate acts, and so on.[7, 8]

Of course moral training is not a simple matter. Aristotle immediately removes the impression that on his view it might be, by telling us that there is no useful general way to characterize the sorts of acts that can be required of one in the various sorts of situations one can face:

> the account of particular cases is ... lacking in exactness; for they do not fall under any art or set of precepts, but the agents themselves must in each case consider what is appropriate to the occasion. (II 2, 1104a6-8)

Acting properly requires the proper perception of the particulars of situations and acquiring the ability so to perceive situations requires experience (II 9, 1109b20-3; VI 7, 1141b14-17; VI 11, 1143b11-14). Mere understanding of a general formula, no matter how cleverly contrived, could not suffice to endow one with the ability to say what doing well would amount to, in terms of particulars, in particular situations. The

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7 Simple, but not necessarily easy: one cannot just *have* someone rush into a battle, for instance. But with respect to some virtues, simplicity would make for easiness: it would not be difficult to have someone do temperate acts, e.g., eat modestly sized meals.

8 Of course, this is not all that moral training, in a fuller sense, would involve. There is nothing to the doctrine of the mean, as I understand it, that makes it incompatible with a view of moral training such as that suggested by Aristotle's claim that excellence in the strict sense 'implies the *presence* of right reason' (VI 13, 1144b27). This suggests that one could not be trained so as to be excellent only morally; moral training must also involve the moulding of the perceptive abilities involved in practical wisdom. The doctrine of the mean concerns only that *aspect* of moral training on which it is the moulding of character (I discuss below what character is). It is neither a presupposition nor a consequence of the doctrine that that aspect of training could be carried out independently of the moulding of morally relevant perceptive abilities. The doctrine has nothing to say on that issue.

thesis that this is so I will call the thesis of the uselessness of general ethical truths, or the uselessness thesis. (This must be distinguished from the thesis that there are no general ethical truths.) It follows that the moral trainer cannot possess a precise general description of the just acts, brave acts, temperate acts etc. that he wants his charges to do, that in advance characterizes them in terms of particulars. Broadie agrees that this is the problem that the doctrine is meant to address: 'From the standpoint of the *politikos* the difficulty now is this ... He could not know *what* to try to bring about' (1991, 60).

So: the moral trainer was told that he should have his charges do brave acts, temperate acts, just acts, and so on; but right after that he was told that there is no useful general way to characterize these acts. So, it seems, he was told nothing useful at all. Aristotle addresses this apparent problem straight off, saying 'though our present account is of this nature we must give what help we can' (II 2, 1104a10) and then discussing what 'produces and increases and preserves' (II 2, 1104a17) the virtues. The discussion is a preliminary presentation of the doctrine of the mean (II 2, 1104a11-26). It is clear, then, that the doctrine of the mean is meant as a help to the moral trainer, someone whose problem is to produce, increase and preserve the virtues in his charges. If one does not see this it might seem that the doctrine merely supplies a way of describing excellent characters. The doctrine is not meant primarily as an alternative way of describing the excellent agent, although it does do that. It is meant to give the moral trainer some idea how to go about his task. We must now consider what that task is and what excellence of character is, towards which it aims.

Excellence of Character

Aristotle says that states of character show themselves in the pleasures and pains that agents take in their actions:

> the man who abstains from bodily pleasures and delights in this very fact is temperate, while the man who is annoyed at it is self-indulgent, and he who stands his ground against things that are terrible and delights in this or at least is not pained is brave, while the man who is pained is a coward. For moral excellence is concerned with pleasures and pains; it is on account of pleasure that we do bad things, and on account of pain that we abstain from noble ones. (II 3, 1104b5-11)

Moral excellence, then, is to be found in someone who is always able, without difficulty of a certain sort, to act rightly. The qualification 'without difficulty of a certain sort' is required because moral excellence rules out continence (and incontinence) in which one's difficulty in acting rightly (or inability to act rightly) is explained by reference to one's dispositions to feel pleasures and pains.[9]

Aristotle assumes that there are certain dimensions of character, different ways of ordering people according to their characters.[10] If we

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9 And I will leave it at that for present purposes, since I wish in this account to abstract from differences among readings of Aristotle's moral psychology that result in different ways of conceiving of the sorts of difficulty at work in continence and in incontinence. David Wiggins (1979, 249), for instance, thinks that the difficulty (at least in incontinence) is a struggle of the sort that Aristotle himself seems to take simply as a datum in psychology, between the desiring and the intellectual parts of the soul (he cites I 13, 1102b16-24). He rejects the idea that the continent and the incontinent 'see things differently' (250), although he allows that the difference between the virtuous man and the continent might be of that sort. John McDowell, on the other hand, thinks that the difficulty in either case is 'a flaw in the functioning of the incontinent's [or continent's] approximation to the special perceptual capacity that *phronēsis* is' (1988, 96; see also 1979, 334). Nonetheless on McDowell's reading too the flaw is *explained* by reference to 'the impact of a desire to do otherwise' (1979, 334). We can see the difference between Wiggins and McDowell as a difference on the question *where* the impact is, so to speak, not on the question *what* it is that impacts. On either sort of reading, the difficulty is explained by reference to the agent's dispositions to feel pleasures and pains. As I read it, the doctrine of the mean tells the moral trainer how to train someone so as not to have difficulties susceptible of explanations of that sort, however they may go in detail: so questions at the level of the disagreement between McDowell and Wiggins do not bear on my reading of the doctrine. All we need to say for present purposes is that excellence of character is what one has when one is not such as to have the sort of difficulty that is explained — in whatever particular way to which one's reading of Aristotle's moral psychology commits one — by reference to one's dispositions to feel pleasures and pains.

10 From his expositions of the virtues we can see that some of the dimensions are supposed to be those of fear and confidence (III 6, 1115a7), pleasure-seekingness (III 10, 1117b25), attachment to wealth (IV 1, 1120b10-15, 1122a2), show-off-ishness (IV 2, 1122a32, 1123a25), self-regard (IV 3, 1123b15) (although the question of desert complicates that account), desire for honour (IV 4, 1125b20), irascibility (IV 5, 1125b28), pleasingness in social situations (IV 6, 1126b30-5), liking for claiming things that bring repute (IV 7, 1127a22), liking for making jokes (IV 8, 1128a34-b3), and lastly the troublesome case of justice, in which the dimension seems to be some sort of proportionality (V 3, 1131a10-b12), although it is hard to see how this could be a dimension of character (V 5, 1133b32).

look at dimensions such as fearfulness and irascibility then we at once wonder how Aristotle could suppose that what would at first seem to be two dimensions would be one: how he could propose to rank both the readiness to become afraid (or angry) and the intensity with which one becomes afraid (or angry), on one scale. Surely, among those who are slow to anger there can be differences in the intensity of the anger aroused; and similarly (though less plausibly) for fear.[11] I will not dwell on the exact nature of the various orderings. The assumption he makes is that there are such orderings that can serve the purpose of the doctrine, which is to help the moral trainer. As Aristotle suggests (IV 7, 1127a14-17), this assumption will be vindicated only retrospectively. To the extent that his expositions of the virtues can be fitted into the conceptual framework supplied by the doctrine so as to generate some useful guidance for the moral trainer, then the orderings will be shown to be well-founded. In some strained cases (e.g., that of justice) we might conclude that Aristotle had hit on the wrong way of conceiving of the relevant dimension of character rather than that he had hit on the wrong doctrine concerning character, or that he went wrong in assuming that characters can be ordered in such ways as to work within the doctrine. In other cases it might be the doctrine itself, rather than the conception of the relevant dimension of character, that causes the problems. But I will not enter into detailed discussions of the doctrine at the level of application, since my interest is more to see what the doctrine is than to assess the plausibility of the claims on which it rests. The claim that characters stand in certain orderings is one of these, as will become clear.

It might appear from many of the remarks he makes, especially in the long discussions of the particular virtues, that Aristotle does not operate with the rather minimal-sounding conception of character just described. So far all I have said about that conception is (1) that it is by

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11 With other dimensions the worry might be that rather than mixing up intensity and readiness Aristotle might be mixing up other things: perhaps among those who are (more or less) attached to telling jokes, there are differences (relevant to one's ability to live as reason would direct) worth plotting along a separate dimension among those who are attached to telling very funny jokes and those who are attached to telling only mildly funny jokes (habitual punsters, for example). I will not discuss the plausibility of the particular dimensions of character that Aristotle singles out See Pears 1980 for a discussion of such problems with respect to courage and Hursthouse 1981 with respect to temperance.

reference to one's character that one's inability to act rightly or difficulty in acting rightly can at times be explained; and (2) that characters can be ordered in ways that serve the purpose of the doctrine of the mean. But throughout his discussions of the virtues of character, as well as taking them to be located at a medial point (along a dimension of character) that corresponds to a mere *ability* to do as reason would prescribe, Aristotle seems also to take them to be located at a point (along a dimension of character) that corresponds to a *disposition* to do as reason would prescribe. In some passages he even appears to *infer* that such an ability guarantees such a disposition (II 9, 1109a20-9; III 7, 1116a10-12; III 11, 1119a11-18; IV 1, 1120b26-31). How, given the minimal conception of character I have attributed to Aristotle — on which its excellence guarantees only that one does not have a difficulty of a certain sort in acting as reason would prescribe — could it also be that its excellence also guarantees a *disposition* to do as reason would prescribe?

The answer is that it does not; neither does Aristotle say that it does. The key to dealing with these passages is to see that in them Aristotle is describing the morally excellent person as a whole, rather than just the difference that moral excellence makes. For the purpose of illustrating the virtues, 'it makes no difference whether we characterize the state or the man characterized by it' (IV 3, 1123a36).[12] We have to be careful in deciding what is true of the temperate man *qua* man having a medial disposition with regard to certain pleasures, and what is true of him *qua* man having such a disposition *and* right reason. Care is especially required since the excellences of character are not such as simply to coexist with right reason; for Aristotle they imply the presence of right reason (VI 13, 1144b27). Aristotle does not say that it is *solely* in virtue of having a medial character that the virtuous man having right reason is *disposed* to do things at the right times, to the right people, in the right amounts, in the right places, etc. The virtuous man's excellence of character makes him capable, insofar as character makes the difference, of doing as situations require; it does not on its own explain why he does do as situations require. The presence in him of right reason, which is

12 Hence we have in the first passage cited in the previous paragraph (II 9, 1109a20-9) a contrast between 'any one' (1109a26) and the virtuous man; in the second (III 7, 1116a10-12) Aristotle speaks of courage itself choosing or enduring things, and this has to be taken figuratively; in the third (III 11, 1119a11-18) the subject is the temperate man; and in the fourth (IV 1, 1120b26-31) the subject is the liberal man.

implied by the presence of excellence of character (VI 13), is also involved in explaining that.

So we can operate with the minimal conception of character just described. It is not part of Aristotle's conception of character, that an excellent character makes one disposed to do as reason prescribes; rather its excellence just ensures that no difficulty of a certain sort arises in doing so. However minimal such a conception might seem, it supplies part of the theoretical apparatus needed to formulate the doctrine of the mean. Another part, to which I now turn, has to do with habituation.

Habituation

Aristotle says that one becomes just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, and so on (II 1, 1103b1). For him, 'states arise out of like activities' (II 1, 1103b21). Clearly, one could believe otherwise. For example, someone might think that one must lead children into as many sensual excesses as possible in order to make them jaded and therefore resistant to sensual temptations later on. Or again, someone might think that one makes a child temperate by feeding him only insipid food and having him sleep on a hard bed in an unheated room, etc. The assumption that one acquires a character of a certain sort by doing the types of things that persons having that character fine pleasant to do, then, is not a truism; not one knowledge of which we could attribute to everyone.

Is it a principle we should credit to anyone possessing practical wisdom? Aristotle says that we should credit to anyone not 'a thoroughly senseless person' the belief that characters are formed by activities (III 5, 1114a9-10) — not, here, the belief that they are formed by *like* activities. So he isn't claiming here that the principle about habituation is part of right reason. I will return to this question.

So far we have attributed two claims to Aristotle: that we have characters as he conceives of them (and by implication that excellence of character is as he conceives of it); and that habituation is effected as he conceives of it. On the basis of these claims, I will argue below, we can describe a way in which the moral trainer having right reason could determine the states that are excellences.

The Doctrine of the Mean

We saw above that the uselessness thesis implied that Aristotle's statement that we become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, and so on, cannot be taken as the whole story about moral training; for there is no useful general way to characterize such acts. To say just this, however, to someone interested in producing and increasing the preserving excellence of character, is to say nothing at all helpful. So Aristotle presents the doctrine of the mean as part of an effort to 'give what help we can' (II 2, 1104a10).

We can start to see how it works by recognizing that the uselessness thesis rules out only a very ambitious sort of ethical knowledge. There is still room for general knowledge that is not that ambitious. Aristotle's discussions of the particular virtues show us that one kind of knowledge not ruled out is knowledge about how often and with what likelihoods right reason will require different sorts of actions during a typical well-lived life. For example, in Aristotle's discussion of temperance he tells us that eating beyond one's needs for replenishment is self-indulgent (IV 11, 1119a16-18). But this cannot be an exceptionless rule: it could be required to gorge oneself, as Hursthouse points out (1981, 62), if one knew that one was to be without food for a long time thereafter. It would also seem that to eat a modest lunch would be an almost daily requirement of right living; the rare exceptions would arise e.g. when one was sick. Similarly the 'mixed actions' of III 1 are ones that right reason would very seldom dictate, though in extreme circumstances they could be required.[13]

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13 Note that we cannot presume anything, from our philosophical standpoint, about what sorts of individuations of action-types a person might employ in formulating such general truths to himself. In particular, there need be no presumption that only individuations in non-ethical terms can play a role. (See below: one such truth is that doing well is unlikely to require giving money to vicious people.) Obviously one could not formulate this proposition without using ethical terms. But even if it were true that no such truth could be framed using ethical terms, it would not follow that the doctrine of the mean represented an attempt to formulate general ethical truths in non-ethical terms. What the doctrine gives is an account of the moral training that produces an agent who is able to do well (insofar as character makes the difference), not a general characterization of doing well. (I am responding here to a worry expressed by Donald Ainslie.)

The moral trainer, who I am assuming possesses practical wisdom to some degree, can be assumed to have general ethical knowledge about how often and with what likelihoods right reason will require different sorts of actions during a typical well-lived life. It is plausible to see the knowledge varying directly with the practical wisdom, and I will assume that it does. So a moral trainer possessing practical wisdom to a notable degree knows of many types of actions, tokens of which right reason could require during the course of a life; and he has some ideas of how often, and with what likelihoods, right reason could require tokens of those types during the course of a typical life.

What the doctrine of the mean shows the moral trainer how to do, I will now argue, is to put this knowledge to work in deciding on how to go about his task of habituating someone into moral excellence. So let us assume that, as well as having practical wisdom to some notable degree, the moral trainer has absorbed the uselessness thesis as well as Aristotle's claims about character and about habituation. Then we can say the following about him. He knows that moral training is not a simple matter: he knows that he cannot — despite Aristotle's apparent urgings — simply have his charges repeat just acts, liberal acts, temperate acts, etc., for he knows that there are no useful general descriptions picking out all and only the just acts, the liberal acts, the temperate acts, etc. But he has a rough idea of the *likelihoods* of right reason's requiring acts of certain types during the course of a *typical* well-lived human life.[14] Consider the virtue of liberality: what are some examples of the general truths available to the moral trainer possessing practical wisdom? He knows that doing well will seldom require (*a*) giving to flatterers (IV 1, 1121b5-7); that it will often require (*b*) giving to a friend (1122a11); that it will often require (*c*) refraining from giving money to someone (1120b3); that it will never require (*d*) raising funds by plying a sordid trade (1121b33).

Now — bringing in his knowledge of Aristotle's claims about character — he knows that there is a dimension of character corresponding to the virtue of liberality and the vices of meanness and prodigality: call it the dimension of attachment to wealth. In the following, if a type of action is

14 He cannot *call* them just acts, brave acts, temperate acts, and so on; the most he can say is that they are types tokens of which are with varying likelihoods going to be just acts, brave acts, temperate acts, etc.

one tokens of which would (*qua* tokens of that type) be ones that the agent is, 'on account of pleasure or pain,' unable or able only with difficulty to do, then I will say that that type is one tokens of which are not *doable* by the agent. So: our trainer knows that actions of type (*a*) will be doable to those least attached to wealth, while to anyone else they will not. Actions of type (*b*) are plausible to see as doable for any but the most attached to wealth. It is plausible to suppose that there will be some characters to whom actions of type (*a*) are not doable while actions of type (*b*) are. Actions of type (*c*) are ones doable for any but the least attached to wealth.[15] Those of type (*d*) are doable only to those of meanest character.

So far the notion of mediality has played no role in our description of the moral trainer's knowledge. I think we can begin to bring out its role, as Aristotle conceived of it, by attempting to diagram the moral trainer's knowledge (i.e., his general knowledge plus the claim about character) in the following way. The bars of x'es represent types of actions, individuated as in the moral trainer's knowledge discussed above, that right reason could require. I have diagrammed action-types (*a*), (*b*), and (*c*) as examples. Action-type (*d*) is not diagrammed since right reason could never require an action of that type.[16] The horizontal axis represents an ordering of character types along a particular dimension of character; here it is the dimension of attachment to wealth. A bar's being over a position on the horizontal axis means that the bar represents an action type, tokens of which are doable for a person having the character corresponding to the position.

So far the diagram doesn't represent the *likelihoods* of different action types being ones tokens of which will be required in typical well-lived

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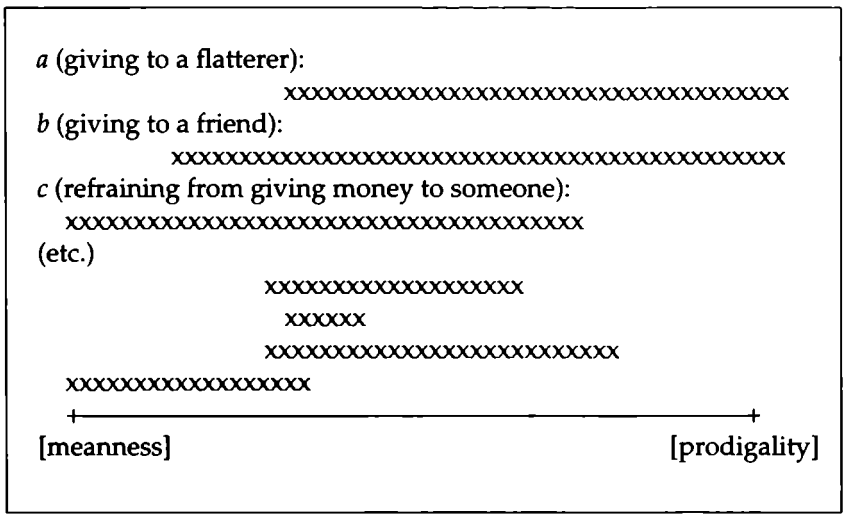
15 Although to see them as ones so painful to the least attached to wealth that they could not perform them, we would have to think of such people as being averse to wealth. Nonetheless Aristotle does seem to think of them in this way. He says that in order to be a true prodigal one has to have a 'wish to spend' (IV 1, 1121a31) and 'an appetite for giving' (1121b3); although it is seldom found without some acquisitive appetite accompanying it and urging one to procure the wealth to be given away (1121a16).

16 Perhaps it could as a 'mixed action,' one worth refraining from considered on its own but worth performing considered with respect to the situation in which one finds oneself (III 1, 1110a4-19). But I will assume that it is among those that 'we cannot be forced to do, but ought rather to face death after the most fearful sufferings' (III 1, 1110a26).



lives. But we could introduce a sort of weighting to the diagram by adding more bars: there would be many giving-to-a-friend bars, few giving-to-a-flatterer bars, and many refraining-from-giving-money-to-someone bars. With such an improvement the following will be true: that the[17] position on the bottom axis over which there is the greatest number of bars will correspond to the character (on the dimension represented) most capable of doing as reason is likely to require during the course of a typical well-lived human life.[18]

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17 I use the definite article here because Aristotle always talks about there being only one mean per virtue. This is another non-empty assumption about how these diagrams are going to look for each of the virtues, but we must make it in order to keep faith with Aristotle's talk about means.

18 Aristotle almost always writes as if the character corresponding to this point on the dimension of character is one to whom *all* actions of types that right reason could require are doable; hence all bars must overlap over at least one position on the horizontal axis. But sometimes he seems to write as if this is too strict an assumption: he says (II 2, 1104a33-b3) that the temperate man is *most able* to abstain from pleasure and the brave man is *most able* to face what is terrible, without there saying that they are *always* able to do such things. I have drawn the 'etc.' bars on the assumption that the usually expressed view is what Aristotle wants.

How does this capture a notion of mediality? The mediality of this sort of character is displayed by the diagram; we select a character that, with respect at least to all the virtues Aristotle discusses that fit at all smoothly into the conceptual apparatus, is not located at either of the extremes. That it is not so located is, obviously, due to the conjunction of contingent facts about the ordering of characters and facts about the likelihoods with which tokens of the various action-types will be required by right reason during the course of a typical well-lived human life. This, I suggest, is the sense in which the mean states are 'relative to us' (II 6, 1106b36). They depend for their location on the conjunction of contingent facts about our characters and about the likelihoods with which we will be required to perform actions of different types during the courses of our lives.

What is the moral trainer's procedure going to be, then? He wants to habituate people so that their characters are, on each dimension of character, as close as possible to the character most able to do as right reason is likely to require during the course of a typical well-lived human life. Now the claim about habituation comes into play: instilling a character of a certain sort involves having the subject do often the sorts of things pleasant to characters of that sort. Things are not simple, however, since for each type of action there will be a wide range of characters such that those having such characters could perform that action without difficulty. The moral trainer needs to zero in on the desired character. One way to do that would be to have the subject perform actions the habituating effects of which partly cancel each other out, leaving the desired character as the only into which one is habituated by often performing actions of *both* those types. For example, in the diagram action-types (*a*) and (*c*) partly cancel each other's habituating effects out in this way, excluding characters of both extremes from the range of characters into which one could be habituated by repeating actions of both those types. By employing such cancelling-out effects, the moral trainer can zero in (to the extent possible) on the desired state.

The Problems Solved

Aristotle introduces the doctrine of the mean as a help to those interested in the question how the virtues are to be produced and increased and preserved. So it couldn't be truistic. And it is plausible to see it as not contained in right reason itself, since the two very philosophical claims — about what character is, and about how habituation is effected — are

difficult to see as ones with which we must credit everyone having right reason. (It is doubtful that Pericles, for example (VI 5, 1140b7), had Aristotle's conception of character.) It follows that neither the truistic reading nor the rationalistic reading could do justice to the doctrine. But where exactly do they go wrong?

On the truistic reading, there was nothing to the doctrine other than the idea that all excellent states of character are ones in which there is neither excess nor defect (this was statement (5) on page 5). However, we know that there must be more to it than just this, for in order to move to the idea that the virtues lie between extremes, Aristotle needed the auxiliary premise that the virtues lie on dimensions that are 'continuous and divisible' (II 6, 1106a26). (This is the move from (5) to (6).) This is what the conception of character provides, and it is certainly not truistic. The doctrine does not turn simply on a *modus tollens* move from the claim that excellent states exhibit neither excess nor defect to the claim that no state exhibiting excess or defect is excellent. The conception of character is crucial to it.

Richard Kraut, as I noted above, reads the doctrine rationalistically. He thinks that it is useless until supplemented with the account of right reason in Book VI, and cites Aristotle's remark about the doctrine that 'if a man had only this knowledge he would be none the wiser' (VI 1, 1138b29-30). But Kraut mistakes what the worry is about. Aristotle's worry is not about the doctrine's having thitherto been useless *simpliciter*; it is about the uselessness of the doctrine *to someone lacking right reason*. The man 'having only this knowledge' is the man who, without having right reason, knows, because he knows *only* the doctrine of the mean, only how it — whatever it is — determines the particular locations of the mean states. That is, he knows what *sort* of diagram *would* represent the knowledge of the man knowing the doctrine of the mean *and* having right reason; but he does not know what the bars would represent nor where they should be located, since he lacks (because he lacks right reason) the knowledge of the likelihoods with which right reason will require actions of various types during the course of a typical well-lived human life. To such a man the doctrine is useless. Aristotle is not, as Kraut says, admitting here that his earlier statements of the doctrine of the mean 'said nothing helpful' (330) absolutely; he is only pointing out that the doctrine is nothing helpful to someone 'having only this knowledge' (the doctrine itself) yet lacking right reason.

This again suggests that Aristotle thought the doctrine of the mean useful to someone *having* right reason. The picture, then, is as follows. What is required of a moral trainer is knowledge of the likelihoods with

which right reason will require actions of various types during the course of a typical well-lived human life (which knowledge is part of having right reason), and knowledge of the doctrine of the mean (which knowledge is based on Aristotle's conception of character and his claim about habituation). To someone lacking the former the doctrine is useless; someone having the former and lacking the latter is not, for Aristotle, in a position to *use* the former to help with moral training.

Broadie appreciates the point of the doctrine, as I noted above. However on her reading, as on Kraut's, it offers little to anyone contemplating the task of raising a child, say, so as to be morally excellent:

> it is useful to point out [to the moral trainer] that a balanced temperament is much less likely to be achieved either through a training that forces people to face, or through one that allows them to evade, everything fearful or unpleasant. Yet even on this level no exact recipes are possible, since it is not as if one could mix (or weave) a desirable temperament out of definite quantities of emotional ingredients according to formula. (Broadie 1990, 101)

We can get more than what Broadie provides, by looking at what is available to the would-be moral trainer in virtue of his having right reason and his having heard Aristotle's lectures. There is more that right reason and philosophy can contribute than is suggested by the statement that 'no exact recipes are possible.' Rough, imprecise recipes can be of some help. And rough, imprecise recipes are exactly what, on the reading I have outlined, Aristotle's doctrine of the mean is meant to provide.

Conclusion

For Aristotle the doctrine of the mean fills, as much as it can be filled, a gap between practical wisdom and the art of the moral trainer. Filling that gap requires three things: Aristotle's conceptions of character and habituation, and the general ethical knowledge that the man of right reason can supply (knowledge of the likelihoods with which right reason will require actions of different types during the course of a typical well-lived human life). It does not turn on a simple *modus tollens*; nor is it useless unless supplemented with an account of right reason. It says something useful to someone having right reason (not necessarily an account of it) but not having as good an idea as Aristotle thinks one can have, of how to produce, increase and preserve the virtues.

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