

Aristotle
Doctrine of the Mean
Nicomachean Ethics II. 6-7

We may safely assert that the virtue (*arete*) or excellence of a thing causes that thing both to be itself in good condition and to perform its function well. The excellence of the eye, for instance, makes both the eye and its work good; for it is by the excellence of the eye that we see well. So the proper excellence of the horse makes a horse what it should be, and makes it good at running, and carrying his rider, and standing a charge.

If, then, this holds good in all cases, the proper excellence or virtue of man will be the habit or trained faculty that makes a man good and makes him perform his function well.

Now, if we have any quantity, whether continuous or discrete, it is possible to take either a larger (or too large), or a smaller (or too small), or an equal (or fair) amount, and that either absolutely or relatively to our own needs.

By an equal or fair amount I understand a mean amount, or one that lies between excess and deficiency.

By the absolute mean, or mean relative to the thing itself, I understand that which is equidistant from both extremes, and this is one and the same for all.

By the mean relative to us I understand that which is neither too much nor too little for us; and this is not one and the same for all.

For instance, if ten be too large, and two be too small, if we take six we take the mean relative to the thing itself [or the arithmetical mean]; for it exceeds one extreme by the same amount by which it is exceeded by the other extreme: and this is the mean in arithmetical proportion.

But the mean relative to us cannot be found in this way. If ten pounds of food is too much for a given man to eat, and two pounds too little, it does not follow that the trainer will order him six pounds: for that also may perhaps be too much for the man in question, or too little; too little for Milo, too much for the beginner. The same holds true in running and wrestling.

And so we may say generally that a master in any art avoids what is too much and what is too little, and seeks for the mean and chooses it—not the absolute but the relative mean.

If, then, every art or science perfects its work in this way, looking into the mean and bringing its work up to this standard (so that people are accustomed to say of a good work that nothing could be taken from it or added to it, implying that excellence is destroyed by excess or deficiency, but secured by observing, the mean; and good artists, as we say, do in fact keep their eyes fixed on this in all that they do), and if virtue (*areté*), like nature, is more exact and better than any art, it follows that virtue also must aim at

the mean—virtue of course meaning moral virtue or excellence, for it has to do with passions and actions, and it is these that admit of excess and deficiency and the mean. For instance, it is possible to feel fear, confidence, desire, anger, pity, and generally to be affected pleasantly and painfully, either too much or too little, in either case wrongly; but to be thus affected at the right times, and on the right occasions, and towards the right persons, and with the right object, and in the right fashion, is the mean course and the best course, and these are characteristics of virtue. And in the same way our outward acts also admit of excess and deficiency, and the mean or due amount. Virtue, then, has to deal with feelings or passions and with outward acts, in which excess is wrong and deficiency also is blamed, but the mean amount is praised and is right—both of which are characteristics of virtue.

Virtue, then, is a kind of moderation inasmuch as it aims at the mean or moderate amount.

Again, there are many ways of going wrong (for evil is infinite in nature, to use a Pythagorean figure, while good is finite), but only one way of going right; so that the one is easy and the other hard—easy to miss the mark and hard to hit it. On this account also, then, excess and deficiency are characteristic of vice, hitting the mean is characteristic of virtue: "Goodness is simple, evil takes any shape."

Virtue, then, is a habit or trained faculty of choice, the characteristic of which lies in moderation or observance of the mean relative to the persons concerned, as determined by reason, i.e. by the reason by which the prudent man would determine it. And it is a moderation, firstly, inasmuch as it comes in the middle or mean between two vices, one on the side of excess, the other on the side of defect; and, secondly, inasmuch as, while these vices fall short of or exceed the due measure in feeling and in action, it finds and chooses the mean, middling, or moderate amount.

Regarded in its essence, therefore, or according to the definition of its nature, virtue is a moderation or middle state, but viewed in its relation to what is best and right it is the extreme of perfection. . . .

But it is not enough to make these general statements: we must go on and apply them to particulars. For in reasoning about matters of conduct general statements are too vague, and do not convey as much truth as particular propositions. It is with particulars that conduct is concerned: our statements, therefore, when applied to these particulars, should be found to hold good. These particulars then will be taken from the following table:

The mean as concerns fear and confidence is courage: those that exceed in fearlessness are foolhardy, while those who exceed in fear are cowardly.

The mean in respect to certain pleasures and pains is called temperance, while the excess is called profligacy. Deficiency in this matter is never found, so this sort of person does not have a name . . .

In the matter of giving and earning money, the mean is liberality, excess and deficiency are prodigality and miserliness. But both vices exceed and fall short in giving and earning in contrary ways: the prodigal exceeds in spending, but falls short in earning; the miser exceeds in earning, but falls short in spending. . . .

With respect to honor and disgrace, the mean is "high-mindedness," the excess might be called vanity, and the deficiency might be called humility or small-mindedness. . . .

In the matter of anger also we find excess and deficiency and a mean. The characters really don't have names, but the moderate man who attains the mean here is called gentle, and we call his character gentleness; of those who go to extremes, we may take the term "wrathful" for the one who is angry in excess, and "timid" for the one who is deficient in anger, and "timidity" is his character. . . .

With regard to pleasantness in amusement, he who observes the mean may be called witty, and his character wittiness; excess may be called buffoonery, and the man is a buffoon; while "tedious" may stand for the person who is deficient, and "tediousness" describes his character. . . .