

Explain why, precisely, the doctrine of the mean cannot set a standard or criterion for virtue in Aristotle's account. Then answer these questions: if it doesn't do that, what use is it? Why does Aristotle think it's so important? Illustrate your answers to those last two questions by discussing (briefly) two virtues.

### The Importance of the Doctrine of the Mean

While Aristotle's doctrine of the mean does not (and cannot) set a standard for virtue, it is important in that the appropriate amount is determined through practical wisdom and our affective capacities. In order for a person to be virtuous, he or she must determine what the appropriate amount of a virtue is depending on the circumstances of the situation, including judgements, opinions, experiences, and other factors that make up his/her own practical wisdom. In addition, our affective capacities give us the context for making those evaluations in each specific situation. This practical wisdom allows the person to determine whether or not his or her virtues are in the appropriate amount and can adjust his or her virtues in accordance with that amount.

Aristotle's doctrine of the mean does not set a standard for virtue. The doctrine of the mean only says that virtue must be held in due proportion. This means the virtue must not be held in excess nor in dearth. For every emotion, it is possible to exhibit too much, too little, or just the right amount of it. By "too much", this can mean to have the virtue on instances that are not appropriate or in an amount greater than the appropriate amount. By "too little", this can mean to have the virtue in an amount less than the appropriate amount or to not have the virtue on appropriate occasions. The doctrine of the mean does not mean that the virtue is to be held in moderation or at an "average" or "halfway point" between extremes. It means that one must

determine the appropriate amount depending on the situation. A person of genuine practical intelligence must judge what would be the appropriate amount of a virtue depending on the situation he or she is in and his or her personal characteristics. The “mean” (appropriate) amount of each virtue is based on this practical wisdom that the person has collected through his or her experiences. This doctrine does not allow a standard or criterion for virtue because this doctrine does not explain how a person determines whether or not an amount of a virtue is appropriate.

Moreover, the doctrine of the mean cannot set a standard for virtue. If there were a way for the doctrine of the mean to set a standard of virtue, then Aristotle's idea of a “virtuous person” falls apart. The “standard” that we create would differ between different people because each person would have a different practical wisdom. Everyone has different judgements, beliefs, and perspectives on situations. What is “too little,” “too much,” “too often,” or any similar quality depends on the judgements of a single individual person and not those of other people. If Aristotle were to set a “virtuous person” that everyone should try to become, then it would be impossible for anyone to share the same idea of a “virtuous person” with any other person since everyone's standard of virtue would be different. If there were a way for everyone to have the same standard of virtue, then everyone's practical wisdom would be the same (including the same judgements, perspectives, experiences, and other ways upon which practical wisdom), then we would already have a way to determine which acts are virtuous. There would be no need for practical wisdom to determine which acts are virtuous, and, since the doctrine of the mean tells us to use practical wisdom to determine the virtuous nature of an act, and, therefore, there would be no need for the doctrine of the mean at all. In addition, unlike, for example, the Kantian method of testing if a maxim can be made into a universal law, the doctrine of the mean does not

establish a specific method for determining whether or not a particular act is virtuous. The doctrine of the mean does not

Aristotle believes the doctrine is so important as it less about giving a precise, absolute criteria for determining the appropriate amount of a virtue, but, rather, it tells us that the appropriate amount of each virtue is determined through practical wisdom and that the framework for our judgements of virtue and vice is determined by our affective capacities. This is important because the virtuous person is able to decide whether or not his or her virtue is in the appropriate amount. If the person decides that his or her virtue is not in the appropriate amount, then, he or she can determine what the appropriate amount is depending on his or her judgement. Then, since the appropriate amount of a virtue is the amount of the virtue that a person should hold, then the person can adjust the virtue in accordance with that amount. Through this process of evaluating and modifying one's virtues appropriately, one can exercise practical wisdom as he or she makes judgements about the appropriateness of disposed virtues and adjusts him or herself in accordance with his or her judgements. In addition, these evaluations and modifications help us understand the ways in which our affective capabilities determine virtues, and, in these ways, we can determine how to appropriately use our affective capabilities in order to be virtuous. This way, a person becomes virtuous through practical wisdom, with the doctrine of the mean telling us how to create a framework.

This practical wisdom can be shown through examples of virtues. If a person shows anger too frequently, then one may use his or her practical wisdom to determine that it is too much anger. Consider a person (Adam) who is tripped by another person (Bob) accidentally. If Adam shows anger at Bob, then Adam might determine that it is inappropriate to show this anger at

since Bob did not trip Adam willfully. Adam would identify the conditions for feeling angry in order to determine that he or she is showing anger too often. Adam might think that, since it was accidental, showing anger at Bob is not appropriate. And Adam can adjust himself to show anger only on those occasions when it is appropriate. Similarly, if Adam does not show courage as strongly as he should, then Adam can use his practical wisdom in a similar manner. Let's say Adam chooses not to speak out against acts of racism for fear that he will be harmed. In this case, Adam can determine that it is inappropriate to not act in the face of this fear since he knows that the importance of speaking out against racism. This condition of how important it is could outweigh the fear of being harmed. Adam can determine that he should show more courage and speak out to adjust his virtue in accordance with what is appropriate. These examples show how practical wisdom can be exercised.

Our affective capabilities, or the emotions that we experience, also determine the framework for our decisions of virtuous actions. In the first example (of Adam accidentally tripped by Bob), Adam may or may not experience the emotion of anger, and, in that experience, his emotion could be expressed with a certain degree or duration. If Adam were to experience a large amount of anger, he might determine that showing such a large amount of anger would not allow him to become a virtuous person. He might not use that anger in the same way he would if anger actually would allow him to be virtuous. For example, Adam might determine that he is not angry because Bob tripped him, but, rather, he is angry because he didn't get much sleep last night. Since he knows his anger isn't actually caused by Bob's action, Adam might determine not to get angry. Since he believes anger would not allow him to be virtuous, he might choose to ignore his anger or make a different decision. Then, in future situations, Adam may change the

way he uses anger in determining an appropriate action to take. There are also instances of courage in which one may use his/her affective capacities in creating a framework for determining which action to take. In the case of Adam determining to speak out against racism as an act of courage, Adam might realize his idea to do such a thing is only a “wistful thought” that is really just a desire to get attention. He may begin to fear harm from others and begin to doubt whether or not he truly wants to speak against racism as an act of courage. He might determine that such an action does not make him virtuous since it is caused by this “wistful” desire, and not out of courage. In this way, Adam might identify how such similar desires and feelings play a role in his framework for virtuous decision-making.

Though the doctrine of the mean does not establish criteria or standards for the virtue, the doctrine gives a method for determining the appropriate amounts of each virtue. The person may exercise practical wisdom and evaluate his/her affective capacities to determine the appropriate amount of virtue for each situation based on circumstances and personal characteristics and become a virtuous person with all virtues in due proportion.