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Topic #2: The Virtue of Mildness

In this paper, I will be applying Aristotle's concept of the doctrine of the mean to the virtue of mildness. I will begin by giving an introduction to the doctrine of the mean, as documented by Aristotle. I will then apply his ideas to my own in relation to the virtue of mildness and discuss the vices associated with it. Finally, I will analyze how being too mild is in fact detrimental. All together, I will lay out a full account of the doctrine of the mean's relation to mildness, and show that it is entirely possible to be too mild in certain situations.

Aristotle's doctrine of the mean details how, in order to be virtuous, we must exercise certain characteristics of ourselves properly. He calls this point the "mean", and, according to him, it is a balance between points of excess and deficiency. This can be visualized on a number line, with excess on the left, deficiency on the right, and the mean somewhere in the middle. Exactly where in the middle is entirely dependent on both the situation and the individual. Acting on the mean prompts self-reinforcement, meaning that doing virtuous actions should inspire further virtuous action in the future.

Furthermore, the mean is the only area on the line that can be considered virtuous. In any given situation, the points of excess and deficiency are vicious. For this reason, operating within the mean is considered to be the only way we achieve excellence (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1106a - 1109a). For instance, in order to function ideally, the amount of fear you experience while walking through a park in the morning should be vastly less than when walking down a city street in the middle of the night. In the same way, a soldier with

combat and survival training should experience less fear than a teenager with neither in both situations.

In addition to the basic layout, Aristotle also details five conditions that must be met in order to ensure we are acting on the mean. He says that we must feel about the right things, towards the right people, for the right end, in the right way, and at the right time. To illustrate these, we will imagine we are being chased by a serial killer while holding a bag with a million dollars in it. If you felt immense fear in this situation, but it was about losing the million dollars, you would not meet all five of Aristotle's conditions. You would be feeling fear in the right way and at the right time, but valuing the million dollars over your life would fail to meet the other three conditions. As a result, you would not be acting on the mean, despite feeling the right amount of the right emotion. Aristotle claims that once these conditions are met, we are acting in a state where we are best able to analyze and adapt to our environment, and are therefore functioning at the highest level we possibly can (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1116a - 1117b).

This concept can be easily applied to a wide range of feelings and actions, including mildness. For our purposes, mildness will be considered the mean of the scale, which, in turn, is based on the feeling of restraint. In this context, restraint is how we manage our anger toward a given offense, and, since mildness is the mean of restraint, being mild is managing our anger optimally. An excess of restraint will give us the vice I will call passivity, while a deficiency of restraint will give us overaggression. Passivity is a lack of action, and having too much restraint over certain situations makes stops us when we should be acting. For instance, in the buildup to World War II, the appeasement of Hitler

by Britain was done in the hope of avoiding conflict. While it seemed like the right move at the time, the invasion of Poland one year later proved that it was not. On the other hand, overaggression is failing to manage your anger and taking too much action as a result. An example of this can be found in the time of the Second Red Scare, when Americans were whipped into an anti-Communist frenzy, starting a decade-long witch-hunt. Clearly, this situation would have been handled much better with added restraint.

In line with Aristotle's structure, true mildness must also meet the five conditions he described. We must show restraint about the right things by choosing to either exhibit more or less of it depending on our judgement of the situation. We must also show restraint towards the right people. His third condition says that we must restrain ourselves for the right end; in other words, we must have good intentions. We must also use restraint in the right way to achieve those ends. Finally, we must practice restraint at the right time based on our knowledge of the situation.

These conditions can be applied to real events, such as the Civil Rights Movement. Of course, this event was a situation where a relatively small amount of restraint was appropriate, and action was absolutely necessary. If African-Americans as a whole showed too much restraint towards the injustice they were suffering from the white population, they would fail to be acting about the right things and about the right people. If they had ceased action and accepted the social norm that they were inferior, they would have showed an excess of restraint with the wrong end, as they would be stopping themselves from achieving equality. In addition, if people like Martin Luther King Jr. and

Thurgood Marshall did not stand up and actively oppose this injustice, they would have been exercising too much restraint in the wrong way, as the movement's impact would have been minimized. Finally, they would have failed to act at the right time if they had decided to continue waiting for other people's opinions to change instead of taking things into their own hands. The Civil Rights Movement was only successful and capable of altering the course of history because the people involved were able to meet these five conditions.

When thinking about the dichotomy of anger and calmness, it is much easier to see anger as a more harmful reaction. However, all the examples I gave of failing to act on the mean would have been a result of an excess of restraint, and, therefore, being too calm. It is entirely reasonable for humans to react to certain situations with anger, and, ultimately, it is these reactions that drive necessary change. While anger can easily blind your judgement, apathy can just as easily paralyze you. That is why the mean must be a middle ground between these two vices; a place where you can act without losing control.

Using the concept of restraint and the doctrine of the mean, it is possible to see that being too calm can easily be described as a vice. I began by presenting the groundwork of Aristotle's ideas and connecting them with my own ideas on mildness. After I established the terms of how Aristotle's concepts work in terms of mildness, I detailed examples of how being too mild could make situations worse. In the end, this paper established that, while being angry has a lot of potential to be harmful, being too calm can be just as dangerous.

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