

Doctrine of the Mean Reading

Further Condensed Notes on Aristotle, 1999

Aristotle (1999) Nicomachean Ethics. Translated by T. H. Irwin. Cambridge, MA: Hackett Publishing

- II.1 How a Virtue of Character is Acquired
 - Aristotle argues that **virtue of character is acquired by habituation**. This is evident to Aristotle from (1) the etymological closeness of the Greek word for virtue and the Greek word for habit, and (2) that legislators appear to aim at habituating citizens in virtue. The upshot of this is that (a) we are not virtuous by nature, and (b) we are not vicious by nature. But our nature is not entirely silent on virtue, (c) it is part of our nature that we can acquire virtue. We are habituated in virtue, by acting well in the situations where virtue is called for.
- II.2 Habituation
 - **So we will want to know what sorts of actions habituate us in virtue.** The common belief that actions in accord with right reason habituate us in virtue is uninformative.
 - Aristotle warns that the alternative account of the actions that habituate us in virtue will be imprecise, but has defended this sort of imprecision earlier.
 - Aristotle here introduces the doctrine of the mean. According to this doctrine, actions that are intermediate between excess and deficiency habituate us in virtue. These are also the virtuous actions.
- II.3 The Importance of Pleasure and Pain
 - **Virtue, and habituation in virtue, will also require taking pleasure in, and being pained by the right things.** Aristotle seems to treat this as a datum, and offers some unclear arguments for this, but does not dwell on them.
 - The common belief that pleasure and pain can lead us astray is not entirely correct, but requires qualification.
- II.4 Virtuous Actions versus Virtuous Character
 - Aristotle has argued (1) virtue is acquired by habituation, and (2) virtuous actions are intermediate between deficiency and excess. This suggests that virtuous action is not sufficient for being virtuous. Aristotle imagines an objector who argues that (a) doing the actions of a craft are sufficient for being such a craftsman, and (b) the same should be true of virtue, by analogy.
 - Aristotle rejects (a) and (b).
- II.5 Virtue of Character: Its Genus
 - **Aristotle argues by elimination that virtue is a state**, and not a feeling or a capacity. These are the three conditions of the soul that are concerned with action. Aristotle thinks (and perhaps has defended elsewhere) that virtue is a condition of the soul, and virtue is concerned with action.
 - Virtue is not a feeling because (1) we do not praise or blame a person simply for being angry, and (2) being angry does not involve decision, but being virtuous does. Virtue is not a capacity for similar reasons.
- II.6 Virtue of Character: Its Differentia
 - **Here, Aristotle tells us what sort of state virtue is.**
 - Virtue is a good state that causes humans to perform the human function well. "Human virtues realise the human function".
 - Aristotle distinguishes between the numerical mean and the "mean relative to us". There is no moderate amount of anger that is appropriate for all persons in all situations. The mean relative to us is relative to "us humans" not "each of us".
 - **Virtue is a state that aims at the "mean relative to us" in action and feeling.** In other words, a virtue is some state of our soul, in virtue of which, we are neither deficiently nor excessively responsive or prone to certain feelings (and actions).
 - It is in the above sense that virtue is a mean, but its goodness is not in a mean, virtue is extremely good.
 - Some actions and feelings are such that no intermediate amount, in fact no amount at all, is good. This is because some actions and feelings are simply vicious or base. in themselves.
- II.7 The Particular Virtues of Character
 - **Aristotle here applies the doctrine of the mean to particular virtues.** Presumably, a plausible account in each particular case is evidence in favour of the broader account.
 - It is important to identify nameless virtues because a failure to do so results in (1) persons at the extremes claiming that the virtue is at the extremes, and (2) our having to refer to virtuous persons, in the mean, misleadingly, by the name that is used for the extremes.

- There are some mean states that are not virtues. These are (1) appropriate responsiveness to shame, and (2) proper indignation.
- II.8 Relations Between Means and Extreme States
 - **The doctrine of the mean can account for the "common beliefs" about virtue:** (1) people in the extremes alleging that the virtuous person is guilty of the opposite extreme, (2) the vices appear more contrary to each other than each appears to the virtue, and (3) in some triads, one vice seems more contrary to the virtue than the other.
- II.9 How Can We Reach the Mean?
 - **The doctrine of the mean accounts for the further "common belief" that it is difficult to be virtuous.**
 - Aristotle concludes II by stating the **practical upshot of the doctrine of the mean** (earlier, Aristotle has told us that this is what we are after). We should (1) aim at the lesser of the two contrary vices, (2) steer clear of the vices we have a natural tendency toward, and (3) be particularly wary of pleasure. Generalising over these, we should sometimes incline ourselves towards one extreme, because that is a more reliable way of achieving the mean.
 - Even with this guidance, it will be difficult to be fully virtuous. But we are not blamed for small deviations from the mean, so this should not trouble us. The threshold for blame is a matter of perception.

Condensed Notes on Aristotle, 1999

Aristotle (1999) *Nicomachean Ethics*. Translated by T. H. Irwin. Cambridge, MA: Hackett Publishing

- II.1 How a Virtue of Character is Acquired
 - §1 Virtues of character are acquired by habituation and we are not so virtuous by nature. Aristotle thinks that virtues of character are acquired by habituation because of an etymological closeness between the Greek word for virtue and the Greek word for habit.
 - §2 The upshot of virtues of character being acquired by habituation is that we cannot have the virtues (or the vices) by nature because we need not be habituated in our nature and cannot be habituated against our nature. §3 But it remains part of our nature that we can acquire virtue by habituation. §4 We acquire crafts and virtues by practice, but do not so acquire natural conditions.
 - §5 Legislators are concerned with virtue hence with habituation.
 - §6-7 We are habituated in virtue by acting well in the relevant situations. To act cowardly or rashly in a situation where courage is called for makes us less courageous. To act courageously makes us more courageous. This is analogous to crafts. §8 Acting virtuously then, is important for being virtuous.
- II.2 Habituation
 - §1 The point of Aristotle's discussion of virtue is not merely a theoretical understanding of virtue, but some practical insight. §2 The common belief that the right sort of action that habituates us in virtue is action in accord with appropriate reasons is not clear enough to yield practical insight.
 - §3-5 The best account of right action (for habituation in virtue) that we can give will be imprecise. Aristotle has defended this imprecision early in I.
 - §6 Aristotle introduces the doctrine of the mean. This Aristotle thinks, is an accurate and practically insightful account of virtue. §6-7 The actions that habituate us in virtue lie in a mean between excess and deficiency. This is analogous to excessive and deficient exercise both being bad for health. §8-9 These actions are not only the actions that habituate us in virtue, but are also the actions that we do once we have acquired the virtues. This is analogous to our becoming strong by laborious exercise, and the strong person's characteristically doing laborious work.
- II.3 The Importance of Pleasure and Pain
 - §1 Virtues of character are about pleasures and pain. A virtuous person will take pleasure in virtuous action itself, and a vicious person will be pained by such action. Aristotle seems to treat this as a "common belief" or a datum. §3-4 Another reason to think that virtues of character are about pleasures and pain is that "virtues are concerned with actions and feeling; but every feeling and every action implies pleasure or pain". This is by no means clear.
 - §1 Taking pleasure in vicious actions and being pained by virtuous actions makes us do the former and avoid doing the latter. So taking pleasure in and being pained by the right things is important for habituation in virtue and being virtuous. §5-6 Pleasure and pain can lead us astray, but only when we take pleasure in or are pained by the wrong things. So the common belief that pleasure and pain can lead us astray is true when so qualified.
 - §7-10 Pleasure is involved in every sort of choice, it is our earliest motive, and it is difficult to resist, so we should think that virtue is about pleasure (and pain).
 - §11 To recapitulate: virtue is about pleasure and pain, we acquire virtue by habituation, in particular, by acting well in the relevant sorts of cases (and we become vicious if we act poorly in the relevant sorts of cases), and virtuous actions are the actions that habituate a person in virtue.

- II.4 Virtuous Actions versus Virtuous Character
 - §1-5 Aristotle presents and responds to the worry that, on the account given so far, virtuous action is not sufficient for being virtuous, and this is dissimilar to the case of crafts, where it seems, for example, playing music is sufficient for being a musician. §2 Aristotle's first response rejects that doing the actions of a craft is sufficient for being such a craftsman. §3 Aristotle's second response rejects that the analogy to the crafts is appropriate here. What a craft is for is producing some product, but a virtue is for its own sake. So a product's being good is sufficient for the goodness of the way in which it was produced, but an action's being virtuous is not sufficient for the state that produced it's being virtuous.
 - §6 The many do not do virtuous actions, and mistakenly think that by arguing about virtue they will come to be virtuous.
- II.5 Virtue of Character: Its Genus
 - §1-6 Aristotle argues by elimination that virtue is a state.
- II.6 Virtue of Character: Its Differentia
 - §2-3 Aristotle relates virtue to the human function: each virtue causes its possessor to be in a good state and perform its function well.
 - §4-8 Aristotle distinguishes between the numerical mean and the "mean relative to us".
 - §9-14 Aristotle argues that virtue aims at a mean.
 - §15-17 Aristotle recapitulates.
 - §18-20 Some actions and feelings are such that no intermediate amount, in fact no amount at all, is good. This is because some actions and feelings are simply vicious or base in themselves.
- II.7 The Particular Virtues of Character
 - §1 Aristotle at this point is satisfied with the general account of virtue given above. Aristotle wants to show that the doctrine of the mean applies to the particular virtues (which are collated on some chart). This will be a better way to judge the plausibility of the doctrine than considering it in abstract.
 - The bulk of II.7 consists in situating each virtue in a mean. The virtues that Aristotle considers here are the following. (1) The virtues concerned with feeling: (a) braveness and (b) temperance. (2) The virtues concerned with external goods: (c) generosity, (d) magnificence, (e) magnanimity, and (f) a nameless virtue in a mean between being honour-loving and honour-indifferent. (3) The virtues concerned with social life: (g) mildness, (h) truthfulness, (i) wit, and (j) friendliness.
 - §9 It is important to identify nameless virtues because a failure to do so results in (1) persons at the extremes claiming that the virtue is at the extremes, and (2) our having to refer to virtuous persons, in the mean, misleadingly, by the name that is used for the extremes.
 - §14-15 There are some mean states that are not virtues. These are (1) appropriate responsiveness to shame, and (2) proper indignation.
 - It is not clear (a) why these are not virtues, and (b) whether this list of mean states that are not virtues is exhaustive. One suspects that (Aristotle thinks) these are not virtues because they are mean states concerned with feelings and not with actions, but the virtues are concerned with both.
 - §16 Aristotle promises to discuss justice and the intellectual virtues separately.
- II.8 Relations Between Means and Extreme States
 - The doctrine of the mean can account for the common beliefs about virtue.
 - §1-3 The first of these "common beliefs" is the phenomenon of people in the extremes alleging that the virtuous person is guilty of the opposite extreme. For example, the coward thinks the brave person is rash, and the rash person thinks the brave person is a coward. On Aristotle's account, this is because the mean is deficient relative to excess and excessive compared to deficiency.
 - §4-5 The second is that in any triad the vices appear more contrary to each other than each appears to the virtue. On Aristotle's account, the reason for this is obvious.
 - §6-7 The third is that in some triads, one vice seems more contrary to the virtue than the other. For example, cowardice seems more contrary to courage than rashness does. On Aristotle's account this is because (1) the virtue is in fact "closer" to one of the two extremes, and (2) in some cases we have a natural tendency toward one extreme, for example toward pleasure or away from danger.
 - (1) seems to turn on Aristotle's distinction between the numerical mean and the "mean relative to us". The mean relative to us could be "closer" to one "numerical" extreme than to another, though the numerical mean could not.
- II.9 How Can We Reach the Mean?
 - §2 The doctrine of the mean accounts for the further "common belief" that it is difficult to be virtuous. On Aristotle's account, this is because it is difficult to achieve a mean condition.

- The explanation Aristotle offers here is difficult to square with the doctrine of the mean. Aristotle seems to think that it is difficult to achieve a mean condition because this involves getting many things precisely right, including the person, amount, time, and way, that one is, for example, angry. This seems to locate virtue not in some triad, but as some non-extreme normative target in "multidimensional" space. This threatens to make the doctrine of the mean trivial.
- §3-4 We should steer ourselves away from the more contrary (to the mean) vice, because the lesser of two evils is better. So, for example, we should steer ourselves away from cowardice in aiming to be courageous.
- §4-5 We should steer ourselves away from the vice that we have a natural tendency toward. We can know our natural tendencies by examining what we take pleasure in and are pained by.
- §6 We should take extra care when acting in situations where pleasure is relevant because pleasure does not only distort our actions (i.e. cause them to deviate from the mean), but also distorts our evaluation of where the mean is.
- §7-8 Even with such practical guidance, it will be difficult to be virtuous. But, fortunately, we will not be blamed for small deviations from the mean. The threshold for blame is not easily defined, and is a matter of perception.
- §9 To recapitulate, the practical upshot of the doctrine of the mean is that we should sometimes incline ourselves to one extreme, because that is a more reliable way of achieving the mean.

Aristotle, 1999

Aristotle (1999) *Nicomachean Ethics*. Translated by T. H. Irwin. Cambridge, MA: Hackett Publishing

- II.1 How a Virtue of Character is Acquired
 - §1 There are virtues of thought and virtues of character. Aristotle appeals to the etymological closeness of virtue of character and habit (in Greek), to claim that virtue of character is acquired by habituation. \
 - §2-3 Because virtue of character is acquired by habituation, we cannot have the virtues of character naturally. Neither can we be vicious by nature, because habituation cannot overcome nature. For example, throwing a rock upwards repeatedly will not habituate it to oppose gravity. §3 It is in our nature that we can acquire virtue by habituation. "We are completed through habit". It is impossible to understand what is meant here. §4 We do virtuous acts before we are virtuous. Similarly, we play music before we are musicians. We are not musicians by nature. By analogy to the crafts, we are also not virtuous by nature. In contrast, our capacity for seeing is prior to our actually seeing. This is because it is in our nature to see.
 - §5 Another reason for thinking that we acquire the virtues by habituation rather than have the virtues by nature is that this is what legislators appear to aim at.
 - §6-7 Virtue is analogous to practical skills, which are uncontroversially acquired by habituation. Practicing carpentry can make a person a good carpenter or a bad carpenter, depending on whether one practices carpentry well or poorly. Similarly for virtue. For example, in a dangerous situation, we either act in a cowardly way or in a brave way. The former makes one cowardly, the latter makes one brave. This generalises.
 - §8 So habitually acting virtuously is necessary for being virtuous.
- II.2 Habituation
 - §1 The discussion here does not aim at a merely theoretical understanding of virtue. The ultimate aim of this discussion is our becoming good, which requires our being virtuous. So we need to know how we should act, because it is by acting (in the right way) that we come to be virtuous.
 - §2 It is commonly believed that right action (for habituation in virtue) requires acting on appropriate (correct) reasons.
 - §3-5 The best account of right action (for habituation in virtue) that we can give will be imprecise. Aristotle has defended this imprecision early in I.
 - §6 Right actions lie in a mean between excess and deficiency. This is similar to the way that both deficient and excessive exercise are bad for health., but a moderate amount of exercise is good for health. For example, a person who easily succumbs to danger becomes cowardly, and a person who acts entirely without consideration of danger becomes rash. §8-9 Such actions are not only how we come to be virtuous, but also how we act once we have acquired the virtues. The analogy to exercise and physical strength continues to apply. It is by laborious training that we become strong, and it is the strong person who is most capable of laborious work.
- II.3 The Importance of Pleasure and Pain
 - §1 But virtue does not simply consist in (is not simply about) doing the right actions (that both habituate one in virtue, and are the actions of the virtuous person). An important part of virtue is also taking pleasure and pain in the appropriate things. For example, a brave person will take pleasure in standing firm in the face of danger, a coward will not. §1-2 Additionally, pleasure and pain have an important role in habituation. If we take pleasure in vicious acts and are pained by virtuous ones, then we will do the former and avoid the latter. §2 Our taking pleasure in virtuous acts and being pained by vicious ones requires an appropriate upbringing.

- §3-4 Aristotle makes an unclear point here, the upshot being that virtue is (at least in part) about pleasure and pain.
- §5 Pleasures and pains can lead us astray, but only when we take pleasure in bad things and are pained by good things. So the common belief that virtues are a sort of resistance to (being unaffected or undisturbed by) pleasures and pains is partially correct. This claim, appropriately qualified (as above) is true.
- §6 At this point then, we posit that virtue is the state from which the best actions (that have to do with pleasure and pain) flow from, and vice is the contrary.
- §7-10 Pleasure is involved in every sort of choice, it is our earliest motive, and it is difficult to resist, so we should think that virtue is about pleasure (and pain).
- §11 Aristotle recapitulates: virtue is about pleasure and pain, we acquire virtue by habituation, in particular, by acting well in the relevant sorts of cases (and we become vicious if we act poorly in the relevant sorts of cases), and the actions characteristic of the virtuous person are the actions that habituate a person in virtue.
- II.4 Virtuous Actions versus Virtuous Character
 - §1 An initial puzzle about Aristotle's account so far is that virtuous action and being virtuous come apart. According to Aristotle, we become virtuous by doing virtuous actions, so we can do virtuous actions without being virtuous. This is puzzling because the same does not seem to be true of the crafts. For example, it seems that if we play music (do the actions of music), we will be musicians. §2 Aristotle first rejects that if we do the actions of a craft, we become such a craftsman. This rejection is patently plausible, we do not become musicians simply by playing some music. Aristotle's argument is that one could produce music by accident or coincidence, and if one does so, one would not be a musician, so producing music is not sufficient for being a musician, one must produce music as the musician does, i.e. with some understanding of music. §3 Aristotle also rejects that the analogy to the crafts is appropriate here. Some way of producing something is good simply if it (tends to) produces a good product. An action's being virtuous is not sufficient for its being done virtuously. This requires also (1) that the agent knows the action is virtuous, (2) that the agent is acting on decision, and (3) that state of the agent from which such actions flow is stable and unchanging. The analogy is inappropriate because the end of production is not in itself, it is the product, whereas the end of virtue is in itself. (2) and (3) are necessary and are achieved by habituation. §4 So, virtuous actions are the actions of a virtuous person, but being a virtuous person does not simply consist in doing virtuous actions. §5 Aristotle recapitulates that we become virtuous by habituation.
 - §6 The many do not do virtuous actions, and mistakenly think that by arguing about virtue they will come to be virtuous. This is foolish in the same way that listening attentively to a doctor without heeding his instructions is.
- II.5 Virtue of Character: Its Genus
 - §1 There are three conditions arising in the soul that are related to action. These are feelings, capacities, and states. §2 Feelings are such things as appetite, anger, and fear. A capacity is what one has in virtue of which one is said to be capable of anger, or other feelings. A state is what one is in, in virtue of which one is said to respond with too much or too little anger, or other feeling. §3 Virtues and vices are not feelings. We do not call a person excellent or base, or praise or blame a person, for simply having some feeling like anger, but for being angry in some particular good or bad way. §4 Our feelings do not require decision but virtue and vice do. §5 For the same reasons, virtue and vice are not capacities (we do not call a person virtuous or vicious, or praise or blame a person for his capacities). Further, we have capacities by nature but are not by nature virtuous or vicious. §6 So virtues are states.
- II.6 Virtue of Character: Its Differentia
 - §2 Each virtue causes its possessor to be in a good state and to perform its function well. This is true of the virtues of eyes and horses, so presumably also true for humans. §3 Then, human virtue is what causes humans to be in a good state and perform the human function well.
 - §4-8 Aristotle will distinguish between the numerical mean and the "mean relative to us". The numerical mean is simply that which is precisely intermediate between extremes. The mean relative to us, on the other hand, is the appropriate amount for some person under some circumstance. So, for example, 6 is the numerical mean between 2 and 10. But the mean amount of food "relative to" an athlete could be more than 6 units, whereas the mean amount of food "relative to" an untrained person could be less. The appeal to the mean will not yield a precise quantitative test for virtuous actions, "as though there is a correct moderate amount of anger that is appropriate for all persons in all situations". "Us" in "the mean relative to us" is best interpreted as "us human beings" rather than "each of us" because this relates the doctrine of the mean to the function argument. So "all" in "same for all" is best interpreted as "all cases" rather than "all persons".
 - §9-14 Each craft achieves its purpose by producing a product that is intermediate between excess and deficiency. Virtue, like craft, will also aim at what is intermediate. In what way can virtue be excessive or deficient? We can have such feelings as anger, appetite, or fear both too much or too little, and being in any such state is bad. But having these feelings at the right times, about the right things, toward the right people, for the right end, and in the right way, is the intermediate condition. Actions can also be excessive, deficient, or intermediate, in the same way. Virtue is

about feelings and actions, so virtue will aim at what is intermediate. Excessive and deficient actions and feelings are blamed, while intermediate actions and feelings are praised. This fits our understanding of virtue. It is commonly believed that there are many ways to be in error. but there is only one way to be correct, and that error is easy but correctness is difficult. Aristotle's account of virtue as aiming at a mean makes sense of these common beliefs. According to Aristotle's account, there are multiple modes of error (at least two, namely excess and deficiency), but only one mode of correctness, namely the intermediate, i.e. the mean relative to us.

- §15 Virtue is a state that decides, it is a mean relative to us, it is a mean between two vices, one of excess and one of deficiency. Virtue is guided by prudence. At this point, this last claim is entirely unclear. §17 But the goodness of virtue is not intermediate, virtue is supremely good.
- §18 Some actions and feelings are such that no intermediate amount, in fact no amount at all, is good. This is because some actions and feelings are simply vicious or base. in themselves. For example, there is no good intermediate amount of spite, shamelessness, or envy, or of adultery, theft, and murder. §19 To think that there is a good intermediate amount of such actions and feelings is as mistaken as it is to think that there is a good intermediate amount of injustice, cowardice, and intemperance. But these, Aristotle has argued, are excesses or deficiencies, and there is no mean of an excess or deficiency. A mean of an excess is just as incoherent as an excess of an excess or a deficiency of an excess. §20 There is no optimal intermediate amount of the virtues in the same way that there is no optimal intermediate amount of the vices.
 - Aristotle then seems to need to treat some feelings and actions as "raw material" for the doctrine of the mean, i.e. the things whose good lies in a mean. Neither the natural actions and feelings nor those that develop in normal forms of social life are plausible candidates. It seems Aristotle will have to argue the case for each virtue.

• II.7 The Particular Virtues of Character

- §2 Bravery is a mean between cowardice and rashness. §3 Temperance is a mean between intemperance and insensibility (inadequate responsiveness to pleasure). These are the virtues concerned with feelings.
- §4 Generosity is a mean between wastefulness and ungenerosity. §5 Magnificence (which seems to be roughly similar to generosity but about "large matters" rather than "small matters") is a mean between vulgarity (ostentatiousness) and stinginess. §7 Magnanimity (which is about great honours and dishonours) is a mean between vanity and pusillanimity. §8 There is a nameless virtue which is about small honours and dishonours that is a mean between honour-loving and honour-indifference. These are the virtues concerned with external goods.
 - §9 Aristotle thinks it important to identify even the virtues with no names because this is necessary to distinguish them from the extremes. A failure to do so results in (1) persons at the extremes claiming to have the virtue (by claiming that the virtue is the extreme, rather than by claiming that the extremes they occupy are in fact intermediate) and (2) we (not the extreme people) referring to the mean by the name of one of the extremes.
- §10 Mildness (which is about anger) is a mean between irascibility and inirascibility. §12 Truthfulness is a mean between boastfulness and self-deprecation. §13 Wit is a mean between buffoonery and boorishness. Friendliness is a mean between being ingratiating and quarrelsome. These are the virtues concerned with social relations.
- §14 The person appropriately responsive to shame is praiseworthy, but this state is not a virtue. §15 Neither is proper indignation, which is a mean between envy and spite.
 - One suspicion here is that these mean states are not virtues because they are only about feelings and not about actions.
- §16 Justice and the virtues of intellect will be discussed later.

• II.8 Relations Between Means and Extreme States

- §1 The mean state is opposed to each extreme, and each extreme is opposed to the other. §2 The mean state appears excessive to the person in a deficient state, and appears deficient to the person in an excessive state. §3 This is why the coward calls the brave person rash, and the rash person calls the brave person a coward. The doctrine of the mean accounts for such "common beliefs".
- §4 The doctrine of the mean explains also why the opposing vices appear more dissimilar to each other than to the intermediate virtue. §5 In some cases, one extreme appears similar to the mean. But it can be distinguished from the mean by its being more distant from the contrary extreme. §6 In some cases, one extreme appears more opposed than the other to the mean. For example, cowardice seems more opposed than rashness to courage, and intemperance more opposed to temperance than insensibility. §7 One reason for this is simply that rashness is more similar to courage, and insensibility is more similar to temperance. (Aristotle does not explain how one extreme is closer to the mean than the other. Presumably the thought here is that the "mean relative to us" could be far from the numerical mean, and so be closer to one numerical extreme than the other). §8 Another reason for this appearance is that we have a natural tendency to avoid danger and pursue pleasure, so we face a greater temptation to be cowardly and intemperate (than to be rash and

• II.9 How Can We Reach the Mean?

- §1 Aristotle recapitulates. Each virtue of character is a mean state, intermediate between a vice of excess, and a vice of deficiency, that aims at an intermediate condition in feeling and action.
- §2 This explains why it is difficult to be virtuous, because it is hard work to achieve an intermediate condition. For example, it is easy to be angry, but not to be angry at the right person, in the right amount, at the right time, in the right way. §3-4 The practical upshot of the doctrine of the mean is that we do better to steer ourselves away from the more contrary opposing vice. For example, in aiming to be courageous, we should steer ourselves away from cowardice. This is because the more contrary extreme is more in error, and we do better to be closer to the lesser of two evils. §4 It is also useful to know our individual natural tendencies, i.e. what each of us is naturally drawn to. And we can know this by examining what we take pleasure in and are pained by. §5 Then, we should "drag ourselves off in the contrary direction" of our natural tendencies.
- §6 We must be especially careful with pleasure (and the associated virtue of temperance). This is because we are naturally predisposed to view pleasure favourably. So this bias could distort our judgement of the appropriate responsiveness to pleasure.
- §7 Even with such practical guidance, it will remain difficult to be virtuous, because it is difficult to find the mean in particular situations, i.e. to know the right person to respond to, the right amount to respond with, and so on. §8 It is somewhat reassuring then, that we are not blamed for small deviations from virtue (the mean), but only large excesses or deficiencies. But the threshold of deviation for blame is not easily defined. This is a matter of perception. §9 Aristotle recapitulates that virtue is an intermediate condition but we must sometimes incline toward excess or deficiency because that is the most reliable (easiest) way to achieve the intermediate condition.