

An Ingenuous Account of the Doctrine of the Mean

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Aristotle admits the possibility of many vices opposed to one virtue, but insists that there are always at least two, related as deficiency and excess. The doctrine that virtue is in a mean is thus both true and useful.

Rosalind Hursthouse has a striking paper in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Vol. LXXXI, 1980-1, entitled "A False Doctrine of the Mean". In it she principally discusses the account given by J.O. Urmson of Aristotle's doctrine in Book 2 of the *Nicomachean Ethics* that virtue is in a mean ("Aristotle's doctrine of the mean", *American Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 10, 1973); but her argument will apply to any other similar attempt to take this doctrine as one that is interesting, bold, and roughly true. This paper examines her claim: it discusses an attempt, which I call "the minimalist account", to meet her objections by making the doctrine of the mean a fairly trivial piece of conceptual analysis; and it proposes another account, the "ingenuous account", which does not fall foul of her objections, and gives reason to think that Aristotle's doctrine of the mean is an important, original and largely true thesis.¹

¹ I shall be spending a great deal of time in this paper disagreeing with Dr. Hursthouse. Let me here express my gratitude and admiration to her for having written one of the most interesting and provoking pieces on the doctrine of the mean that I have come across in recent years.

Hursthouse's attack on Urmson

Hursthouse's principal objection to the doctrine of the mean, as expounded by Urmson, is that she thinks that it is not true. The basis of Urmson's account can be summed up in the following theses:

- 1) For each specific excellence of character that we recognise there will be some specific feeling whose field it is.
- 2) In the case of each such feeling it is possible to be disposed to exhibit it to the right amount, which is excellence, and it is possible to be disposed to exhibit or feel it to a wrong extent, as one should not, which is a vice, a defect. (pp.57-8)²

But, as Hursthouse points out, these theses do not yield anything that deserves to be called a doctrine of a *mean*. (p. 59) To make a doctrine which relates excellence of character to feelings into a doctrine of the mean we need to add some such thesis as:

- 3) One's character may err in two opposed ways.

She thinks that thesis 3) is definitely false, and that the following thesis, which she uses to explain Urmson's view, is yet more so:

- 3a) In the case of each such feeling it is possible to have an excessive or deficient disposition with respect to it: (or perhaps - in the case of

² I have followed Hursthouse in generally translating "pathē" as "feelings". Urmson usually translates it as "emotions", while Ross, whose translation I generally use for quotations from Aristotle, has "passions". Equally, I speak of "deficiency" and "deficient" where others whom I quote have "defect" and "defective", and of "intemperance", while others have "licentious" or "self-indulgent". I hope that this lack of discrimination will be pardonable. It certainly helps to avoid a lot of unimportant footnotes.

each such feeling it is possible to be disposed to exhibit or to feel it either too much, excessively, or too little, deficiently).

She goes on to say that she is not sure whether Aristotle really seriously maintained theses 3) and 3a), as although Book 2 of the *Nicomachean Ethics* would seem to suggest that he does, in much of the detailed discussion of the particular virtues in Books 3 and 4 he implies that they are false. She points out that many vices, such as intemperance, show themselves more typically in a person's being disposed to have the specific feelings about the wrong objects, rather than in being wrongly disposed with regard to these feelings. A suitable text, among many, which shows that Aristotle is aware of this would be, for example, 1107a 14-17:

It is not possible, then, ever to be right in regard to them (feelings such as spite, shamelessness, and envy, and actions such as adultery, theft, and murder); one must always be wrong. Nor does goodness and badness with regard to such things depend on committing adultery with the right woman, at the right time, and in the right way, but simply to do any of them is to go wrong.

Aristotle shows here that he is aware that there are major vices and vicious actions, which are indeed related to certain feelings, but which do not consist in or spring from feeling or exhibiting feelings either too much or too little.

Hursthouse, then, thinks that the doctrine of the mean is a mistake, though it is clear that Aristotle does in fact uphold theses 1) - 3) above, and verbally, at least, upholds something close to thesis 3a): the words for excess and deficiency, too much and too little, are to be found throughout Book 2. She holds that the doctrine as given so far is in fact already false, and to develop it, as Urmson does, is to depart yet farther from the truth, and also from Aristotle.

TOPICOS

Hursthouse implies that we can defend Aristotle from the accusation of maintaining a manifest falsehood, of which he was himself aware, only by claiming that the doctrine of the mean is not very seriously meant. In this paper I intend to argue that we can in fact defend Aristotle by maintaining that the doctrine, if suitably restricted in scope, can be seen as both true and interesting.

The explanation she offers of Aristotle's willingness to dally with this false doctrine is that the doctrine, she says, does genuinely apply in the case of courage. It is a fact that the cowardly tend to fear as much as the brave and then some, to fear to excess: this is so whether we are talking about amount or intensity of feeling, or of number of objects of fear. At the same time, the rash or foolhardy tend to fear less than the genuinely brave do, and to be more daring. This set of virtue-and-vice fits the model expressed in thesis 3a) almost exactly, for the most part. But, she maintains, it is only a contingent fact that this is so. One can without any absurdity imagine someone who fears none of the normal objects of fear at all, but is terrified of mice, enclosed spaces and the dark. It is not the case that such a person fears more than the brave person and then some: but such a person is nevertheless neither brave nor rash, but rather cowardly. Such cases, if they occur at all, must be extremely rare: but the fact that they are possible shows that courage fits the model provided by thesis 3a) only contingently.

But once the model has been accepted, because of its obvious and useful application to the case of courage, it can be seen to have some application to the fields of other virtues. It applies quite well to certain forms of gluttony, that is, intemperance with regard to food. One form of gluttony is to eat all you need and then some: to eat to excess. But it is not, as Hursthouse points out, the only, nor perhaps the most important form of gluttony (pp.68-9). When we come to intemperance with regard to sexual desire the mis-fit is even clearer. Aristotle thinks that adultery is an action that is typically licentious or intemperate (1130a 25-30): but it is clear that there is nothing

essentially excessive about adultery at all. It is licentious not because of the excessive number of women, or because of excessive feeling, but because it is someone else's wife (pp. 65-6). When we get to the virtue of patience, the model has scarcely any application at all outside a very limited field which is scarcely representative of the complexities of the vice of bad temper. The most typical form of bad temper, according to Hursthouse, is one which combines excessive reactions to trivial annoyances with deficient reactions to serious affronts. The essence of the vice here is surely related to the kind of object, rather than to the degree of feeling or number of objects (pp. 69-71).

Thus, according to Hursthouse, it is right to conclude that in so far as Aristotle insists on the doctrine of the mean he is making a mistake: he is taking one contingent feature of one virtue and applying it more widely than he should. She prefers to believe that Aristotle does not really insist on this doctrine, and she strongly objects to any attempt, such as Urmson's, to fill out the notions of excess and deficiency used in 3a), particularly when they seem to lead to conclusions such as that to exhibit a feeling for the wrong reasons can be considered as feeling it for too many or too few reasons (pp. 60-61).

Hursthouse's attack on Aristotle

Hursthouse's attack on Urmson's account of Aristotle's doctrine of the mean is a very strong one, with a lot of justice on its side; and the strength of this attack may make her claim about what Aristotle undoubtedly did hold in Book 2 appear a comparatively modest one. But though it is modestly expressed, it is in fact a very strong claim. The doctrine of the mean undoubtedly forms the backbone of Book 2: and if the doctrine is false, then the whole book is in error. If, as Hursthouse claims, we should not take the doctrine very seriously because Aristotle admits that in Book 2 he is talking "in outline only" then he is at least wasting his time and ours, and also misleading many readers who have felt that this book is to be taken seriously.

This does not seem to me, as it does to Hursthouse, a venial fault which Aristotle can and does make atonement for by the excellence of Books 3 and 4.

The minimalist account

We are naturally unwilling to admit the claim that Aristotle has misled us, however venially. It is natural to seek an answer to the claim, which will show Book 2 to be consistent with the later books, interesting and true. One possible answer might be to minimise the doctrine.

Hursthouse principally attacks the doctrine that vices are to be characterised by their exhibiting too much or too little feeling, though she is aware that Aristotle seems also to want to discuss excesses and deficiencies of action. He refers to feelings at 1105b 25-7, and at 1106b 16-25, but in the latter place also refers to actions, as Hursthouse mentions (p.57). In yet other places he seems to refer to objects of feeling: to have the vice in question would seem to be to have feelings towards too many or too few of these (1104a 20-8 and 1104b 3). Many will have had the impression, too, that when Aristotle deals with pleasure and pain, for example at 1104b 21-4, he is hinting that here too there is a possibility of too much and too little. Hursthouse herself points out that magnanimity is clearly a virtue that is related to right judgment, and the same would seem to be true of magnificence (p.58).

Hursthouse would presumably see this as evidence for the vagueness of the doctrine in Aristotle's mind, and the casualness with which he holds it: a doctrine which is so vague about what the mean is supposed to be a mean *of* may seem to bear the marks of not being a doctrine that was very important to the one who propounded it. But it is possible to react in another way: we could give up the search for an adequate basis for the doctrine in a theory of the mind, or in a theory of action, and take the doctrine rather as a framework for an analysis

of what doing well and doing ill (in the widest sense of these expressions) consist in. What would be wrong in Urmson's account, then, would not be the extent to which he applies this doctrine, but his seeking to link all the applications of it to excess and deficiency of feeling.

In favour of this "minimalist" account would be Aristotle's own remark at 1106b 36-1107a 2: "Virtue, then, is a state of character concerned with choice, lying in a mean, i.e. the mean relative to us, this being determined by a rational principle, and by that principle by which the man of practical wisdom would determine it". The rule or standard of good action, good feeling, and so on, then, is how the person of practical wisdom, or complete virtue, would act or feel.

What "the mean" is, according to this account, is to act or feel rightly: "to feel them at the right times, with reference to the right objects, towards the right people, with the right motive, and in the right way, is what is both intermediate and best, and this is characteristic of virtue (1106b 21-3)". Thus the non-virtuous person, who acts, feels, and so on, wrongly, will act or feel as and when the wise person would not; and will fail to act or feel as and when the wise person would. In this way the non-virtuous person will always act or feel at least once too often or at least once too seldom, compared with the person of practical wisdom; or perhaps both.

We can thus call all cases of non-virtuous action or feeling excessive or deficient: and the last case enables us to give an account, in terms of excess and deficiency, even of vicious judgment. In the case of a viciously mistaken judgment in the field delimited by the feelings whose right measure is magnificence, for example, the vulgar man will make the judgment "This is a suitable occasion for splashing out" on an occasion when the man of practical wisdom, who possesses the virtue of magnificence, will not make such a judgement. On such an occasion, on the contrary, the man of practical wisdom will make the judgment "This is a suitable occasion for

spending modestly"; a judgment which the vulgar man will fail to make. According to the minimalist account of the doctrine of the mean, the vulgar man will have erred by excess and deficiency at the same time: but he will not have erred by excess and by deficiency at the same time and in the same respect, so there is no inconsistency. The vulgar man will have made one wrong judgment too many, and one right judgment too few.

Thus by thinning down the doctrine of the mean we can make it stretch further; that is, by minimalising it, by making "the mean" equivalent to "what is right", it seems that we can see all cases of doing ill and doing well as cases of doing more or less than the virtuous person would do. Some account of this kind would seem to be necessary if we are to make the doctrine apply even to courage and its related vices, beyond the usual cases. We referred above to Hursthouse's example of the "fearless phobic", who happens to fear exactly the right number of things to the right degree, but fears the wrong things - fearing mice, enclosed spaces and the dark instead of death, dishonour and wounds. By the minimalist account we can explain how such a person fails to be virtuous: objects of fear do not cancel out. The fearless phobic has three right objects of fear too few, and three wrong objects of fear too many, and is thus vicious by excess and deficiency at one and the same time. As Hursthouse herself says in another context (p. 68) "wrong object guarantees both wrong occasion and wrong amount". According to this minimalist account, this kind of point is what the doctrine of the mean is all about.

Hursthouse's objections to a minimalist account

Hursthouse seems to reject such an account of the doctrine of the mean as something akin to a series of plays on words (p.71):

Of course it is true that, even if, like Aristotle, one does recognise more than two vices corresponding to a virtue, one

could try to describe them all in terms of "too ...". The irascible are too violent; the bitter are angry for too long; the irritable are angered too often (by too many objects?). Perhaps it is the apparent possibility of doing this that continues to entice people into believing that there is some truth in some quasi-Urmsonian doctrine of the mean. But this is an illusion. To many of the virtues there correspond vices which consist simply in being disposed to feelings about wrong objects, as I have illustrated. The objects are not "too many" or "too few" but just plain wrong. The fact that many vices can be characterised in terms of "too ...", is a fact that has its own interest, but it does not serve to support the doctrine of the mean."

The minimalist account defended

A defender of the minimalist account might argue that here Hursthouse has missed the point: the whole point of this account is that by applying it we can show that even the vices and vicious actions which consist in being, as she says, "disposed to feelings about the wrong objects" can genuinely be represented as (minimal or notional) cases of "too much" or "too little". That is, according to this account, to teach a doctrine of the mean just is to draw attention to the fact that many or all vices "can be characterised in terms of 'too ...'". The doctrine of the mean, then, is supposed on this account to give us a structure within which to organise our thoughts on virtues and vices; it is not meant to say anything substantial about virtue or vice.

Thus, to take the Aristotelian example of adultery, to which Hursthouse draws attention: it is true that Sir Lancelot's crime was not that of falling in love with too many women. He fell in love with only one, and no Aristotelian is likely to say that one is too many. His crime, defenders of the minimalist account can admit, was that of falling in love with a wrong object, the Queen, as Hursthouse would

insist. But the minimalist account would go on to point out that we can safely say that Sir Galahad or Sir Percival, knightly equivalents of Aristotle's man of practical reason, would not have fallen in love when Sir Lancelot did. Hence we can characterise Sir Lancelot's crime as "excessive", in the minimalist sense for which this account provides: he fell in love with someone else's wife at least once too often, once more often than the man of practical wisdom would have done.

The defender of the minimalist account could go on to generalise this view of Lancelot's crime, and point out that any case of falling in love with a married woman is a case of falling in love once too often. An appeal could be made to the suggestion of Professor Anscombe in her article "Thought and action in Aristotle"³ that Aristotle stands in need of a theory which would explain what descriptions of an act are relevant to its moral evaluation. If this is so, as she argues, in Book 6, why should this not be the case in Book 2 as well?

The defence of the minimalist account rejected

This defence of the minimalist account, however, though it seems to meet the objections of Hursthouse, will not save this account. In the first place, as we have already seen, Aristotle expressly rejects the application of the "too much - too little" analysis to the case of adultery, and to the cases of other feelings and actions that are "in themselves bad" (1107a 8-17). The defender of the minimalist account of the doctrine of the mean has just proved that, according to this account, the analysis in terms of "too much - too little" does apply to the case of adultery. This is surely strong evidence that the

³ ANSCOMBE, G.E.M.: "Thought and action in Aristotle", *New Essays in Plato and Aristotle*, ed. R. Bambrough. It is also to be found in her *Collected Papers*, Vol. 1, and in the collection *Articles on Aristotle*, Vol. 2, ed. Barnes, Schofield and Sorabji.

minimalist account does not explain what Aristotle himself meant by this doctrine.

It is perhaps worth pausing a little to confirm this. Hardie, in his article "Aristotle's doctrine that virtue is a 'mean'"⁴, seems to hold that the doctrine of the mean does apply to the actions and feelings that Aristotle calls "bad in themselves".

"But not every action nor every passion admits of a mean; for some have names that already imply that badness is included in them, e.g. spite, shamelessness, envy, and in the case of actions, adultery, theft, murder; for all of these and such like things imply by their names that they are themselves bad, and not the excesses or deficiencies of them' (1107a 9-14) The opening words of this passage might suggest that Aristotle was asserting or admitting that there are exceptions to the doctrine of the mean, ranges of action or passions to which it does not apply. But he is making a purely logical point which arises from the fact that certain words are used to name not ranges of action or passion but determinations within a range, with the implication, as part of the meaning of the word, that they are excessive or defective, and therefore wrong." (pp. 190-1)

This would seem to be an error. It is perhaps true that Aristotle is making the logical point that spite and the like are not "ranges of action or passion", but there seems little reason to claim that he is saying that they are determinations, already excessive or defective, within that range. The passage that Hardie quotes in fact continues:

⁴ HARDIE, W.F.R.: "Aristotle's doctrine that virtue is a 'mean'", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* Vol. 65 (1964-5). It is also to be found in *Articles on Aristotle*, Vol. 2, mentioned above.

It is not possible, then, ever to be right in regard to them; one must always be wrong. Nor does goodness and badness with regard to such things depend on committing adultery with the right woman, at the right time, and in the right way, but simply to do any of them is to go wrong.

It would be absurd in a similar way⁵, then, to expect that in unjust, cowardly and voluptuous actions there should be a mean, an excess, and a deficiency; for at that rate there would be a mean of excess and of deficiency, an excess of excess, and a deficiency of deficiency. (1107a 14-21)

It seems fairly clear that Aristotle, in this second part of the passage, is making Hardie's point about unjust, cowardly, and voluptuous action. These are indeed dispositions to which the doctrine of the mean is explicitly applied, in one way or another, by Aristotle. These are indeed dispositions which are "not ranges of action or passion but determinations within a range, with the implication, as part of the meaning of the word, that they are excessive or defective, and therefore wrong". Unjust, cowardly and voluptuous actions, that is, *are* excessive or deficient parts of ranges in which there is excess, deficiency, and a mean. To make this point Aristotle compares them with other actions and feelings, to which he drew our attention in the first part of the passage, which Hardie quotes: actions and feelings which are simply bad in themselves, such as adultery, theft, murder, spite, shamelessness and envy, whose badness does *not* stem from being excessive or deficient parts of ranges in which there is excess, deficiency and mean. That is, what Aristotle is saying in the first part of the passage, quoted by Hardie, is precisely what Hardie admits the opening words seem to suggest. Aristotle is saying that adultery, theft, murder, spite, shamelessness and envy do not admit of a mean because they are bad in themselves: unjust, cowardly and voluptuous actions, likewise, do not admit of a mean, but the reason given here is

⁵ "In a similar way" translates "*homoion*". Ross in fact has "It would be equally absurd, then ...", which seems to make my point too easily.

that they are already either excessive or deficient. The minimalist account, then, though interesting and perhaps true, is not an accurate account of Aristotle's doctrine of the mean.

But there is another, yet more serious objection to the minimalist account. We said above that according to this account the doctrine of the mean gives us a structure within which to organise our thoughts on virtues and vices; it is not meant to say anything substantial about virtue or vice. Such a structure is of theoretical interest, and, if true, is of theoretical value. But it cannot be of any practical use. This is a serious consideration: in this very Book 2 Aristotle tells us with a certain amount of solemnity that we are aiming here not at theory but at practice (1103b 26-30). The only substantial moral truth which the doctrine of the mean enshrines, on the minimalist account, is that the vicious do not feel and act and act as and when the virtuous do, and vice-versa. It is not very likely that Aristotle supposed his pupils to be unaware of this fact; and even if they were, how will this information help them to become virtuous?

An impasse

We find ourselves, then, in something of an impasse. We did not want to accept Hursthouse's claim that the doctrine of the mean is either false, or not very important, or both: so we had recourse to the minimalist account. But we have seen that the minimalist account is not what Aristotle meant by his doctrine of the mean, and does not make the doctrine of the mean useful in the way that Aristotle claims that it is.

According to Hursthouse, Book 2 should be read as a not very successful, chatty and rather inaccurate introduction to Books 3 and 4. According to the minimalist account, it is a slightly more successful, though possibly inconsistent, theoretical framework for Books 3 and 4. Either way Aristotle's desire to be useful to those who want to be virtuous is to be fulfilled, if at all, in a later book.

If we re-read Book 2 these solutions appear unlikely. Chapter 9 of Book 2 is undoubtedly meant to be of real practical usefulness: it provides a trainer's guide to the acquisition of virtue. The claim to usefulness made early on in Book 2 means that we should try to read chapter 9 as the climax of the book, as a compendium of ascetical, practical instructions, for which the rest of the book has been a preparation. We should try to find an interpretation of the rest of Book 2, then, and of the doctrine of the mean that it contains, that makes the rest of the book a genuine preparation for chapter 9.

We are looking, then, for an account of the doctrine of the mean which is true and non-trivial, an account which makes sense of the advice Aristotle gives at the end of the book. We can find it by looking carefully at where Hursthouse goes wrong.

An ingenuous account of the doctrine of the mean

Hursthouse begins by asserting, surely correctly, that for a doctrine about the virtues to be called a doctrine of the mean it must at least contain thesis 3): "One's character may err in two opposed ways". She goes on to say that the thesis

"is, I think, definitely false, but the point I want to make here is that, if it were true, its truth would be a deeply mysterious fact. That to each virtue there corresponds at least one vice is an odd fact, but one for which we can imagine an explanation [the explanation being the fact that virtues are, in Foot's words, 'corrective']. But that to each virtue there should correspond precisely two vices, neither more nor less - what kind of explanation could there be of this extraordinary mathematical symmetry?" (pp.59-60)

She goes on to explain, using the examples and arguments already given, why she thinks this thesis, so understood, is false. Again, she is surely correct in this.

The mistake she is making is contained in her words "precisely two vices, neither more nor less". No doubt many defenders of the doctrine of the mean have been inclined to claim that to each virtue there correspond two and only two vices, which are, moreover, related to each other and to the virtue as excess, deficiency, and mean. But thesis 3 does not entail this: nor, even, does thesis 3a). All these theses maintain is that for every virtue there are *at least* two vices which are related as excess and deficiency; and this is all that one needs to maintain in order to hold a doctrine of the mean. I propose to adopt this as an account of the doctrine of the mean - an "ingenuous" or simple-minded account which does not go beyond what Aristotle says.

The "false doctrine of the mean", which Hursthouse attacks, is that to every virtue there correspond two and only two vices. It is clear that this is false: it should be no less clear that Aristotle does not hold it. On the contrary, he is inclined to say that to any virtue there will correspond a great number of vices; he insists that evil is manifold, for example at 1106b 28-35:

Again, it is possible to fail in many ways (for evil belongs to the class of the unlimited, as the Pythagoreans conjectured, and good to that of the limited), while to succeed is possible only in one way (for which reason also one is easy and the other difficult - to miss the mark easy, to hit it difficult); for these reasons, also, then, excess and defect are characteristic of vice, and the mean of virtue;

For men are good in but one way, but bad in many.

We can also repeat, as evidence that Aristotle does not hold the false doctrine of the mean that Hursthouse rejects, all the examples of non-

excessive and non-deficient vices and vicious actions which we have already seen.

Aristotle does not hold the false doctrine of the mean; but he does hold that to every virtue related to feeling there correspond two vices, one of excess and the other of deficiency. Hence, in the absence of any further evidence, we should take it that the "ingenuous" account, which takes Aristotle to mean what he says and no more, is the correct one.

Evidence in favour of this account

There is, of course, corroborative evidence that the doctrine as explained by this account is what Aristotle held. We could look, for example, at his account of liberality and its associated vices, to which Hursthouse draws attention on p.71. "The prodigal, he says, goes too far in giving and falls short in receiving ... thus the faults of prodigality are hardly ever found together (1121a ff)." That is, even within a single range of feelings, it is possible, according to Aristotle, to find more than two vices; in this case, a number of pairs of opposed vices. It is also possible, though not common, for a person to have one vice of excess and one of deficiency at the same time, though not with regard to one and the same feeling. The same is true of anger, as Hursthouse again points out: "Regarding anger, Aristotle says 'the excess occurs in respect of all the circumstances, with the wrong people, for the wrong reasons, more than is right ...; but *of course these conditions do not all attach to the same subject.* (1126a 9ff)". Even in the case of the feelings related to courage there seems to be some such complication, which Hursthouse deliberately sets aside (p.66). Courage would seem to be related to at least two kinds of feeling, daring and fear, but there are neither two nor four vices that correspond to these feelings: there are only three. There is "excess of fearlessness" (or deficiency of fear), which has no name: excess of daring, which is rashness: while excess of fear and

deficiency of daring are one and the same vice, cowardice. (1107a 34-b4)

We can see, then, that the doctrine of the mean as Aristotle held it is consistent with there being more than two vices opposed to a given virtue. There may even be more than two vices *of excess and deficiency* opposed to a single virtue, when there is more than one kind of feeling involved in the virtue. Things become even clearer when we consider vices that are not related to excess and deficiency at all. There may be many of these, so far as the doctrine of the mean is concerned, so long as there are always at least two vices of excess and deficiency. We should also notice that the (at least) two opposed vices of excess and deficiency need not both be common and immediately recognisable: many have no name (1107b 2) and some are extremely rare, as for example the vice of deficiency opposed to temperance (1107b 6-8). Hardie said, rightly, that the doctrine of the mean is not the whole of what Aristotle has to say about virtue (p.186): according to this ingenuous account, the doctrine of the mean is not even the whole of what Aristotle has to say about vice.

Is the doctrine thus expounded true?

The ingenuous account, then, seems to absolve Aristotle of the charge of contradicting himself, of holding both that there are two and only two vices opposed to a given virtue, and that there are many vices opposed to a given virtue. But the doctrine, so expounded, may still fall foul of other objections Hursthouse makes to the false "two and only two vices" doctrine. She held that this doctrine is in fact false, and that "if it *were* true, its truth would be a deeply mysterious fact" (p.59). The question then arises, is the doctrine, as expounded by the ingenuous account, true or false? and if true, what possible explanation could there be for it?

To defend the truth of the doctrine as thus understood we can do little more than appeal to fairly obvious evidence. We can, for

example, point out that Hursthouse herself accepts that there do really exist a number of pairs of vices that are related to virtues as simple excess or deficiency, though she denies that they are the most important or typical cases of bad disposition with relation to those feelings. She admits that there are gluttons who eat "the right amount and then some" (p.62). She admits, too, that there are people who are "greedy for sexual pleasures, and in such cases we can make good sense of licentiousness being a form of excess", while "There is a corresponding deficiency, for we may speak of people as being unnaturally or unhealthily indifferent to sexual pleasure"(p.65). To be sure, she goes on to insist "But cases of excess may well be rare, though licentiousness with respect to sex be common"; but as we have seen, this insight, that there are other non-excessive forms of the vice of intemperance or licentiousness, or other non-excessive vices opposed to sexual temperance, is perfectly compatible with the doctrine of the mean as understood according to the ingenuous account. On p. 67, discussing cowardice, she admits that even a majority of cowards will fear just the right objects and then some. Thus we have some evidence that to a number of virtues there do correspond vices that are vicious by being excessive or deficient, while not denying that there may be other vices opposed to the same virtue, or other forms of the same vice, which are not vicious by excess or deficiency.

(There is a difficulty of terminology here. The claim being made is that to each virtue there correspond at least two vices, of excess and deficiency, while there may also be other ways of going wrong with respect to these feelings. We might want to speak of e.g. the excessive and deficient *vices* of intemperance and insensibility, contrasting them with other vices opposed to temperance in other ways: or we might prefer to contrast the excessive and deficient *forms* of intemperance and insensibility with other forms of the same vices. Aristotle seems happy to call both excess of sexual appetite and adultery - which is not essentially excessive at all - by the same name, *akolasia*. This perhaps does not lead to very serious confusion: but what is important

is that he treats the excessive and deficient forms of the vice as the central or focal case, even though it may not be the most frequent or most typical. The central case of *akolasia* for Aristotle is excess of desire, even though the example he most often picks on, in later books, is that of adultery. The reason why he treats a non-typical kind of *akolasia* as central or focal is that this case fits the doctrine of the mean, as adultery does not: and the doctrine of the mean is central to his practical purpose in book 2, as we shall see.)

We can, in fact, surely insist that there are pairs of vices that are related to each virtue of feeling as excess and deficiency: or we can at least insist that it is possible that there should be such vices, even if we have never come across examples of them. Courage, for example, is a complicated virtue: but surely there are people whose cowardice consists simply in fearing too much - understanding "fearing too much" in a non-technical way which could include both fearing too many things, and fearing too intensely - and in not being daring enough. We could admit this even if we do not want to say, as Hursthouse does, that such cowards are the usual sort of cowards. Equally, there are people who go wrong simply by being too daring, or by not fearing enough: and perhaps, as Aristotle observes, we can distinguish the two forms of vice, at least notionally, even if they are usually found together. The most obvious form of gluttony, in our day at least, may be what we would call epicurism: an exaggerated concern for having the very best and most refined dishes. But we must also recognise the existence of a simpler form of gluttony, that of stuffing yourself to bursting, even if we do not regard this, as Aristotle apparently does, as the most common or typical form of gluttony. We also need to recognise the existence of people who care so little for their food that they do not eat enough to stay well. Excess and deficiency in sexual desire may be rare and untypical forms of licentiousness, which in other forms is a very common vice: but there are people who suffer from the excess or the deficiency. Bad temper may show itself most typically, as Hursthouse claims, in exaggerated responses to trivial stimuli, combined with carelessness towards

serious injustices: but there are or can be simpler souls whose vice consists in mere general irascibility or indifference, in an excess or deficiency of a certain kind of feeling. It makes no difference that we may not have met anyone with the vice in question or not: Aristotle admits that those who are viciously indifferent to physical pleasures are not frequent, and there is no reason to suppose that his young pupils will yet have come across any such. All they need is to be able to recognise that it is possible that such a person exists: if they have no experience of anybody with this vice, Aristotle's example of the stereotyped grasping, grudging, miserable peasant (as seen on the stage, perhaps?) will help them to accept the point (1104a 24).

Why should every virtue have at least two vices related to it?

If we grant, then, that each virtue has related to it at least one pair of opposed vices of excess and deficiency, as well as, perhaps, other possible opposed vices, it remains to explain this fact, which Hursthouse would regard as "extraordinary". It must be admitted that Aristotle does not make much effort to explain: perhaps because he does not regard the fact as so very extraordinary. He is surely right to say that there can be more or less of anything continuous and divisible, and it is surely true that amounts of feeling appear to be continuous and divisible. This is not extraordinary. Thus if, in a given virtue, one element is that of feeling to the right degree, it follows that it is always possible to miss this virtue, and fall into vice, by feeling too much or too little. This will be so even if such a vice is a minimal departure from virtue: even if there are much more important and frequent ways of falling into vice which do not consist in feeling too much or too little, but rather, say, in having feelings (the amount of which is irrelevant) towards wrong objects. The excessive and deficient forms of the vices will not exhaust the catalogue of vicious dispositions opposed to this virtue: they will be no more than two individual forms of the two different vices. *Akolasia*, in the sense of unbridled sexual drive, is only one form of that vice opposed to temperance which Aristotle frequently exemplifies by adultery; and

adultery is a form of vice that need not involve any excessive sexual drive. Liberality will certainly include having the right amounts of the feelings that have to do with getting and to giving away, and it will be possible to fall away from this virtue merely by having too much or too little of these feelings. It will also be possible, of course, to fall away from this virtue by having those feelings towards wrong objects: you can throw away money on flatterers, or live off immoral earnings. These may be more serious and more frequent forms of the vices opposed to liberality than a mere excess or deficiency of feelings: but the mere excess and deficiency of feelings do exist, and if the virtue includes having the right amount of these feelings, having too much or too little will be vicious.

Aristotle, of course, does not stop at feelings: he tells us that in actions, too, there is excess, deficiency and the intermediate (1106b 23-4). It is certainly true that some virtues seem to be more related to actions than to feelings. Actions appear to be discrete rather than continuous and divisible: so we have here another "extraordinary fact" that needs a different explanation.

Aristotle might have chosen to insist here that every virtue is going to involve some element of right degree of feeling, but it seems that he does not wish to. Instead, we can say that if actions are discrete, then there can be a more and a less: there can be a case of acting too often and a case of acting too seldom. These will again be minimal departures from virtue: but they will be departures. The fact that there are other forms of the same vices is irrelevant. If all virtues, then, involve either feelings or actions - and it is hard to see how they could not - then all virtues will have as one aspect of their correctness *feeling the right amount* or *acting the right number of times*. Thus it will be possible to go wrong with regard to every virtue *either* by feeling more than the right amount - too much - or less than the right amount - too little - *or* by acting more than the right number of times - too often - or fewer than the right number of times - too seldom. This is a fact, but it is not extraordinary.

We should stress one corollary of the doctrine of the mean as we have here expounded it. It is that the excessive and deficient forms of the vices opposed to a given virtue are, in a sense, *minimal* departures from virtue, the least bad vices. Adultery - which is a form of intemperance, the vice opposed to temperance - which gets its badness not from excess but from being directed to the wrong objects, is far worse than having an excessive sexual drive. The person with excessive sexual drive *may* eventually become an adulterer: but if he happens to share this excessive drive with his wife, there is no reason why he should. His vice, then, will be far less serious than that of the adulterer. The adulterer, on the other hand, may not have an excessive sexual drive at all; just a normal drive and no care for what is honourable.

The doctrine of the mean and Aristotle's practical purpose

It has been claimed, then, that the doctrine of the mean is true, and that its truth is not an extraordinary fact. It remains to see how this doctrine fits with Aristotle's purpose in Book 2. His claim is that this study is to be useful: "We are inquiring not in order to know what virtue is, but in order to become good" (1103b 26-7). The idea is that after this study one of his pupils will be able to act virtuously, and thus, by dint of practice, to become virtuous: "We must determine the nature of actions, namely how we ought to do them; for these determine also the nature of the states of character that are produced, as we said" (1103b 29-31). This is not an easy task: for "it is possible to fail in many ways ... while to succeed is possible only in one way (for which reason also one is easy and the other difficult - to miss the mark easy, to hit it difficult)" (1106b 28-33).

Aristotle sees his task as helping the pupil to hit the mark of virtuous action: he frequently uses this metaphor drawn from

archery.⁶ It is worth stopping for a moment to consider the metaphor. For example, Aristotle speaks of “looking towards the mean” at 1106b 9. This may not be a metaphor drawn from archery: but elsewhere he speaks of “hitting the mark” (1106b 33), or of “hitting” the mean (1106b 15), using the same word, *stokhastikē*. He uses the same word at 1109a 22 and at 1109a 30, and another word for “hitting”, *tynkhanein*, at 1109b 13 and 1109b 26. It is to be noticed that most of these uses of the metaphor are to be found in chapters 6 and 9, that is, the chapters in which he expounds the doctrine of the mean and uses this doctrine for practical advice. How important is this metaphor?

It is possible to see the metaphor as the key to the doctrine of the mean, and thus to Book 2 as a whole. Aristotle's pupils are well brought-up: they have some idea of good and bad. They are expected to know that adultery, say, is shameful. In the same way, the novice in archery knows that the idea is to hit the target, and not, say, to shoot the umpire. What he needs is to learn *how* to aim at and hit the target, so as to be able to develop the skill by practice. In the same way, Aristotle's pupils need to know how to aim at virtue. To hit the target one needs to aim in the right direction, along the right line, so to speak. But this is not enough: one needs to know how to avoid

⁶ It is impossible for me to go to great lengths to defend my understanding of the metaphor. The metaphor works much better if we do not think of archery practice in terms of the modern sport of “shooting at the butt”, shooting at an upright target at short range. In such a case there is no question of overshooting, as distinct from missing one's aim, and it is scarcely possible to undershoot at all. We should rather think of the older practice of “shooting at the clout”, shooting at a larger horizontal target at much greater range, by aiming high and getting your arrow to fall on the target. The experts seem to say that this practice was unknown in Greek warfare, but I find this unconvincing, for a number of reasons. Perhaps the most important fact is that the Greeks do have verbs for “overshoot” and “undershoot”: given this fact, I take it that they must have been familiar with this kind of shot.

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overshooting or undershooting. In the same way Aristotle's pupils need to know along what line virtue is to be found, and how to avoid overshooting and undershooting.

We said that the vices of excess and deficiency are minimal departures from virtue. All that is wrong with the man of excessive sexual drive, *qua* excessive, is his excess of that kind of feeling. If he is driven by his excessive drive to commit adultery, this is a new form of the vice. We should limit ourselves to considering the pure case of excess. This man is like the virtuous man, except in the degree of his passion. Equally, the man of deficient sexual drive is also like the virtuous man, except in the degree of his passion. These two minimal departures from virtue fix the line on which virtue falls, and thus the line along which the pupil, of archery or of virtue, must aim. Once the line is fixed, the pupil has to learn to avoid overshooting and undershooting. It is surely not a coincidence that the words that we translate "excess" and "deficiency", *hyperbolē* and *elleipsis*, also have the technical sense of "overshooting" and "undershooting". One might say to a novice in archery "Aim as X and Y do, along the same line: but shoot a little farther than X and a little shorter than Y" or "You have the line all right, but you need to shoot farther, or shorter". This is exactly what Aristotle is saying in Chapter 9.

The doctrine of the mean, then, may be useful in two ways. It may help the pupil to see where virtue is to be found, and it may help him to hit it once found. The fact that virtue can be identified as a disposition which lies between these two vices is something that is surely new in Aristotle, certainly new to his pupils, and of great practical interest.

For this to be true, it has to be the case that it is easier to identify a pair of perhaps rare vices than it is to identify the virtue that lies between them: we need to be able to identify what kinds of disposition are excessive or deficient, without having yet identified the disposition that is medial. Hardie alludes to this possibility, and gives the

example of working out how much money to give to some good cause: twenty pounds would be too little, thirty too much, and so on. But he claims that this "working inwards" is rare: he goes on to quote with approval Ross's remark that in general "we recognise what is too much and too little by recognising what is right"(pp. 195-6)⁷.

It is possible to argue that Hardie and Ross are wrong here, both as a question of fact and as a question of what Aristotle thought. It is true that what is wrong is wrong in virtue of being not right, and that it is not the case that what is right is right in virtue of being not wrong: and it is also the case that what makes such-and-such a disposition "too much" or "too little" is its relation to what is just right. For all that, it may well be easier, and more common than they think, to *recognise* what is just right in virtue of having recognised what is too much and what is too little. Aristotle certainly seems to have held this view. When he begins to tell us how to hit virtue, he does so by *first* drawing our attention to pairs of opposed vices: vices so exaggerated, indeed, that it is practically impossible for anyone normal, even if not very well brought-up, to fail to recognise that they are vices.

The man who flies from and fears everything and does not stand his ground against anything becomes a coward, and the man who fears nothing at all but goes to meet every danger becomes rash; and similarly the man who indulges in every pleasure and abstains from none becomes self-indulgent, while the man who shuns every pleasure, as boors do, becomes in a way insensible; temperance and courage, then, are destroyed by excess and defect, and preserved by the mean. (1104a 20-7)

Aristotle seems to think, then, that vices of excess and deficiency are more easily picked out than is the virtue on either side of which

⁷ The reference to Ross is to p. 196 of his Aristotle.

they lie. He does not even seem to agree with Hardie and Ross that excess or deficiency can only be considered as such relative to the mean: at 1108b 11-19 he insists that "All are in a sense opposed to all; for the extreme states are contrary both to the intermediate state and to each other". He seems generally, in any case, to refer to "excess and deficiency and the intermediate" in that order: the order followed by the "table" that he gives in the **Eudemian Ethics**. One might, too, very plausibly hold that everyone will be able to identify some excessive and deficient degrees of the relevant feelings, even if they are themselves excessive or deficient. Even the greatest coward will be able to imagine someone who fears more than he does.

But even if we do not agree that the doctrine of the mean helps us to identify the line on which virtue is to be found, by first performing the easier task of identifying two vices that are related to the mean and to each other as excess and deficiency, the doctrine of the mean is still of practical usefulness. Even if we grant, with Hardie and Ross, that the recognition of the right line does not come from the recognition of excess and deficiency, but from some other source - a good education, perhaps - it is still useful to be told that these forms of vice exist. It is useful to be told that even if one is one the right line - as a result of being well brought-up, say - one's virtue is not by that fact guaranteed. It is useful to be told that we may need to find the right point along the line: and it is certainly useful to be told how to identify where one's own disposition falls along that line, and how to lengthen or shorten one's aim, in order to hit the mean of virtue. This is exactly what Aristotle tells his pupils in chapter 9.

According to this account, then, the doctrine of the mean is true, and we can see why it is true. The doctrine of the mean is made by it to be consistent with other things that Aristotle has to say of vice. It is certainly of some practical value, and may be of very great practical value. According to this account, too, Aristotle's failure to tell us explicitly what the mean is supposed to be a mean of is not a serious defect. What he actually says is that the mean is a "mean of two

vices, one of excess, and one of deficiency” (1107a 2-3, 1109a 21-2). This appears to explain nothing: but on this account of the doctrine there is no need why it should explain anything. The mean will be a mean of that of which the excess is an excess, and the deficiency a deficiency, whatever that may be. No other account of this doctrine fits the text on all these points.

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