

## THE MEAN

### Introduction

The mean, according to Aristotle, is a term which references moderation in feelings, decisions and actions in accordance with what is virtuous. I will discuss a possible anomaly in his argument with regard to utilizing reason in order to be virtuous illuminating that one cannot be virtuous from habit because habit has no reason. I will also discuss the utility of the mean in and of itself as applied to Aristotle's time period, as well as the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, concluding that it is only useful when used as a guideline.

### What is the Mean?

Aristotle believes we have two kinds of virtues—that of thought and that of character. Virtue of thought is enhanced over great lengths of time and conducted through teaching and virtue of character comes from habit, which requires the right sort of habits to be taught at an early age and must “accord with the correct reason.” (Aristotle, 1999), pg. 19(33). Virtue is, as Aristotle claims, “...about pleasures and pains; the actions that are its sources also increase it or, if they are done badly, ruin it; and its activity is about the same actions as those that are its sources.” (Aristotle, 1999), pg. 21(15). In order to be a virtuous person one must have habituated the proper actions well and by doing so makes a person excellent. An excellent person will perform virtuous (and right) actions by invoking the “mean.” The mean is the epitome of virtue because it strives for feelings, decisions and actions somewhere in the middle of extremes on either end of the spectrum. By meeting in the middle, “...relative to us the intermediate is what is neither superfluous nor deficient...” (Aristotle, 1999), pg. 24(33).

If, for instance, ten are many and two are few, we take six as intermediate in the object, since it exceeds [two] and is exceeded [by ten] by an equal amount, [four]. This is what is intermediate by numerical proportion. But that is not how we must take the

intermediate that is relative to us. For if ten pounds [of food], for instance, are a lot for someone to eat, and two pounds a little, it does not follow that the trainer will prescribe six, since this might also be either a little or a lot for the person who is to take it—for Milo [the athlete] a little, but for the beginner in gymnastics a lot...In this way every scientific expert avoids excess and deficiency and seeks and chooses what is intermediate—but intermediate relative to us, not in the object.

(Aristotle, 1999), pg. 24(§6-8). Thus, it is the proper intermediate action taken in consideration of human need that makes something virtuous or not. In order to be virtuous people we must abstain from the vices of “excess, [and] one of deficiency,” but pursue “one, the mean, [which] is virtue.” (Aristotle, 1999), pg. 27. The mean is what we are to strive for and is moderation, “for both excessive and deficient exercise ruins bodily strength, and similarly, too much or too little eating or drinking ruins health, whereas the proportionate amount produces, increases and preserves it.” (Aristotle, 1999), pg. 20(15).

### *The Anomaly*

While Aristotle is probably right about moderation being key and he seems more open, within moderation, about various activities our society has tabooed (e.g. sex and other pleasures) I don't know that he is as convincing when the mean is applied to other key components of being virtuous.

Aristotle claims that only an excellent person can be virtuous and the only way that one can become an excellent person, a virtuous person, is to have been properly raised from youth as to what decisions, feelings, thoughts and/or actions are correct, right, good and “intermediate condition.” (Aristotle, 1999), pg. 29(20). While everyone may have ideas as to what this may be, only the excellent person will know the answer: “the excellent person is far superior because he sees what is true in each case, being himself a sort of standard and measure.” (Aristotle, 1999), pg. 37, §5. However, in order for the excellent person to have come to his “standard and measure,” and know how to implement the mean he must acquire virtue of thought and virtue of character.

Virtue of thought is a state of reasoning ability while virtue of character is a state of intermediate behaviors (e.g. temperament, feelings, actions, etc.)

The two virtues are taught through habitual performance, i.e. being told by the superior excellent person what the mean should be relative to feelings, decisions, actions and the like, in accordance with each individual human need as in the example of the gymnast above. “Virtue of thought arises and grows mostly from teaching; that is why it needs experience and time. Virtue of character...results from habit...” (Aristotle, 1999), pg. 18(15). Here is where the irregularity, or contradiction if you will, comes into play.

If the rules of being a virtuous person require the ability to reason, “...what we decide to do is what we have judged [to be right] as a result of deliberation” (Aristotle, 1999), pg. 36, §17 (emphasis added), we would have to contemplate what the right, good and/or correct actions are, but if a person is taught from youth what to think and to decide from habit then he/she is not really thinking for him/herself. Because they are not thinking for themselves the reasoning behind the virtue of thought is lost and if we lose out on virtue of thought we cannot teach habitual acts of virtue to others and therefore would also lose virtue of character. Further, if the excellent person teaching has previously learned to behave from habit he is not using virtue of thought in the first place and if that person does not have virtue of thought he/she is not virtuous and is in no position to teach the unvirtuousness to others.

### Utility of the Mean

The mean, applied to Aristotle’s time or the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, does have some use insofar as it is used as a guideline. In fact, we use his guideline of the mean (moderation) for many things; especially things or substances we now socially ought not do or consume. Think about the consumption of alcohol, for example. Many people, especially those with rigid moral values,

believe that the consumption of alcohol is a mortal sin yet others do not. We (people in the U.S.) remedy this with finding the mean by allowing the consumption of it, claiming that drinking in moderation is the key and invoke a “sin” tax upon it. In this way, all who are directly or indirectly involved receive some benefit relative to their human need. A person who believes alcohol consumption is wrong does not get a full prohibition on it, but certain limits are placed upon those who do consume it so as to appeal to the safety needs of others (e.g. illegality of drunk driving or underage drinking, or even as far as the regulation of the advertisements of such substances).

However, some of the mean’s utility is lost when you apply the strict measure of how one becomes virtuous, because merely finding the intermediate based on each human’s need is not enough. If we strictly apply Aristotle’s vision of excellence, and the epitome of virtue—the mean—Aristotle would not agree with our current set up for the consumption of Alcohol because our current system deals with varying social classes and applies to them all, whereas Aristotle would claim that those who are not raised in accordance with his strict rules for virtue (non-aristocratic people) would not be virtuous and the virtuous rules would not apply to them in the same way, if at all. Purely applied to Aristotle’s time period the mean is a useful way to control peoples’ overall behavior and thinking, as well as keep the social classes separated, which is reminiscent of today’s American struggle to separate, define or undefine what are or were considered traditional gender roles, but I digress.

Ultimately, Aristotle’s principle of the mean is not useful if strictly construed when applying it to modern-day America’s alleged principles of equality and certain freedoms (including speech), but using it as a guideline to appeal to all as a group and taking individual human needs into consideration is useful when trying to determine what is fair punishment of a crime, what regulations, if any, should be created to limit certain actions and/or behaviors; however, in doing

so, it would not necessarily be able to be done completely from habit because each new “case” has a different set of facts and each different set of facts would require a different mean to be applied to it, which is why it is better utilized as a guide rather than a do or die-type rigid lifestyle.

Considering the current state of our economy, I think it would be a fair argument to claim that if we apply the “guideline” of the mean, like we do for the concept of “alcohol in moderation,” to the legalization of marijuana it would become more than useful to our country. What I mean by this is that the legalization of marijuana would generate revenue in the form of an additional “sin” tax to help reduce the budget deficit (if not completely eliminate it, considering the number of people who smoke marijuana in this country). which would be beneficial to everyone, especially in the creation of new jobs (new jobs equal more tax payers, more tax payers equal even more revenue generated in the form of income taxes). It would also be the application of the mean in regulating the consumption of it by maintaining the illegality of driving under the influence and the sale of it and advertisements of it to those under the age of 18, which would also benefit the safety of the general public as well as the influence over minds without proper capacity. And, the removal of the social stigma would benefit those who choose to smoke it by claiming “it’s okay if it’s in moderation,” or used for medicinal purposes for which has a whole lot more benefits that will not be discussed herein for the purposes of this paper.

### Conclusion

I cannot conclude that the mean as applied to Aristotle’s rules and definition of virtue is true because by habitually performing certain actions and decisions removes the deliberation of reason, which is supposed to be a requirement of virtue, and if those requirements are rendered moot then those who perform specific actions and decisions by habit (as Aristotle would require of them) then they are merely sheep and not virtuous. The usefulness of the mean is only useful

when used as a guideline to find a solution somewhere in the middle that is beneficial relative to human needs and preferences because one cannot be Aristotle virtuous when performing without reason but by habit alone.