



Dependency of the Mean Upon the Right Rule; A Critique of the Aristotelian Mean's Interpretation as an Autonomous Ethical Action's Criterion

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Abstract

The mean has mostly been considered in the history of Aristotelian Ethics' commentaries as the main idea of his ethical thought so that it transformed from an ethical concept to his ethical theory. Thus, the validity of the Aristotelian ethical attitude is evaluated by the mean as the central thesis. However, it becomes apparent by pursuing the procedure of the Aristotelian investigation in the text of the *Nicomachean Ethics* that the mean is first presented as a possibility for the necessity of the best choice's understanding in every given practical situation. The final signification and the substantial content of the mean is that the best choice must be chosen by every individual agent at any particular action considering all the multiple, variable and conditioned factors. Because the mean is an individual intuitive grasping, it needs a right rule; relying on which, as a universal criterion, we determine any particular mean in every special circumstance. The right rule itself consists of the right reason. Having surveyed various kinds of knowledge, Aristotle arrives at practical reason, which is an agent's dispositional power generally and in comprehending and actualizing the best particular option particularly. The mean, therefore, depends on the right rule which itself relies on the correct reason or practical understanding (Phronesis).

Keywords

Mean, right rule, action, ethical action's criterion, particular knowledge, individual agent, practical understanding (Phronesis).

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Introduction: Question and Method

The mean term in Aristotle's intellectual system is one of the main concepts and in several sections of his thought, plays a common outstanding part. But, its application in ethics, among all of its usages, has become more prominent and more controversial so that his ethical contemplations during history have been summarized and introduced by ethical mean as a golden rule. The mean in Aristotelian Ethics' commentaries has prevailed over the other concepts in such a way that the totality of his ethical thought has been interpreted based on the mean as an autonomous and self-sufficient criterion for ethical action. It consequently transformed from an ethical concept to ethical theory and in various interpretive traditions, the whole of Aristotelian ethical ideas has been mostly criticized by the valuation of the mean as his main ethical theory. Thus, the validity of his ethics, in theory, and practice, has been conditioned by the viability of the mean as an independent and self-sufficient basis for moral deeds. Following this exegesis, the question that follows is firstly, whether the mean is the essential core of the Aristotelian ethical thought or not? And if the answer is negative (of which this article aims to defend), therefore, secondly: why such an interpretation has gained this authority in his prevalent ethical thought commentaries? The present paper attempts to investigate the first question to prepare the path for investigating the latter. For this purpose, by suspending the predetermined judgment on the centrality of the mean as an autonomous criterion of the ethical action on Aristotle, an immediate confrontation with the Aristotelian thought as it appears in the text of the Nicomachean Ethics could arise. Thus, regarding the mean's place in Aristotle's Ethics, the paper intends to follow the Aristotelian way, wherein he projects it as a possibility for grasping the best option in any practical situation and then scrutinizes its capacity for this goal.

Projection and Rejection of the Mean as a Criterion

The initial significance of the mean in practical investigation is descriptive which describes our conditions as agents *among* actions seeking the best choice in every situation. This real state necessitates an ideal prescriptive criterion in grasping and realizing the best practical option. The mean in any given practical situation is an option for action that is not more or less than what that practical state demands; but rather, is the exactly suitable deed. Of the intermediate term, there would either be the quantitative or qualitative mode; the first of which is based on the equal distance of the mean point to each of the extremes terms (excess and deficiency). In the quantitative mean, the middle is determined by a mathematical principle that is single, fixed and

absolute and hence it could be the universal rule for general determination of the right choice; but exactly of this mathematical formality and generality, it denies the individuality and plurality of the several actions and various actors. The unique, steady and absolute quantitative mean does not say anything useful about the suitable action regarding the multiple, variable and conditioned essence of the action.. Consequently, we transfer to the qualitative mean that which it depends on, not on the quantitative equal distance from two extreme terms but upon the several movable standards that vary for every agent in any situation; depending on many factors. The undetermined, changeful quality of an action performed by every single individual agent at any personalized, particular circumstance, helps to determine the mean. The qualitative mean, because of its floating entity, is in accordance with the moving quality of action; but it is exactly due to this characteristic that it cannot play the role of a criterion that involves stability and generality. Inevitably, there would not be one stable standard; but there is merely an individual intuition about the mean in action. The final content of the mean in its normative form is nothing but a formal instruction that instructs us to choose the best option in any situation upon the several, special factors. The normative theme of the qualitative mean does not contribute to establishing an all-inclusive universal criterion. In this stage, Aristotle by denying the mean as an autonomous self-founded criterion declares that it is an individual immediate intuition, not a universal constitution.

Conclusion: Mean, Right Rule and Phronesis

Since the mean in every particular circumstance is determined by the agent's personal considerations and the situation's distinctive characteristics, Aristotle concludes that the mean cannot be a universal rule. Therefore, it needs a right rule, relying on which as a general criterion, we can determine any particular mean in every special circumstance. At the beginning of the sixth book of *Nicomachean Ethics*, having declared the insufficiency of the mean as an ethical action's norm and its dependency upon the right rule, Aristotle continues to investigate the right understanding for establishing the right rule. Examining several kinds of grasping, he arrives at practical comprehension (*Phronesis*) as a general potentiality in cognition and realization of the particular mean. On the ground of practical experiences, an actor gradually reaches a disposition, which - Aristotle calls it, is like the soul's eye in seeing the mean in any given action. He, in fact, obtains total power in the partial diagnosis of the mean in knowledge and action.

Therefore, the mean as an individual intuition is determined by the right rule which, - as a universal constitution, flourishes in the domain of Phronesis as a potentiality of the agent's disposition generally in knowing, and acting the particular mean particularly.

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