

The doctrine of the mean philosophy essay



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Aristotle's The Doctrine of the Mean is defined as: " 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 rational principle, and by that principle by which the man of practical wisdom would determine it." An interpretation of the passage would be that at any given virtue lies between two extremes, either excess or deficient of, and the means between the two extremes determined by our rational principle, would be the virtue by which we should act upon in certain situation. Virtue as a state of character is a matter of how we stand with regard to the passions. Before proceeding with how Aristotle uses the doctrine, we should look at how Aristotle defines the mean as.

Now, by " lying in a mean," Aristotle does not take it to be arithmetical. For example, taking $10+2= 12$, and the mean of this equation would be 6.

However, in the Milo example, the six pounds of food would be considered either too much or too little, depending on which athlete you are feeding.

Aristotle does not deny that the intermediate is " equidistant from each of the extremes, which is one and the same for all men, by intermediate relatively to us that which is neither too much nor too little-and this is not one, nor the same for all." What Aristotle seems to be saying here, is an account that on a particular scale of the two extremes, the intermediate, or virtue, is the same distance from the two extremes. Going on from both passages, it is not the case that it will be the same for all men, and the intermediate is determined by the individuals in how they act in accordance with certain situation.

A case example of how the doctrine works is for instance, social party. There are two extremes, excess of drinking alcohol and deficient of drinking

alcohol. In this case, an excess of drinking alcohol might impair your judgment on certain decisions, leading to a regrettable mistake, while lack of alcohol might lead to ostracizing of certain social group. In either of the two extremes, the action and the circumstance give unwanted results. The intermediate in this case would be, “ 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.” So the correct action to take in the fraternity case would be to take in the right amount of alcohol, neither excessive so that you would lose your rational, nor lack of so as to not be ostracized from the social group.

Problem with The Doctrine of the Mean: clarifying what the Intermediate means.

The problem with the doctrine is understanding what it means to be in the intermediary. In one sense, it is easily comprehensible as having the right references to do the right action, but for example, in the case of fear and confidence, where the extreme of fear leads to cowardice and the extreme of confidence lead to rashness, how are we to understand the relation of intermediary virtue between the two extremes?

In one sense, we cannot neglect one vice over another, such that we cannot say that the intermediary is “ excess/deficiency of fear” or “ excess/deficiency of confidence,” for the intermediate has to carry both the properties of fear and confidence. It would not do to say that the intermediate lies in relation to one vice, for example, that the same intermediate would be found if we only take in account of having too much or too little fear, we would find the same intermediate for if we only take in

account of having too much or too little confidence. Aristotle does not necessarily state anywhere in the text, however, it should be reasonable to suppose that any two extremes in relation to the intermediate will undermine, but not neglect, one of the two extremes and exaggerate the other extreme. So, we can suppose that both fear and confidence are unopposed to cowardice and rashness.

If the intermediate have to carry both the properties of fear and confidence, then it would help give a clearer account on where the intermediate lies on the doctrine. A means in relation to the two extremes would then be between the two extremes, where the intermediate have both the property of the two extremes. A virtue then would be the intermediate between the two extremes, individually distinct from the two extremes by having both properties of the two extremes.

Aristotle does not give an explanation in ethical application what he means by virtue as intermediate. However, Aristotle's description of the intermediate and the two extremes do allow room for the argument to understand that intermediates have both properties of the two extremes. With an account of being able to find the intermediate on the scale of the two extremes, an intermediate is the right expression of action or emotion, independent of the two extremes, but the two extremes are dependent on the intermediate in their relation to virtue.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have given an account of Aristotle's The Doctrine of the Mean, by offering a general interpretation of the doctrine and using examples to

understand the doctrine. What I proposed for the paper is to give a clearer understanding of what the intermediate is and their relation to the two extremes. Most interpretation of Aristotle's account of the doctrine seems correct, in that it is to act or express appropriately in a certain circumstance, but take it for granted that the intermediate is just what is "between" the two extremes. There are many problems regarding the doctrine that Aristotle gives, but in most cases, if we can understand the relation of the two extremes and the intermediate, then we could explain some of the discrepancy that arise from the doctrine.