

# [Courage and aristotle’s doctrine of the mean](https://assignbuster.com/courage-and-aristotles-doctrine-of-the-mean/)

For Aristotle, the doctrine of the mean is a moral frame of reference by which each manÃ¢s character can be better understood. When applied to specific virtues such as courage, it illuminates what Aristotle believes to be the complex relationship among the agent of virtue, his judgment, and his character. However, the worth of the theory of the mean is its recognition of manÃ¢s moral autonomy, an independence that is made necessary by the incomplete and inconclusive nature of AristotleÃ¢s doctrine. AristotleÃ¢s account of virtue in the Ethics is given structure through its organizing principle, the doctrine of the mean. He first develops virtue as a mean through the analogy of art. He writes, Ã¢A master of any art avoids excess and defect, but seeks the intermediate and chooses this Ã¢” the intermediate not in the object but relatively to usÃ¢? (1106b5). Thus, the standard by which every art does its work well and by which the good artist is judged is by looking toward the intermediate. For Aristotle, virtue is Ã¢more exact and better than any art. Ã¢? Thus, as an art, virtue too Ã¢must have the quality of aiming at the intermediateÃ¢? (1106b10). He states that he is here concerned with Ã¢moral virtue, Ã¢? the body of virtue that encompasses passions and actions and their inherent excesses, deficiencies, and intermediates. What is this intermediacy at which the master artist of the good life aims? Aristotle writes that what is intermediate is to feel the right pleasures and pains Ã¢at the right times, with the right motive, and in the right way; Ã¢? and this applies Ã¢similarly with regard to actionsÃ¢? (1106b20). Thus, we find that there are four components of mean within each mean of virtue itself: the mean with respect to emotions, pleasures and pains, attitude and intention, and action. Both excess and deficiency in any of these components of mean are forms of failure, but the intermediate is a form of success at which virtue aims. Finally, from this Aristotle concludes that it is possible to fail in many ways, but to succeed is possible in only one way. Aristotle summarizes this account of virtue as a mean and introduces the secondary element of choice at 1107a: Ã¢Virtue, then, is a state of character concerned with choice, lying in a 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. Ã¢? Furthermore, virtue is a mean between two vices, one which falls short of and one which exceeds what is right in passions and actions. How is the doctrine of the mean developed for the specific virtue of courage? Aristotle begins by characterizing courage as a mean through an evaluation beginning at 3. 6, using as measuring rods the elements of fear and confidence. He first asks, What do men fear? Because he defines fear as Ã¢expectation of evil, Ã¢? he concludes that the things that are feared are Ã¢terrible things, Ã¢? Ã¢evilsÃ¢? such as disgrace, poverty, and disease (1115a10). Yet there is a distinction among men as regards fear. The brave man fears only what is right and noble to fear, and would be base if he did not fear them. The brave man fears the greatest thing, death, in the noblest circumstances of danger: he is Ã¢brave who is fearless in face of a noble deathÃ¢? (1115a30). All terrible things are not terrible to the same magnitude and degree; some are terrible beyond human strength. Though the brave man fears even things that are within human strength, Ã¢he will face them as he ought and as the rule directs, for honorÃ¢s sake; for this is the end of virtueÃ¢? (1115a30). Not only are the objects of fear characterized by variation, but fear, as an emotion, is also subject to degrees and variance: one can fear more or less. The courageous man faces and fears the right things and from the right motive, in the right way and at the right time. He feels and acts according to the merits of each case as the rule directs Ã¢” thus achieving the mean in action, emotion, and intention Ã¢” with the end or goal of conformity to the state of the courageous character. Because courage is noble and each thing is defined by its end, the end of courage is noble. Thus, the Ã¢brave man endures and acts as courage directsÃ¢? for a noble end (1115b20). Aristotle analyzes the state of courage and its opposite states through a dissection of the magnitudes of fear and confidence. Aristotle calls he who exceeds in fearlessness Ã¢insensible, Ã¢? and he who exceeds in confidence Ã¢rashÃ¢? (1115b25). The rash man is a pretender to and imitator of courage: Ã¢as the brave man is with regard to what is terrible, so the rash man wishes to appearÃ¢? (1115b30). In his analysis, Aristotle overlaps the genres of rashness and cowardliness by claiming that the rash man acts in both ways: by nature rash, the rash man does not persevere against what is truly terrible, showing himself cowardly as well. It seems, then, that the rash man diverges from the mean of courage in both directions, though foremost characterized by his excess of confidence. Contrarily, the coward exceeds in fear, fearing both what he should and what he should not, and is deficient in confidence. In summary: The coward, the rash man, and the brave man, then, are concerned with the same objects but are differently opposed to them; for the first two exceed and fall short, while the third holds the middle, which is the right position. (1116a5)For Aristotle, courage is the mean with respect to the objects that inspire emotions of confidence or fear, choosing and enduring these objects because of the nobility or the baseness of doing so. Fear and confidence play the configuring roles around which the account of courage is articulated. They unite the four components of mean (emotion, pleasure/pain, intention, and action). Fear and confidence are the emotions that drive one to act and give the action its accompanying intention or attitude, and they arise through manÃ¢s sensitivity to pleasure and pain Ã¢” the pleasure of doing ignoble deeds, and the pain involved in doing noble deeds. Aristotle writes, Ã¢if virtues are concerned with actions and passions, and every passion and every action is accompanied by pleasure and pain, for this reason also virtue will be concerned with pleasures and painsÃ¢? (1104b15). Yet, paradoxically, although courage comes through facing what is painful, it has a pleasant and noble end that is concealed by the attending circumstances. This is central to the conflict within the courageous man: he must reconcile his feeling of fear (aversion to pain and desire for safety) and the uncertainty that lies in his feeling of confidence with the desire for good that is the end. Here there is a conflict between the external goal and the internal feelings attached. The courageous man assigns the correct value to these dangers, goods, and goals, and controls himself accordingly. AristotleÃ¢s theory of the mean makes possible two models for identifying the mean. The first entails fixing the two extremes (state of excess and deficiency) in relation to each other, and consequently fixing the optimum mean in relation to these two points. The second model entails beginning with an independent optimum and identifying the two directions of extremity. With respect to courage, Aristotle proposes and takes the second approach by identifying the mean based on manÃ¢s feelings of fear and confidence. His methodology is fear-centric. Aristotle first takes the things that are feared by men and identifies which are to be feared rightly and which are not to be feared. The brave man achieves the mean of courage by fearing what is to be feared, facing this if necessary, and, in addition, by facing what is not to be feared. After finding this mean, Aristotle characterizes the insensible, rash, and cowardly man by the magnitude and correctness of his fears and by his actions in enduring or abstaining from the objects of his fear. The doctrine of the mean, with its structural analysis of virtue and its opposition, raises the question as to who will be able to identify the mean. Is right judgment about right and wrong a necessary precursor to identifying the mean? Aristotle implies that it is. At 1143a20 he defines judgment as Ã¢the right discrimination of the equitable. Ã¢? Being a man of good and right judgment consists in Ã¢being able to judge about the things with which practical wisdom is concernedÃ¢? (1143a30). Thus, right judgment reconciles the understanding and discrimination of the equitable with practical wisdom. Identification of a virtue, already defined as the Ã¢mean determined by the rational principle by which a man of practical wisdom follows, Ã¢? requires right judgment on the part of the agent concerning what is right and wrong (1107a). To support this position, Aristotle distinguishes states of character that he considers false types of courage. Among these is the Ã¢courageÃ¢? of the citizen-soldier: because he is compelled to act as he does, he has no right judgment of his own about what is noble. The passionate person is also not truly courageous because he lacks the choice and motive that follow from correct judgment: he is like a wild beast, acting not for honorÃ¢s sake but from the strength of his passions. Finally, the ignorant person acting bravely is excluded from having true courage: he is without awareness and self-reliance, and therefore is without right judgment. For Aristotle, judgment can be mistaken, but right judgment implies that one has judged correctly about right and wrong, and insomuch as the virtue of courage has as its end what is noble and right, right judgment predates the identification of the mean. The critical point to consider in concluding this is whether or not identification of the mean necessarily is followed by virtuous action. Do human beings sometimes err in acting virtuously even when they have knowledge of the virtuous mean state? Plato asserts that if the good is known, men will choose this good, because no one willingly chooses what is harmful. Aristotle echoes this position by claiming that Ã¢every action . . . aim[s] at some goodÃ¢? (1094a). Though action is connected to intention and emotion, each is given a separate and independent existence. By extension, is right judgment divorced from choice? For Aristotle, virtue is Ã¢a state of character concerned with choice, lying in a meanÃ¢? (1107a). He asserts that right judgment cannot be severed from the choice that manifests itself in the correct and virtuous character, the one that is chosen for its intermediacy. Therefore, right judgment is a necessary condition for the agentÃ¢s identification of the mean. AristotleÃ¢s doctrine of the mean provides a moral framework that is not morally based but rather based on the elements of our functioning as humans Ã¢” emotion, action, intention, and pleasure and pain. However, this moral framework is foremost a technical description of the range of possibility within manÃ¢s moral autonomy rather than a guide. He seems merely to make clearer what we should already know. In AristotleÃ¢s grasp of the variable, he seems to have mastered the craft or art of virtue. Yet for the ordinary citizen or reader of the Ethics, Ã¢making and acting are differentÃ¢? (1140a). Aristotle has painted for us the art of virtue: he derives the means of virtues by elucidation and description through identifying the emotions, attitudes, and intentions that accompany our actions. But he leaves the individual to act for himself in ways that are uncompelled, aware, autonomous, and free. How is man to acquire right judgment? How is he to discover the means and achieve them through his actions? To answer this, we must explore the notion of practical wisdom as it relates to AristotleÃ¢s theory of the mean. He defines practical wisdom as Ã¢the true and reasoned state of capacity to act with regard to the things that are good or bad for man; Ã¢? the worth of practical wisdom is that it helps us Ã¢take the right meansÃ¢? to achieve the Ã¢right markÃ¢? which is the end of moral virtue (1144a5). Through his account of the mean, Aristotle gives structure to moral virtue, but acquiring practical wisdom is largely our own task. The well-functioning and excellent man has both, for Ã¢the work of man is achieved only in accordance with practical wisdom as well as with moral virtueÃ¢? (1144a5). The doctrine of the mean is only half of the answer when grappling with the questions of what one ought to do, questions that arise from the moral autonomy in which Aristotle firmly believes. Man must develop, for himself, Ã¢the eye of the soulÃ¢? which involves acquiring practical wisdom to live oneÃ¢s life (1144a30).