

Lesson 34

Aristotle's Doctrine of the Mean

Objectives

- To become familiar with Aristotle's Ethics and his idea of the Doctrine of the Mean
- To generate a definition of the mean
- To apply the Doctrine of the Mean generally and personally

Notes to the Teacher

Aristotle rejects Plato's Absolutism and takes a more common sense approach to ethics. As a result of studying the behavior and actions of people in everyday life, Aristotle presents a more scientific or empirical approach to ethical problems. He creates the Doctrine of the Mean, which can be summed up as happiness is based upon moderation. If people choose the middle of two extremes, then they will be happy.

In this lesson, students analyze and apply Aristotle's Doctrine of the Mean.

Procedure

1. Ask students what the following statement means: "No man can be happy on the rack." Discuss students' answers. (*According to Aristotle, people cannot be happy without a certain amount of pleasure in their lives. Aristotle takes a more common sense approach to ethics.*)
2. Write the word *mean* on the board, and ask students to define it. (*Most will describe a personality trait or use the mathematical definition.*) Write the phrase *Doctrine of the Mean* on the board. Explain that Aristotle believed that right action was found somewhere in the middle of two extremes. Distribute **Handout 51**. Have students complete it individually. Then conduct a class discussion of students' responses.

Suggested Responses:

1. *one that includes happiness*
 2. *the correct choice for action somewhere in the middle of two extreme actions*
 3. *true*
 4. *false*
3. Distribute **Handout 52**. Have students complete it as homework. Provide class time to share and discuss students' short stories. Hold private conferences with students on the second question as needed or requested.
 4. Conclude by discussing the question "In terms of ethics only, how does Aristotle differ from Plato?" (*Aristotle takes a more common-sense approach using experiences and creating the Doctrine of the Mean to show that happiness is not absolute but can be different for each individual.*)

The Doctrine of the Mean

Read the summary of Aristotle's ethics and the excerpt from Aristotle's main work on ethics, the *Nichomachean Ethics*, and answer the questions at the end.

Recall from Aristotle's metaphysics the theory of causality based on the four causes of material, formal, efficient, and final. The concept of the final cause plays a significant role in Aristotle's ethics. If everything has a final cause, and if one understands the final cause, then a person can understand its fundamental essence. For example, if an eye had a soul, its essence would be vision. Eventually, this leads up to the question "what is the essence of human kind?"

Aristotle notices that happiness is the common factor that ties together people who live a life of common sense. The highest good for humans was what Aristotle called "eudaimonia" or "having a good spirit." Since virtue involves choice, then the correct choice was somewhere in the middle of two extremes. "The Mean," or as it is also referred to, "The Doctrine of the Mean," involves choice for the long-term qualities of a person.

For example:

Deficiency	Mean	Extreme/Excess
Fear	Courage	Foolhardiness
Excessive abstinence	Temperance	Self-indulgence
Dishonor	Proper pride	Arrogance
Pollyannaish	Good temper	Irascibility

Nichomachean Ethics, Book II, Section 6

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

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. Now it is a mean between two vices, that which depends on excess and that which depends on defect; and again it is a mean because the vices respectively fall short of or exceed what is right in both passions and actions, while virtue both finds and chooses that which is intermediate. Hence in respect of its substance and the definition which states its essence virtue is a mean, with regard to what is best and right an extreme.

But not every action nor every passion admits of a mean; for some have names that already imply badness, e.g. spite, shamelessness, envy, and in the case of actions adultery, theft, murder; for all of these and suchlike things imply by their names that they are themselves bad, and not the excesses or deficiencies of them. It is not possible, then, ever to be right with regard to them; one must always be wrong. Nor does goodness or 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 equally absurd, then, to expect that in unjust, cowardly, and voluptuous action 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. But as there is no excess and deficiency of temperance and courage because what is intermediate

is in a sense an extreme, so too of the actions we have mentioned there is no mean nor any excess and deficiency, but however they are done they are wrong; for in general there is neither a mean of excess and deficiency, nor excess and deficiency of a mean.¹

1. According to Aristotle, what is the good life for man?
2. What is the Doctrine of the Mean?
3. True or False: Aristotle used common sense (observation) when studying ethics.
4. True or False: Aristotle was a rationalist in terms of his study of ethics.

¹Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. W. D. Ross (Oxford: 1908), The Internet Classics Archive, <<http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/nicomachean.2.i.html>> (11 May 2001).

The Doctrine of the Mean Applied

Complete this handout for homework.

1. Write a short story describing an ancient Greek individual who must make a choice between two extreme actions and take the middle path. The Doctrine of the Mean wasn't intended to be applied to everyday choices (for instance, should I steal, or shouldn't I steal?) but instead represents the long-term qualities a person should possess to achieve happiness. Keep in mind that the Greeks believed a healthy mind needs a healthy body, and a healthy body needs a healthy mind. Use any or all of the following topics for your story:

- Dieting: overeating versus excessive dieting
- Exercise: overexercising versus no exercise at all
- Education: overtraining in a specific area versus no education

For other meaningful topics, check for teacher approval.

Be prepared to share and explain your story in class.

2. Write a short essay reflecting on your personal characteristics or qualities. Are your personal qualities excessive or deficient? Apply Aristotle's Doctrine of the Mean to project whether your personal characteristics/qualities will lead to a life of happiness. Be honest in your answers. This portion of the assignment will be kept confidential.