

Introduction: The Mean Among Monsters

Coming close to Aristotle's mean is, in Aristotle's words, "[...] no easy task [...] For in everything it is no easy task to find the middle (Aristotle's *Ethics*, 1109a20, Ross)." Nonetheless, Aristotle does offer us some advice, recommending that we "[...] first depart from what is the more contrary to it (1109a30)." And toward this end Aristotle urges us to follow the mandate that Odysseus gives his crew. We are to "*Hold the ship out beyond that surf and spray* [quote from the Homer]. For of the extremes one is more erroneous, one less so (1109a30)."

But what does it mean for us to hold our ships out beyond the surf and spray? Here, Aristotle is referring to Book 12 of the *Odyssey*, to the episode in which Odysseus recognizes the portents of Charybdis, and instead of facing her, chooses to sail alongside Scylla's lair (*Odyssey*, 12.205). Odysseus sails on in this manner due to Circe's earlier warning:

Three time in a day does she vomit forth her waters, and three times she sucks them down again; see you be not there when it is sucking [...] you must hug the Scylla side and drive your ship by her as fast as you can, for you had better to lose six men than your whole crew (*Odyssey*, 12.101).

Aristotle's advice, then, seems clear enough: Charybdis represents the more erroneous and dangerous extreme/vice, a setup that positions the mean closer to Scylla's side. Scylla, as horrific as her six snapping heads may be, cannot do what Charybdis can; she cannot swallow Odysseus and his men in a single gulp. As we aim for a particular virtue, we are to perceive the disparity between its two corresponding vices. These two extremes, while both opposed to the mean, do not oppose it equally. One of them is always worse and more akin to Charybdis.

However, does Aristotle accurately label each virtue's Charybdis? Does he ever mistake Charybdis for Scylla or vice versa? I accede to Aristotle's example in 1109a5: indeed, cowardly

actions do appear to stray farther away from courage than rash ones do. For courage requires risk-taking, a quality that rashness has and cowardice does not. But other virtues and their extremes need to be put to the test to see whether a definite Scylla-Charybdis dynamic emerges. In turn, the next two sections of this paper assess the virtues of liberality and magnanimity, in hopes of finding a conspicuous Charybdis for each. Along with the introduction, these two sections try to make sense of what looks like an objective arrangement of extremes. The final section of the paper introduces the element of subjectivity and what Aristotle advises us to do given our natural predispositions. Supposing that we sail through waters where one monster is objectively worse, we must still account for the dissimilar coordinates of our ships.

Liberality's Extremes

Which extreme is worse, stinginess or prodigality? The problem with the former is a willingness to receive but a reluctance to give. “It also extends widely, and is multiform, since there seem many kinds of meanness. For it consists in two things, deficiency in giving and excess in taking (1132b15).” The arrant cheapskate is both stingy and greedy, like “[...] those who lend small sums at high rates (1122a).” Cheapskates take several free food samples in the grocery store, lend to others only for gain, and feel inordinate pain when tipping their waiter ten percent for good service. When hosting, they provide only the essentials—no relishes, nothing expensive. They readily take and balk to give. In contrast and in complete opposition, Aristotle defines the prodigal as someone beyond a spendthrift, more than someone who simply wastes money on unnecessary items. He, as an extreme, ruins his own subsistence by the proportion of his livelihood that he gives away: “[...] for a ‘prodigal’ [actually] means a man who has a single evil quality, that of wasting his substance [wealth and possessions] (1120a).”

As for which is worse, cheapness/meanness or wastefulness to the extent of ruin, cheapness looks like Scylla and financial ruin like Charybdis. If a moral agent extirpates her own substance, as the prodigal does, she moves from a position of independence to dependence—a disaster for herself and for those she supports. Cheapness, as selfish as it is, while it fails to consider others, at least preserves independence and potential generosity. Profligacy undoes both the moral agent and her dependents. A cheapskate, as miserable as one is to live around, by maintaining financial independence, avoids self-ruin and maintains a state of potential generosity.

My initial diagnosis above, however, conflicts with Aristotle's. "And it is natural that meanness is described as the [most] contrary of liberality; for not only is it a greater evil than prodigality, but men err more often in this direction than in the way of prodigality as we have described it (1122a10)." Aristotle views the prodigal as salvageable: "For he is easily cured both by age and by poverty [...] For he has the characteristics of the liberal man, since he both gives and refrains from taking, though he does neither of these in the right manner or well (1121a20)." In the sense that the prodigal is already practicing generosity, I would have to agree. And I would also grant Aristotle's concern about the incurability of meanness in old age.

Thus, I differ with Aristotle not over one extreme being worse, but over what constitutes curability. Aristotle values the prodigal's established habit of giving, a particular kind of spending that centers on others. I am emphasizing financial stability, though, and how it better buoys your dependents and yourself. To be generous in the future, you must first have something of value to give. 'He means well,' in the context of hospitality or generosity, means little if one lacks any means. Money goes through the prodigal like water through a colander, quickly and in many directions. To me, resizing and plugging up a colander's holes, so that the colander can

retain some water and still flow out to bless others, looks harder to do than drilling some holes into a stingy person's leak-proof cauldron.

In reply, Aristotle may counter that the cheapskate is pouring his money into a cauldron made of titanium and stuffing it into a vault. That is, Aristotle could insist that having some wealth in the wings matters far less than understanding money for what it is—something to use, not to accumulate. “Now the things that have a use may be used either well or badly; and riches is a useful thing [...] Now spending and giving seems to be the using of wealth; taking and keeping rather the possession of it (1120a5).” A miser, then, becomes harder to cure than the prodigal because he completely misunderstands the purpose of wealth. He mistakes it for an end when its sole purpose is to function as a means to improve the lives of his friends and family, as well as his own. Over time, cracking the vault becomes impossible: because the miser secures the first vault inside another one, and then another, and so forth. Aristotle summarizes: “The man who is prodigal in this way is thought much better than the mean man [...] because he benefits many while the other benefits no one, not even himself (1121a25).” What the miser hoards only goes to waste.

Magnanimity's Extremes

The extremes of “empty vanity” and “undue humility” present, perhaps, a more ambiguous situation than liberality (1123b-1125b). The vainglorious man grasps for honors but cannot prove himself worthy of them when push comes to shove. And someone who is unduly humble, “[...] thinks himself worthy of less than he is really worthy (1123b10).” The vainglorious person boasts of his unfounded aptitude, and replete with self-confidence strives for

recognition and distinction but falls short. Similarly, someone with undue humility also falls short, but by selling herself short: her actions could outperform her claims if she so chose. The vainglorious man oversells himself; the unduly-humble undersells. And Aristotle's position on which vice is worse is as follows: "[...] undue humility is more opposed to pride than vanity is; for it is both commoner and worse (1125a30)."

Here again I want to part with Aristotle, not over there being a Charybdis, but over which extreme/vice corresponds to it. What Aristotle criticizes for being "commoner" lacks the blatant ignorance attached to vainglorious behavior. Aristotle even admits: "Vain people, on the other hand, are fools and ignorant of themselves [...] they attempt honorable undertakings and then are found out (1125a25)." I am more sympathetic to the unduly humble person who, although worthy of more, merely takes a back seat. This kind of ignorance of oneself seems far more measured and closer to the truth. The vainglorious boasts about what he ought not to boast and then proceeds to act as he ought not to act. The unduly-humble person simply refrains from claiming honors—no disasters, no one getting hurt. She abstains from acting upon false knowledge.

True, both extremes participate in skewed perceptions of themselves. But if forced to choose between a society beleaguered with one of these vices, I would prefer undue humility since it prevents a sort of 'honors inflation' that a vainglorious society is more likely to engender. Similar to the problem of grade inflation, 'honors inflation' is the situation in which a population's excessive demands for honors overwhelms a society's accolade-givers. The more that a society clamors for honors, the more the accolade-givers debase the meaning of honor, in order to retain their positions. And honor, once it is the possession of a sizable majority, ceases being honor since it ceases to distinguish the honorable from the quotidian.

Despite the possibility that a vainglorious society may dilute honor *qua* honor, we can commend it for at least trying—for steering clear of what Aristotle deems the primary problem of undue humility—i.e., “stand[ing] back from noble actions and undertakings (1125a25).” At the same time, we can also recognize how an unduly-humble society might be safer and less volatile—because it circumvents the innumerable failures that a vainglorious one would have. There would be fewer dashed hopes, fewer failed missions. Vainglory may elicit a response of ‘well, at least you tried,’ but with the following addendum: ‘but you keep reaching beyond your competency.’ Undue humility escapes the psychological ups and downs of vainglory’s foolish temerity.

Then again, cowering in a corner and dodging risks can be plenty risky. It flirts with apathy, a problem you avoid with the vainglorious man of action and ambition. The unduly humble person undervalues the market value of her skills; she is undemanding and looks limp and lethargic beside the energetic, vainglorious man. The latter reaches beyond his grasp and receives a nod of approval from Aristotle for his go-getting. By reaching, the vainglorious man elevates himself above the “commoner [vulgar]” position (1125a30). He is no sitting duck.

More Advice

Only two virtues were tested above, but Aristotle’s point, that one of the extremes can suck you under, seems to hold up. What deserves further consideration, besides scrutiny of more pairs of extremes, is Aristotle’s other piece of advice found in 1109b (other than avoiding the worst extreme). Supposing that we can distinguish Charybdis from Scylla, we still have to

synthesize this objective arrangement of vices with our subjective tendencies to prefer one to the other. Aristotle advises:

But we must consider the thing towards which we ourselves also are easily carried away; for some of us tend to one thing some to another; and this will be recognizable from the pleasure and pain we feel. We must drag ourselves away to the contrary extreme; for we shall get into the intermediate state by drawing well away from error, as people do in straightening sticks that are bent (1109b).

So then, if the Charybdis of liberality is meanness, as Aristotle asserts, and I am personally more inclined to prodigality, how exactly am I to draw away from error? How do I sail toward the lesser of two evils if I am already predisposed to sail toward the less pernicious extreme? Do I aim for meanness, for Charybdis? The answer, perhaps, is Yes. As with a bent stick, I must bend beyond the point where things look straight and attempt what looks to me like meanness and stinginess. And incorporating my awareness of the Charybdis-Scylla dynamic, I should beware: once I start acting with more parsimony, bending back toward the mean, toward liberality, is harder to do. The Charybdis-like vortex of meanness is harder to escape. I should inch with caution toward meanness—while if entrenched in a predisposition of meanness, I would want to sprint for prodigality.

And so this paper comes full circle, back to the mean being no easy task. The challenge, of course, is wrestling with what comes to us pleurably and naturally, which is why pleasure in general, Aristotle suggests, should put us on red alert. “We ought, then, to feel towards pleasure as the elders of the people felt towards Helen, and in all circumstances repeat their saying; for if we dismiss pleasure thus we are less likely to go astray (1109b10).” When contemplating the amount of pleasure that various extremes/vices bring us, Aristotle asks us to recall what the elders of Troy told to Priam—advice that Priam ignores. The Trojan elders, upon seeing Helen

come into full view, counsel: “Still, fair though she be, let them [the Greeks] take her and go, or she will breed sorrow for us and our children after us (*Iliad*, 3.146).”

Choices that we find pleasurable, then, especially those we suspect to be taking an ‘easy way out,’ should help us develop better maps for our moral lives. Pleasure often forecasts monsters—and where there are monsters there are labels and captions we may want to add. For how we proceed to oar and steer may not only protect ourselves, but also “[...] our children after us (*Iliad*, 3.146).” True, the virtuous person finds the mean itself pleasurable, as Aristotle contends in 1104b; but first we have to overcome the inertia of our natural affinities with a good deal of ‘oaring.’ The activity of rowing itself, if it propels us through the sliver of the straight that somehow evades both Charybdis and Scylla, somehow becomes enjoyable.

And so, to end, we may want to keep in mind how Odysseus’s crew initially reacts to the seas that Odysseus guides them through half-successfully. Seeing smoke and hearing an unknown roaring—that only Odysseus knows is Charybdis—the crew responds as follows:

The men were so frightened that they loosed hold of their oars, for the whole sea resounded with the rushing of the waters, but the ship stayed where it was, for the men had left off rowing. I [Odysseus] went round, therefore, and exhorted them man by man not to lose heart (*Odyssey*, 12.220).

The crew proceeds to take action, but sidling too close to Scylla, loses a half dozen men—whom Scylla eats alive. As dreadful as this outcome is, it is not equivalent to a confrontation with Charybdis. And we, I am guessing, when navigating murky moral waters, would want to follow suit: steering with the foreknowledge of Odysseus and rowing with the vigor and expediency of his crew.