

4 Why Is Aristotle's Virtue of Character a Mean?

Taking Aristotle at His Word (*NE* ii 6)

Why, for Aristotle, is a virtue of character a mean, a *mesotēs* (or "between-state")? The usual answer is: because each virtue is *between* two vices, one an excess and one a deficiency. But this, while true, is not Aristotle's own most definitive answer – or so I shall argue here. Rather, a virtue is labeled a "between-state" because to possess a virtue is to be disposed to aim at and achieve what is *meson* or "in between" (in other words, just right) in one's actions and feelings. This is what Aristotle insists in the passage I scrutinize in Section I. A person's actions and feelings – or, in short, their responses – are "in between" when they avoid "too much" or "too little," that is, excess and defect, and so are just right for the given circumstances. The between-ness of a given virtue derives from the between-ness of the responses typical of a person possessing that virtue, not (primarily) from its lying between two vices, one of excess and one of deficiency (Section II). In Sections III–V, I examine (and reject) the reasons some critics have given for refusing to take Aristotle at his word, and for insisting that it is the between-ness of the virtuous disposition that is primary, rather than that of the responses typical of the possessor of virtue. Since to be "between" in the relevant sense is to be good or right (as Section I shows), the goodness or rightness of a virtue, its state or disposition, derives from that of the responses typical of that virtue – that is, from the right or appropriate feelings and actions typically manifested by, say, a brave or a temperate person. This has important implications for the question whether Aristotle agrees with some modern proponents of virtue ethics, in holding the thesis of the primacy of character. In Section VI, I argue that he does not.

To show all this, I take a close look at *NE* ii 6, the chapter in which Aristotle fulfills his promise to show *what sort of* state a virtue is. Earlier in *NE* ii he has shown that a virtue of character is a state or disposition (*hexis*), not a feeling or a capacity. And he has argued that to acquire a

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character virtue one must practice doing the corresponding acts, that it involves correct feelings as well as actions, and that it is intimately connected with pleasure and pain. But now, at the start of ii 6, he promises to show not just the genus – virtue is a state – but what kind of state it is (*poia hexis*). And by a few paragraphs later, two-thirds of the way through our chapter, he has established the key point, which I label K (or Key thesis):

(K) Virtue, then, is a *mesotēs*, insofar as it aims at and achieves¹ what is *meson*. (NE ii 6.1106b27–8)

Literally, a *mesotēs* is a “between-state”; and what is *meson* is what is “in between” in a sense I shall explain shortly. (As it will transpire, it is actions and feelings that are here labeled *meson*.) How should we translate these terms? Here are some English published versions.

- (1) Virtue, then, is a kind of mean, at least in the sense that it is able to hit the mean. (Crisp)
- (2) Virtue, then, is a mean, insofar as it aims at what is intermediate. (Irwin)
- (3) Excellence, then, is a kind of intermediacy, insofar as it is effective at hitting upon what is intermediate. (Rowe)

The most commonly found version, (1), is unsatisfactory because it uses the same translation – “mean” – for the two different terms: *mesotēs*, what a virtue *is*, and *meson*, that which a virtue (or, rather, a person possessing a virtue) *aims at and achieves*. Critics have different views on how important the distinction is, and on whether Aristotle observes it consistently. But we should try to avoid using the same translation for the two terms.² Version (2) is an improvement in this respect, and it keeps the familiar term “mean” for the state that a virtue is. But it suffers from two drawbacks: by using the unrelated words “mean” and “intermediate,” it hides the relationship that the Key thesis asserts; and the translation “intermediate” cannot convey the essentially evaluative force that belongs, as Aristotle makes clear, to the relevant kind of

¹ I follow Taylor in translating *stochastikē* in this way: the translation needs to capture both aspects.

² That is a fault I was guilty of in Brown 1997 where I used “mean” to translate both *meson* and *mesotēs*, though at some points I used “mean state” for *mesotēs*. I now regret not distinguishing them more consistently in that article. But I remain convinced that my 1997 explanation of what Aristotle does and does not intend by the two expressions “*meson* relative to us” and “*mesotēs* relative to us” is correct. In Section I of this chapter, I briefly resume my 1997 defense of the view that, in speaking of aiming at a *meson* “relative to us,” Aristotle means by “us” human beings generally. Müller’s (2004, n11) endorsement of this reading offers as explication “with regard to the kind of creature we are.”

meson.³ To be *meson*, as we shall see, is to be good or right, or more precisely: just right – neither too much nor too little. Version (3) is the most scrupulous, maintaining both the difference between *mesotēs* and *meson* and the link between them. But, like (2), its use of “intermediate” gives no hint of the positive evaluative force of *meson* and *mesotēs*, and it uses the unfamiliar – and rather ugly – term “intermediacy” to render *mesotēs*. I have come to the conclusion that, in English at any rate, it is not possible to find fully suitable translations of the two terms.⁴

What K conveys – as I shall argue – is that a character virtue is an in-between-and-so-just-right state (a *mesotēs*), insofar as it aims at and achieves what is in-between-and-just-right (what is *meson*) in feelings and actions. From now on I will leave the key terms untranslated. As well as giving a careful reading of the argument, I aim to show that we should take Aristotle at his word when he asserts the Key thesis.

I. THE PROOF THAT VIRTUE IS A MESOTĒS (NE II 6)

I first set out the opening two-thirds of the chapter, numbering the sentences or groups of sentences for ease of reference in my subsequent discussion.

(1) But we must say not just that virtue is a state, but what kind of state. We should mention, then, that every virtue causes that of which it is a virtue to be in a good state, and to perform its characteristic activity well. [Some examples are omitted.] If this is so in all cases, then, the virtue of a human being too will be the state that makes a human being good and makes him perform his characteristic activity well. (2) We’ve already said how this will happen, and it will be clear also from what follows, if we consider what the nature of virtue is like. (3) In everything continuous and divisible one can take more or less or an equal amount, and each either in respect of the thing itself or relative to us; and the equal is a sort of *meson* between excess and deficiency. (4) By the *meson* in respect of the thing itself I mean that which is equidistant from each of the extremes, this being one single thing and the same for all, and by the *meson* relative to us I mean that which is neither excessive nor deficient – and this is not one single thing, nor is it the same for all. (5) If, for example, ten are many and two are few, six is the *meson* if one takes it in respect of the thing, because it is by the same amount that it exceeds the one number and is exceeded by the other. This is the *meson* according to arithmetic proportion. (6) The *meson* relative to us, however, is not to be obtained in this way. For if ten pounds of food is a lot for someone to eat, and two pounds a little, the trainer will not necessarily prescribe six, for this may

³ The French translation by Gauthier and Jolif captures the evaluative force with “le juste milieu,” which does duty both for *meson* and, at many points, for *mesotēs*. However, in translating K, they use “une sorte de moyenne” for *mesotēs tis*.

⁴ Another possibility would be to use “mean” only for *meson*, and “mean state” for *mesotēs*, despite the more usual use of “mean” for the state, *mesotēs*.

be a lot or a little for the person to eat – for Milo a little, for the beginner at gymnastics a lot. The same goes for running and wrestling. (7) In this way every expert in a science avoids excess and deficiency, and aims for the *meson* and chooses it – the *meson* not in the thing itself but relative to us. (8) If then every science does its job well in this way, with its eye on the *meson* and judging its products by this criterion (which explains both why people are inclined to say of successful products that nothing can be added to or taken away from them, implying that excess and deficiency ruin what is good in them while the *mesotēs* preserves it, and why those who are good at the skills have their eye on this, as we say, in turning out their products), and if virtue, like nature, is more precise and superior to any skill, it will also be the sort of thing that is able to hit the *meson*. (9) I'm talking here about virtue of character, since it is this that is concerned with feelings and actions, and it's in these we find excess, deficiency and the *meson*. (10) For example fear, confidence, appetite, anger, pity and in general pleasure and pain can be experienced too much or too little, and in both ways not well. (11) But to have them at the right time, about the right things, towards the right people, for the right end and in the right way is the *meson* and the best, and this is the business of virtue. (12) Similarly there is an excess, a deficiency and a *meson* in actions. (13) Virtue is concerned with feelings and actions, in which excess and deficiency constitute missing the mark, while the *meson* is praised and on target, both of which are characteristics of virtue. (14) Virtue then is a kind of *mesotēs*, at least in the sense that it is able to hit a *meson*. (1106a14–b28, Crisp trans., adapted)

So the proof starts by reminding us that virtue is a good state, and concludes that it is a *mesotēs*, since it is able to hit a *meson*. How are we to understand the argument for (14)?⁵ And how does Aristotle explain the key terms, including that of a *meson* relative-to-us? On my reading, this part of the chapter rolls together in a somewhat confusing way a Chief Argument (from the nature of goodness in continua), a Subsidiary Argument (from skills), and an explanation of the key notion of a “*meson* relative to us.”

What I label the Chief Argument comes mainly at (9)–(14), but important groundwork is laid in (2)–(6), with the distinction between two ways in which a continuum may have a more, a less, and an equal/*meson*. Aristotle sets aside one way (the arithmetic equal or “between”) and focuses on the other, that which is between excess and deficiency, and so is neither *too* much nor *too* little (but, as we may add, just right.) Aristotle explains this notion, which he labels “the *meson* relative to us” (6), and states that it is what skills achieve (7)–(8): this is the Subsidiary Argument. Though he has not yet said so explicitly, it is clear that what avoids too much and too little is *good* or *right*, and that in this second use *meson* carries essentially evaluative force. Aristotle

⁵ Rapp 2006 has an excellent account; a key point is made at 114–115. My analysis owes a lot to his, though I differ in identifying a subsidiary argument as well as the chief one.

adds the qualification “relative to us” to show that he is invoking an evaluative way of being *meson* or “in-between,” that is, the “just right” rather than the middle. As I argue in this chapter, the measure of “just-rightness” is human concerns generally.

The evaluative force, and the application to virtue, will be made clear in (9)–(14), but before completing the main argument he offers a subsidiary one, from expertise or skills (7–8). It comes immediately after Aristotle’s contested and confusing explanation of his invented label “the *meson* relative to us.” As we saw, this evaluative notion is distinguished from the irrelevant arithmetic *meson* or midpoint. It is what is neither excessive nor deficient – and this is not one single thing, nor is it the same for all. The verb used in (4) for “to be excessive” – *pleonazein* – makes it clear that to be excessive is bad, and to avoid it is good or just right.⁶ To illustrate it, Aristotle chooses a trainer who is responsible for prescribing athletes’ diets; he knows that ten pounds of food is too much and two too little for any athlete. Ignoring the arithmetic midpoint of six, the trainer selects what is neither too much nor too little but just right for each of the athletes in his charge, prescribing a hefty diet for Milo, the champion wrestler, and a modest one for a beginner. So the “*meson* relative to us” is what’s best or right or appropriate in each set of circumstances and obviously will differ according to the circumstances; hence, it is not one and the same in all cases. And, claims Aristotle at (7), it is what every expert aims at. Continuing what I dubbed the argument from skill or expertise, he recalls the familiar terms of praise for a work of art or craft: “It’s just right – anything more or less would ruin it” (8). And since virtue is superior to skill, it too must be *tou mesou stochastikē* – able to hit the *meson*.

What are we to make of this subsidiary argument? I think Aristotle would readily admit that it is an overstatement to claim that *every* expert aims at the “*meson* relative to us” (the “just right”). I believe he has in mind, in addition to craftsmen, chiefly those with the skills he mentioned before (*NE* ii 2.1104a7–10), such as medicine and navigation, where *judgment* is essential, and where no formula can be given to deliver an excellent result, and no rulebook consulted to get the “right” answer (Brown 1997, 88–89). Architecture and gymnastics are added to medicine and navigation in the equivalent passage in *Eudemian Ethics* (*EE* 1220b21–29). And why is virtue more precise and superior to any skill (8)? With Aquinas, I suggest that virtue is superior because it does

⁶ The terminology of excess and defect (*hyperbolē* and *elleipsis*) can be used both in a merely descriptive way and evaluatively, as (3) indicates. (Compare: “Mary’s weight exceeds her sister’s” with “Mary’s weight is excessive.”) Usually the context indicates which use is involved, but to make the evaluative use clear Aristotle changes to *pleonazein* at this point. Henceforth in ii 6 the terms *hyperbolē* and *elleipsis* always have an evaluative force.

not matter what motivation a *skilled* person has in producing his excellent product, while someone manifesting *virtue* must have the right motivation as well as the relevant knowledge (*NE* ii 4).

Even if not meant to be conclusive, the subsidiary argument is helpful for two reasons. First, we note that *outcomes* (in his example, works of art) are described as produced by keeping an eye on the relative-to-us-*meson*; they are said to be just right. Likewise, at (11) human responses (actions and episodes of feeling) will be described as *meson* and best. Second, the remark that every skilled person aims at the "*meson* relative to us" confirms the interpretation of this phrase that I argued for in Brown 1997. By "us" Aristotle means human beings and human nature generally, not different individuals.⁷ Like virtues, the skills he has in mind have a human dimension, and – this is the point – success in all of them is (at least in part) a matter of finding what is "just right" in a given set of circumstances. This, I think, is how we should understand the remarks about the trainer. In comparing the exercise of virtue to the trainer's skill by saying each of them aims at a *meson* relative to us, Aristotle is *not* suggesting that different possessors of virtue of character, just by being different persons, will find a different *meson* when responding with virtue. Clearly the trainer does not aim at a *meson* relative to himself; all trainers aim at the "*meson* relative to us," that is, the just right, where human concerns settle what is just right.⁸ In exercising their skill, they will adjust their action to all aspects of the situation, including the recipients. Likewise, the responses of a possessor of virtue will be correct provided they are just right and appropriate, and neither too much nor too little, for the circumstances.⁹

⁷ ii 8.1109a12–16 could be cited in further support, as R. Polansky has pointed out in correspondence with me, since "we" there refers to human beings generally. Contrast ii 9 where Aristotle speaks of different tendencies of different individuals.

⁸ A clarification to avoid misunderstanding: when I argue that by "us" in the expression "relative to us," Aristotle means human beings generally, I do not mean to suggest that he regards ethics as a matter of universal principles, rather than as a matter of finding a response appropriate to the circumstances. My view is this: in the expression "relative to us," here as elsewhere, "we" are humans beings generally. What it is for an ethical response or a work of art to be *meson* in the "relative to us" way is for it to avoid defect and excess and to be just right in the particular circumstances, where human concerns set the standard of "just-right"ness.

⁹ Gottlieb 2009, 25–30, countering Brown 1997, argues that a number of factors about the agent are relevant to what counts as a *meson* response and infers that in those respects the corresponding virtue is "agent-relative." She instances truthfulness (*NE* iv 7), which requires giving an accurate account of one's own abilities: "The virtue of truthfulness . . . will be relative to the abilities of the agent" (19). This is a somewhat attenuated sense of agent-relativity. And it does not counter the chief thesis I argued for in Brown 1997: in calling virtue a "*mesotēs* relative to us," Aristotle is not claiming that it is relative to the agent who possesses the virtue, as his explanation of the *meson* relative to us shows.

Now back to the Chief Argument, which he resumes at (9), putting to use the notion of the evaluative *meson* (the *meson*-relative-to-us), which he explained at (3)-(6). He now reveals why he began with a claim about what is continuous and divisible. Why? Because feelings and actions – which are the province of virtue of character – are continua. “For example fear, confidence, appetite, anger, pity and in general pleasure and pain can be experienced too much or too little, and in both ways not well.” In such continua, the good or right or well is neither too much nor too little but what is *meson* in the “relative to us” way – that is, just right. In feelings and actions you can miss the mark by excess and defect, or hit the target and be praised for your responses, which are deemed *meson*. Now he infers (14) that virtue is a *mesotēs*, insofar as it is able to hit the *meson*.

This completes the Chief Argument. I set it out here, referring to the key points in the stretch of *NE* ii 6, with numbered sentences.

- (i) Virtue is a good state. (1)
- (ii) Virtue of character concerns feelings and actions. (9)
- (iii) Feelings and actions are continua. (9)
- (iv) In continua, what is good or right or well done or praiseworthy is what is neither too much nor too little but *meson*_{relative-to us}. (4-6) and (10)

Conclusion: Virtue, as a good state, achieves the *meson*_{relative-to-us} in feelings and actions and hence is a *mesotēs*. (14)

After an important remark about how one can go wrong in many ways but get things right in only one, Aristotle continues with his famous definition of virtue of character as

(15) a state involving rational choice, consisting in a *mesotēs* relative to us, and determined by reason – the reason, that is, by reference to which the practically wise person would determine it. (16) It is a *mesotēs* between two vices, one of excess, the other of deficiency. (17) It is a *mesotēs* also in that some vices fall short of what is right in feelings and actions, and others exceed it, while virtue both attains and chooses the *meson*. (1106b36-1107a6)

In the next section I discuss the apparently rival reasons given, in (16) and (17), for the claim that virtue is a *mesotēs*. First, a few words about (15). I will not pursue the reference to the *mesotēs* being determined by reason, that is, as the practically wise person, the *phronimos*, would determine it. It is a crucial part of his account of virtue that such determination is the role of reason, specifically of the *phronimos*. But that is not my concern here. This is the first time he has used the phrase “*mesotēs* relative to us,” and we must interpret it with the help of the notion he has just carefully defined: the *meson* relative to us: what is neither excessive nor deficient, but in between, that is, just right, for the specifics of the

situation. So Aristotle has given us no reason to interpret him as saying that my virtue is relative to me, yours is relative to you, and so on. The Milo illustration, read in its context, should not (mis)lead us to such an interpretation. A virtue is a *mesotēs* relative to us precisely because it attains a *meson* relative to us, in just the way the trainer and other experts such as craftsmen do. That is all the argument from (1) to (14) allows us to infer.¹⁰

II. TWO COMPETING REASONS WHY VIRTUE IS A MESOTĒS?

Two apparently different reasons for calling virtue a *mesotēs* follow hard on the definition in (15). The second, at (17), is a fuller statement of what I have called the Key thesis (K): virtue is a *mesotēs* because it attains and chooses the *meson*. But just before that we get a different reason, which I will call the Usual thesis or (U), since it is the reason usually given (by commentators) for why virtue is a *mesotēs*:

(Usual) Virtue is a *mesotēs* because it is between two vices, one of excess and one of deficiency.¹¹

On my reading, the Usual thesis is true and is not in competition with the Key claim (K), but K is the more fundamental thesis. When a virtue is said to be a *mesotēs*, that is *derivative* from it being a state in which one chooses and hits the *meson* in actions and feelings. Likewise, a given vice of excess, say self-indulgence (*akolasia*), is an excessive state derivatively from the fact that it is related to excessive actions and feelings, and similarly for a vice of deficiency.¹² In *NE* iii and iv Aristotle puts flesh on the bones of the theory he sketches in ii 6 by listing and discussing triads consisting of vice-of-excess/virtue/vice-of-deficiency. These are of great interest, not least because, with the help of his conceptual framework, he identifies some virtues or *mesotētes* that previously had no

¹⁰ The treatment in *Eudemian Ethics* confirms my reading. There too (1220b21) Aristotle first introduces the *meson* relative to us, calling it what is best and what knowledge and reason (*logos*) command. Only after that does he introduce virtue as a *mesotēs*. The confusing Milo illustration is absent from *EE*.

¹¹ Sentence (17) does not contain a Greek word corresponding to "between"; literally it says that virtue is a *mesotēs* of two vices. Only at vi 1 in *NE* (i.e., in one of the "common books") is the expression "between excess and defect" used (1138b24). But frequently in *NE* ii–iv, Aristotle writes "x is the *mesotēs* of y and z," where we have to translate this "is the *mesotēs* between y and z."

¹² Aristotle uses the same pair of terms, *huperbolē* and *elleipsis*, for both the vice (the defective or excessive state) and the associated excessive or defective responses, whereas he distinguishes the virtue as a *mesotēs* from the good response, which is *meson*.

name, but it is not my task here to discuss them at any length. To explain the sense in which each triad contains one vice labeled excess, a virtue labeled *mesotēs*, and another vice labeled defect, we must invoke the character of the responses that each state typically prompts.

I offer two grounds for insisting that the fundamental thesis is K. The first is the now familiar point that the proof he gives in ii 6 that virtue is a *mesotēs* insists on K. And the point is repeated twice, first at (16), and again when Aristotle summarizes his results at the beginning of ii 9: note the last clause. "Enough has been said then to show that virtue of character is a *mesotēs*, and in what sense it is so, and that it is a *mesotēs* between two vices, and that it is such because it is the sort of thing able to hit the *meson* in feelings and actions."

My second ground is this. Aristotle introduces the relative-to-us *meson* as what is good or best in continua, because it avoids both being excessive and being defective. Feelings, he has told us, are continua, such that one can feel them too much, or just right, or too little. But, if we turn to the triads, there is no continuum linking vice of defect–*mesotēs*–vice of excess, and it would be quite wrong to think that way (Rapp 2006, 114–115). A triad of vice-virtue-vice does *not* form a continuum. The sense in which a virtue is "between" a vice of defect and one of excess is derivative from each of them being related to responses – whether actions or passions or both – which are, in the primary application, either too little or just right or too much. The relevant scales or continua are scales of feelings or actions, not of states or dispositions.¹³

III. WHY HAVE CRITICS BEEN EAGER TO DENY OR PLAY DOWN THE KEY CLAIM: THAT VIRTUE IS A MESOTĒS INSOFAR AS IT ACHIEVES WHAT IS MESON?

Many critics refuse to take Aristotle at his word – Urmson (1980, 161), for example: "It is perfectly plain, in fact, that what is primarily in a mean is a settled state of character. . . . thus an emotion or action is in a mean if it exhibits a settled state that is in a mean." Later on the same page, with my letters inserted, he continues: "Aristotle holds excellence of character to be [i] a mean or intermediate disposition regarding emotions and actions, not [ii] that it is a disposition towards mean or intermediate actions." In reply, I urge that Aristotle plainly asserts [ii], and that Urmson is wrong to find it absurd. He argues that [ii] would commit Aristotle to the view that virtue is a disposition to *moderate* emotions

¹³ That is, vices do not shade into virtues. Of course, there are states that are in some sense *between* a vice and a virtue, in that a person could count neither as mean nor as generous, while "verging on" meanness. In ii 6 Aristotle makes clear that the continua he has in mind are actions and feelings.

and actions. But this is wrong, as we know. *Meson* emotions and actions are ones that avoid too much and too little; they are not (necessarily) moderate. So we *can* safely ascribe to him the view Urmson denies.¹⁴

Bostock (2000, 42–43) notes: “The best suggestion seems to be that it is not the virtuous action, on each occasion, that has something middling about it, but rather the general disposition from which it flows.” Now this plainly contradicts what Aristotle tells us in ii 6, but Bostock notes here a different passage, in ii 2. “The man who flees from everything, fears everything, and withstands nothing becomes a coward; the man who fears nothing at all but goes to meet everything, becomes rash.” He comments: “Undoubtedly Aristotle is thinking here not of the intensity of the emotion on a given occasion, but of the way it may be displayed on too many, or too few, occasions (or types of occasion).” Now this is a fair reading of that earlier passage, in ii 2. There, where Aristotle is describing how we *come to be* brave, rash, or cowardly, he focuses not on the appropriate intensity of fear (if any) on a given occasion, but on the frequency with which a person feels the emotion. Bostock suggests that Aristotle may not have clearly distinguished the two lines of interpretation and acknowledges the clear statements of the other view. “But, to be charitable, we may suggest that what is uppermost in his thought is that virtue is a middling disposition.” Well, I do not think that it is uppermost in Aristotle's view, nor that we are charitable to Aristotle to ignore his Central Argument in ii 6.

Broadie (1991, 98–101) also appeals to the ii 2 passage to draw a similar conclusion to that of Bostock. Of the key discussion in our chapter, ii 6, when at (11) Aristotle speaks of responses as *meson* and best, she writes that “‘intermediate’ seems virtually a synonym for ‘right’ and it includes every category of rightness, with no special emphasis on the intermediate.” So why, she wonders, does Aristotle cling to the term “intermediate” (i.e., *meson*)? “The explanation must lie not in the presumed intermediacy in any substantial sense (for none applies) of the right response itself, but rather in some sort of intermediacy belonging to the disposition that gives rise to the right responses” (Broadie 101).

Once again I reply that that this directly contradicts Aristotle's own explanation, which quite clearly goes the other way. But would it be an improvement if Aristotle had seen things the way Broadie argues for? Here is how she argues the point. “Encouraging a prospective agent to aim at the intermediate is not appropriate even as a metaphor.” But, she continues, encouraging someone to aim at a *balanced temperament*, on the other hand, might be of practical value, and advice to a learner neither to avoid all bodily pleasure nor to indulge whenever possible would be

¹⁴ Hursthouse 1981 and Welton and Polansky 1995, 90 criticize Urmson on this point.

sensible advice. So in a nutshell Broadie's argument is this: calling the right response *meson* is of no practical value, whereas calling the good disposition a *mesotēs* (i.e., a balanced one) is. To reply fully to this argument, we must finally turn to consider a familiar difficulty for Aristotle's theory (Section IV), one that bears on the practical value of the *mesotēs* theory (Section V).

IV. THE PROBLEM OF THE PARAMETERS

At a key point in what I called the Chief Argument, Aristotle introduced what have come to be called the parameters for responding in the best way. (11) *But to have them [that is, feelings of fear, anger or whatever] at the right time, about the right things, toward the right people, for the right end and in the right way is meson and the best, and this is the business of virtue.*¹⁵ Here he no longer talks simply of avoiding too much and too little; rather, the agent must get a number of features right to respond in the best way. Now this is a welcome refinement, as Broadie and other critics note. But they object that, in effect, it makes redundant the notion that the best response is *intermediate between excess and defect*. Ridding the theory of its quantitative aspect is, they argue, a distinct improvement, since the wrong-making features of a response cannot be captured simply by talk of too much or too little.

A modest reply to this objection runs as follows. Even if it is correct, Aristotle himself is clearly not aware of the problem, since he is happy to *elucidate* the notion of a *meson* response in terms of the different parameters (at the right time, about the right things, and so on). He does so not only in this passage but also throughout his discussion of the specific virtues of character in iii 6–12 and iv. He clearly would not accept Broadie's claim that the right response is not intermediate in any substantial sense.

A more ambitious reply tries to vindicate Aristotle, by finding a way or ways in which one can properly combine the quantitative language of the *meson*, the right degree or amount of something, with the recognition of the parameters (Welton and Polansky 1995; Curzer 1996; Rapp 2006). One favored way to do so is to say that for Aristotle "the question whether we feel an emotion too much or too little can only be assessed by checking whether our responses are right in the sense of the different parameters" (Rapp 2006, 124). Thus, if I get only a tiny bit angry for no good reason, then that counts as an excess, while if I do not feel at all

¹⁵ Some translations avoid "right" and instead use "should"; thus Taylor "but to feel such things when one should, and about the things one should, and in relation to the people one should (etc.)."

angry at – say – an unprovoked attack on a defenseless relative, that counts as a defective response.

Now the ambitious reply succeeds in vindicating Aristotle's approach for many cases, but I am inclined to agree with the skeptics (such as Hursthouse 2006, 108; Taylor 2006, 110–111) that it is not always successful.¹⁶ I do not think Aristotle can “have it both ways,” by retaining the language of excess, defect, and *meson*, and at the same time recognizing that a response may be inappropriate for any of a number of reasons. Indeed, he himself uses the image of hitting a target to emphasize that “one can miss the mark in many ways, but one can get things right in only one” – with which we may compare Plato (*Republic* 444c): vice has many forms but virtue only one. But, as I noted earlier in the more modest reply, Aristotle himself evidently saw no tension between the two accounts: the insistence that going wrong is always a matter of excess or of deficiency, and the recognition of a whole array of reasons why a response may be wrong. So we should not go along with Urmson, Bostock, and Broadie and ascribe to Aristotle the view that while virtue really is some kind of “in-between” state or disposition, the right response is not in any substantial sense “in-between.” Aristotle never wavers from labeling the right response *meson*, or from the view that right responses are indeed “in-between,” that is, just right.

V. OF WHAT PRACTICAL VALUE IS THE THEORY?

As we saw, Broadie argued that describing a *state* as an intermediate or balanced one is of some educational value, while calling the correct *response* on a given occasion “intermediate and best” is of no practical value at all. That is why she disregards what I called the Key claim K. I first consider her negative claim.

I readily agree that, in calling the best response *meson*, Aristotle did *not* see himself as offering a decision procedure for finding the right action. He emphasizes this in two ways: first, by distinguishing the relative-to-us *meson* from one which *can* be calculated and does not vary from occasion to occasion and, second, by comparing the possessor of virtue with a skill that enables its possessor to get things just right. As

¹⁶ The ambitious line of defense will argue that, say, getting angry with a blameless person is displaying too much anger. But suppose through bias I get angry with blameless X instead of with the real culprit Y. This line would have to call my anger both excessive and defective: an unfortunate result. In truth the fault is (neither excess nor defect but) that I got angry *with the wrong person*. I owe the example to Lindsay Judson.

argued earlier, he seems to have in mind a kind of knowledge or expertise that cannot be spelled out in a way that would enable an unskilled person to follow instructions and achieve the same success. In many passages, Aristotle denies that there are universal truths in ethics, by which he seems to mean that there are none that do not also require ethical judgment to apply them successfully. As Aristotle makes clear throughout the work, the best way to put yourself in a position to have the right responses to a given set of circumstances is by keeping good company in your youth, developing the right ethical sensitivity, and cultivating the virtues. Far from offering a decision procedure, his account of what makes a response "*meson* and best" shows, and is intended to show, that *no such decision procedure can be offered*. So we can agree with Broadie that in calling the correct response *meson* Aristotle does not thereby offer a novice a decision procedure for identifying the correct response.

But, for all that, Aristotle *does* think it helpful to give some advice on aligning one's responses with the best, that is, the *meson* ones, in ii 9. Most of us have an idea in which direction we tend to err – no doubt from the advice and admonition of others, as well as from our own reflections. So we should examine our own natural tendencies and "drag ourselves in the opposite direction (as people do in straightening wood)" so as to hit the *meson*. Despite what Broadie argues, Aristotle *does* seem to be offering this as advice on how to find the right response, and not just as advice on how to acquire a balanced state, *hexis*. But, of course, he does not think that the mere label *meson* will help someone, regardless of their stage of ethical development, to identify the correct response.

What about Broadie's positive claim, that there *is* a substantial sense in which the good state, the virtue, is intermediate, and that here it *is* of practical value to advise someone to acquire an intermediate disposition? One might expect the sense of "intermediate" to be the one Aristotle himself suggests, that the state is between two vices, one of excess and one of deficiency. Now I argued earlier for the following way of interpreting those labels. Each member of the triad, vice of deficiency–*mesotēs*–vice of excess, is so-called derivatively from the nature of the responses they typically prompt. But the view I am opposing denies this and holds that it is the between-ness or middling-ness of the virtue state that is primary. And in any case, the substantial sense in which, for Broadie, a virtue is a *mesotēs*, is that it is a *balanced* state.¹⁷ And this cannot mean that it is a balanced mixture of two vices!

¹⁷ Similarly Gottlieb 2009, 22–25, argues that we should understand *mesotēs* as equilibrium. But, if so, it loses the connection with the *meson* response.

VI. MESOTĒS AS DEVELOPING VIRTUE: AN EMPIRICAL APPROACH?

Broadie and Bostock support their position by pointing to Aristotle's discussion, in ii 2, in which he introduces the term *mesotēs*. Here, in what Rapp (2006, 106–107) calls the empirical version of the theory, Aristotle compares becoming virtuous with becoming strong or healthy, where both deficiency and excess (of food or of exercise) are harmful. He advises that *to acquire* temperance one should pursue some pleasures but not all, and *to become* courageous one should face some dangers but not all, concluding that “temperance and courage are ruined by excess and deficiency and preserved by *mesotēs*.” As often noted, the passage has echoes of Hippocrates' *On Ancient Medicine*, chapter 9, with its injunction to avoid excess and deficiency in diet. Here a correct diet may well be a balanced one, so Broadie's position may seem vindicated, at least regarding the appeal to *mesotēs* in ii 2.¹⁸

But I do not think that this low-level advice (“pursue some pleasures but not all; face some dangers but not all”) qualifies as giving a substantive sense in which a virtue is an intermediate (i.e., balanced) state and hence as being of some practical use, as Broadie argues. Indeed, Aristotle follows that bit of advice with a much more weighty thesis, one that is of huge importance in his account of character virtue: doing actions of a certain good kind develops a good state, which in turn makes us better able to do those actions. This is evident, he says, both in weight training to acquire strength and in the acquisition of the virtues. The claim that to acquire virtue V a young person must be encouraged to do V acts is sensible and practical, while the claim that to acquire virtue V he should take a balanced approach and take some but not all opportunities to display a given feeling or do a given action is hardly practical unless the learner has some advice on which opportunities to take and which to pass up.

So none of the reasons these critics give for denying the key claim is strong enough to license us in refusing to take Aristotle at his word. Even though he also has a somewhat different way of talking about *mesotēs* in ii 2, perhaps invoking a medical theory that Hursthouse (2006, 99) has dismissed as “simply whacky,” his official account of why virtue is a *mesotēs* relative to us is precisely that it is a tendency to

¹⁸ Broadie and Bostock might defend their line by pointing out that the ii 6 discussion (as quoted above at (2)) recalls the earlier (ii 2) introduction of a *mesotēs*. While this is a problem for the view I defend (cf. Rapp) by which the analytic account of *meson/mesotēs* in ii 6 discussion is the key one, it is also a problem for those critics who stress the importance of the “empirical” account of ii 2 but have to downplay or deny the Key claim in ii 6.

aim at and achieve responses that are *meson* (in the relative-to-us sense) and thereby best.

VII. IMPACT ON A CURRENT DEBATE IN VIRTUE ETHICS

The thesis I have defended has an important bearing on an ongoing debate. A central tenet of modern virtue ethics is that of the primacy of character: the claim that “the concept of virtue is explanatorily prior to that of right conduct, prior indeed more generally to the concepts that fall under the heading ‘morally good conduct’” (Watson 1997, 58; see also Statman 1997, 7–11). Should Aristotle be included in those who subscribe to the view that virtue, that is, goodness of character, is explanatorily prior to right or good conduct? The answer is no, if what I have argued here is correct.

But, critics urge, surely Aristotle has already asserted the priority thesis in *NE* ii 4.1105b5–7: “Actions, then, are called just and temperate when they are such as the just and the temperate person would do.”¹⁹

My response is this. Though that *can* be read as asserting definitional or explanatory priority to the just or temperate person over just or temperate acts, it *does not have* to be read that way, and indeed the context of ii 4 shows – I believe – that Aristotle is there making a different point. He is reasserting, against an objector, his important claim that to acquire a virtue *V*, one must do *V* acts. He has explained what further conditions, over and above merely doing *V* acts, are needed for the agent to be acting *V*-ly (justly, or temperately). Then, to hammer home his point, he emphasizes that though (1) actions are called just and temperate when they are such as the just and the temperate person would do – that is, *all* just acts are such as a just person *would do*, (2) some just acts are done by persons who are not yet just. And (2) allows him to restate his claim that “it is by doing just actions that one becomes just, and by doing temperate actions temperate; without doing them no-one would have even a chance of becoming good” (1105b9–12). Given the thrust of his argument, there is no need to read (1) as an assertion of definitional priority, in my view.

And a different priority suggests itself, if what I have argued is correct – that is, if Aristotle makes the status of a virtue as a *mesotēs* derivative from the *meson* nature of the responses it prompts.²⁰ We already saw that Aristotle spells out what it is for a response (whether a feeling or an

¹⁹ Taylor 2006, 94, commenting on 1105b5–9, writes, “Aristotle here assigns definitional priority to the agent over the act.” See also his introduction xvi and xvii n9. Reviewing Taylor, Morison 2007, 244–245 contests this interpretation of the passage.

²⁰ Santas 1997, 273 concurs. Commenting on 1106b27–8, what I have labeled herein the Key claim, he writes, “Once more first actualities (states of character) are explicated in

action) to be *meson* in terms of its being "at the right time, about the right things, toward the right people," and so on. A *meson* response is one that is done or felt *hōs dei*, as one should. And, when Aristotle comes to substantiate his claim that virtues of character are *mesotētes* by examining them one by one, he characterizes the *mesotēs*, or rather the person possessing a virtue, in terms of what he typically does or feels in a variety of circumstances.²¹ His way of putting flesh on the bones of the *mesotēs* theory is to spell out the kinds of consideration that make a given response *meson*, and he does so by a variety of means, typically invoking evaluative terms such as how one should (*dei*) feel or act, what is *kalon*, and what someone deserves. The possessor of a given virtue has learned how to recognize these considerations and responds accordingly.

To restate my main thesis and conclude: A virtue of character is labeled a "*mesotēs* relative to us" precisely because it is a state that aims at and achieves what is *meson* relative to us – a term Aristotle has carefully explained in ii 6 before making his Key claim. Given this prominent claim, it seems clear that Aristotle does *not* subscribe to the thesis of the explanatory or definitional priority of virtue (good character) over good or right action. So, *if* that is a central tenet of modern virtue ethics, Aristotle's view cannot be claimed as an ancestor. I see no conclusive reason from elsewhere in the *NE* (and in particular not from ii 4) to think that it was an aberration on Aristotle's part to derive the "between"-ness of a character virtue from the "between" or "just right" nature of the responses it prompts, as he clearly does in ii 6. The more Usual claim, that a virtue is a *mesotēs* because it is *between two vices*, one of excess and one of defect, is also correct, but it is not the fundamental one. It is *derived from* the Key claim in the way I have explained (Section II). Those who try to rewrite the theory (Section III) do Aristotle no favors, and I see no reason not to take him at his word.²²

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part at least by second actualities (the actions), and, because the actions constitute well-functioning, the states of character are said to be virtues."

²¹ 1127a15–17: we will become more confident that the virtues are *mesotētes* by going through them one by one.

²² Young 1997, 94 agrees in reading Aristotle as giving priority to what Young labels Intermediacy, and I label the Key thesis. However, his worry that "Aristotle simply doesn't tell us how to understand Intermediacy [i.e., the key thesis]" is misplaced in my view. I thank M. Pakaluk for drawing my attention to Young's fine article.

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