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THE FALSE GLITTER OF THE GOLDEN MEAN

A CYNICAL OPINION holds that the great thinkers of the past had but one thing in common—their thoughts were wrong. It may be more nearly true to say that all great thinkers tend to encourage wrong thinking in us. For we are inclined to take over the phrases they have made famous, imagining that we have been given magic formulae to solve our problems without having to do any thinking ourselves. A case in point is Aristotle's doctrine of the Mean. This doctrine has a certain cogency in the context of classical ethics: that, and no more than that. Yet today it is often lifted out of its context and put forward as a general principle both simple and authoritative. The Good (it is urged) stands in a middle place; and therefore anything which can be shown to occupy a middle place must be a Good Thing.

Obviously, Aristotle cannot be blamed for later distortions of his doctrine. And the doctrine of the Mean was not entirely his invention. Tracing virtue to a "middle way" between extremes was almost a habit of the Greeks, as we learn from Plato, who tells us of the inscription "Nothing in excess" in the temple at Delphi. Nevertheless, Aristotle's account of the Mean in the *Nicomachean Ethics* is decisive in the history of this particular tradition. The person who "loves well the Golden Mean" (the phrase is from Horace) may not have the *Ethics* directly in mind, but the argument of that treatise will lie at the back of what he believes. Similarly, those who suspect that there is more glitter than true gold in the Mean are bound to look at this argument of Aristotle's in order to set the record straight. Here is the place to begin, even though the end may be far away from the Greek world and from formal ethical theory.

In Book II of the *Ethics* the state of virtue is defined as one lying in a relative Mean, because the feelings and actions with which virtue has to do are said to be capable of conforming to, or of deviating from, the "best" state. The best state is one avoiding extremes, achieving on this account a regulated perfection. Now, the

view of virtue underlying such a definition is one equating goodness with efficiency. A good man is to be recognized in exactly the same way as is a good automobile, namely, by the evidence of a consistently satisfactory standard of performance. Virtue, says Aristotle, must be *a state whereby man will perform his proper work*. To the modern mind, this suggests a standard more suitable to the world of the machine than to the world of humanity. Indeed, what Aristotle has to say about the life of man applies equally to clocks. The excellence of clocks consists in their adherence to a Mean, falling neither into the defect of slowness nor into the excess of running fast. Like Aristotle's man who sleeps his life away, a clock which is never wound up (or plugged in) but which stays gathering dust on the shelf is one which has no true existence as a clock. The same applies to a clock accidentally damaged beyond repair; it is in the state of Aristotle's man robbed of the opportunity for a full life by death or misfortune.

Aristotle indeed, not being familiar with the products of a technological civilization, compares the "proper work" of man with the functioning of horses and eyes; yet, had he known of jeeps and camera lenses, these would have served his purpose even better. The viewpoint that considers only function or instrumental value assumes that there is no more than one question to be asked about anything, namely, "How well does it work?" Whether the "it" happens to be a horse or a water-wheel, a clerk or an electronic computer, makes no difference at all. And, even if the courtesy title "he" is used, the object being viewed instrumentally still remains an object. In her illuminating book, *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt has noted how both Plato and Aristotle, when they discuss human life and its problems, base their arguments on analogies drawn from the activities of craftsmen and the "use objects" they produce. The result, she points out, is to dehumanize man. Miss Arendt's thesis is borne out in the *Ethics*—for instance where Aristotle asks, "Have the carpenter, then, and the tanner certain functions and activities, and has man none?" Here the assumption behind the rhetorical question must be that right living is a matter of instrumental efficiency, human life itself being a technique to be mastered. But, if this is so, there is no place for genuinely human decisions. The good life becomes a basically mechanical affair of regulating the human clock.

Again, Aristotle's way of speaking *seems* to respect life as over against mechanism. He proposes to leave the decision concerning where the Mean is to be found to *the man of practical wisdom*. However, the man of practical wisdom is no more, in the last resort, than a not too efficient machine; and the *rational principle* by means of which he is supposed to carry out his task is no more than a rough-and-ready form of technical knowledge. Our present advance in automation is, in fact,

the result of a discovery that the man of practical wisdom (in Aristotle's sense) is not the best instrument to employ in technical operations, just because he is human and not mechanically infallible. Formerly, all technical operations required both a tool or instrument and a skilled technician. The arrow reached its mark through the practised mastery of the archer. Now the guided missile replaces both arrow and archer. The instruments of our hands not only run themselves but they also adjust themselves. They are constructed to "think"—that is, to function according to a rational plan—thus achieving their instrumental end more certainly than when guided by human hands and brains. The "thinking" which a machine does so perfectly is precisely that practical wisdom which chooses the Aristotelian Mean, finding the best route to a predetermined end.

The reason why Aristotle could elevate the Mean to the position of the necessary guide to the good life was, as many commentators on the *Ethics* have remarked, that he took for granted the essential nature of the good life. So in the *Ethics* he concentrates on asking how the life he has in mind can be achieved. The Mean provides him with a quantitative standard, dividing the too-little from the over-much, while all the time the qualitative standard (ostensibly "happiness" but actually the type of behaviour approved by contemporary Greek society) lays down what is to be recognized as defective or excessive in human conduct. The *Ethics* is a consistent guide to the practical (technical) means of achieving one ethical idea. But it leaves out of the picture all that we think of as being *ethical* in the modern sense of the word, since it never considers why men ought to choose one ethical ideal rather than another. Having adopted a thoroughly instrumental outlook, it has made all moral judgment impossible. For no instrument can be moral or immoral. It can merely be efficient or inefficient, hitting the mark (the Mean) or failing to hit it by falling short (defect) or going too far (excess).

The criterion of moral judgment is that it does *not* employ the Aristotelian Mean. When making moral judgments we never speak in quantitative terms of not-quite and more-than, but in qualitative terms of this-but-not-that. We classify persons and acts into good or bad, right or wrong, righteous or evil; and, without either a negative or a positive reaction of this kind, the ethical dimension of human experience cannot appear. Here the prophet's command, *Cease to do evil, learn to do good*, has absolute force. A sliding scale of more and less, with the good somewhere in the middle, just will not do. It is true that we sometimes say, "I think that Tom came out of this affair better than Dick though less well than Harry". Yet such a statement does not indicate that there are degrees of moral worth but rather that there are degrees of certitude concerning moral worth in particular instances. Fre-

quently good and evil are so intertwined in human conduct that we find it easier to compare one individual with another on the basis of our general impressions about "character" than to investigate the rights and wrongs of a specific situation where the individuals are involved. Nevertheless, all comparative moral judgments are unsatisfactory. As in a court of law (an institution expressing man's ethical dimension), our awareness of the absolute claims of morality drives us on to a decisive moral verdict.

As in the realm of the ethical we invariably react either positively or negatively, so in the realm of the instrumental our reactions are frequently after the same pattern; and this explains why the language used to describe moral excellence is also used to describe technical efficiency. Society, which is morally obliged to approve of good men, has a practical motive for approving of good workmen. Yet a good man and a good workman are far from being two examples of one quality termed *goodness*, convenience of language notwithstanding. And, in so far as Aristotle's ethical theory tries to make the two into one, it creates confusion. How this basic confusion is further confounded by the doctrine of the Mean has been analysed by Sir David Ross in his classic study, *Aristotle*. Ross protests that all the examples given in the *Ethics* of vice-by-defect and vice-by-excess are forced, because the two alleged extremes never really correspond. The doctrine of the Mean makes the virtue of courage lie between the vices of timidity and rashness. But, objects Ross, while timidity may be contrasted with fearlessness, the opposite of rashness is caution. Similarly, liberality is not the mean state lying between the excess of prodigality and the defect of avarice; it is the virtue ruling out avarice, just as prodigality is the vice ruling out the virtue of thrift. The conclusion indicated is that virtues and vices cannot be forced together into threes, because they belong together in pairs—each virtue with its corresponding vice.

Such a conclusion is fully in line with the distinction I have made between instrumental and moral action. Instrumental activity is quantitative, and so can be measured by a scale of defect-mean-excess. Moral activity is qualitative, and so demands a positive or negative judgment. The doctrine of the Mean ignores this distinction and attempts to associate the various virtues and vices with words descriptive of different intensities of action. Thus Aristotle argues that the brave man is the person who neither hides in a hole nor rushes blindly into danger. Yet it should be obvious that circumstances may demand even these extremes of conduct from a brave man, in which case the moral verdict will be, "Cautious but brave", or "Rash but brave". In short, the descriptive evaluation of an (instrumental) act has no necessary bearing upon the moral evaluation of a person acting.

There is a connection between the two, however, and it is sufficient to lend plausibility to Aristotle's ethical theory. This connection is a psychological one. It is a matter of common experience that certain qualities of character (which are approved or disapproved) are psychologically linked with certain types of action (which have consequences considered desirable or the reverse). Thus, believing some one to be a coward, we may say, "Just you watch him scuttle to his funk-hole!"—or, thinking him irresponsible, "He'll be sure to shut his eyes and rush in, regardless!" At the same time, those judging the character of the person involved differently from ourselves may well put quite another construction on the same actions. They will object, "But no one with any sense of responsibility would fail to take cover!" or "He has no other choice than to risk it, brave man that he is!" Here the instrumental efficiency of a particular act is variously interpreted according to the views held concerning the moral integrity of the actor. But, whatever the standpoint adopted, the observer of an action looks for some psychological consistency marking *these* acts as the acts of *this person*. And, in the long run, the moral quality of an individual is likely to be inferred from the type of behaviour he commonly displays. The psychological link between instrumental action and ethical action, therefore, is of great importance. At the same time, it is never conclusive. The instrumental efficacy of an act is always objectively demonstrable, because instrumental acts are either successful or unsuccessful and will appear as what they are to every one who has access to the relevant facts. Quite otherwise, the moral worth of action can never be finally proven, because, whatever the action achieves, it will be interpreted according to the moral standard adopted. An heroic ethic ("Better death than dishonour") will eternally disagree with a prudential ethic ("He who fights and runs away/Lives to fight another day").

The psychological link between virtuous action—action regulated by an ethical norm—and efficient instrumental action makes possible an appeal to the Aristotelian Mean as proof of the presence of virtue. This appeal is based on the expectation that both efficiency and virtue will give evidence of the presence of control. Just as recklessness makes a bad driver and inability to reach decisions makes a bad business executive, so wild enthusiasm and sullen apathy are signs of ethical inadequacy. Over against a background of psychological extremism the Mean makes good sense.

Yet even here we have no sure ground to stand on. The plain fact is that the psychological justification for the Mean must be, in the nature of things, indecisive. It can be helpful only because it can be misleading as well. Thus an appeal for moderation may be a reasoned plea for intelligent restraint, but it may equally be a panicky retreat into conformism and a refusal to face realistically the need for

vigorous action. Often the "wild men" among us are the ones who understand the situation, while the middle-of-the-roaders are the unprincipled and the blind. In the name of moderation a Winston Churchill is kept in the political wilderness until the war he has foreseen breaks out, and the military strategy advocated by a Charles de Gaulle is dismissed as unpractical until the enemy adopts it. Therefore it can never be enough to demonstrate that an action shows moderation in order to prove it to be virtuous. Moderation may not even be efficient! That the extreme may be on occasion *right* (instrumentally efficient) is admitted openly by Aristotle, who insists that the Mean is always relative and so does not always occupy the middle place. If this is true of instrumental action, it is obviously still more true of virtuous action. For the Mean is to be identified only exceptionally with an extreme, otherwise its name would be a misnomer. Ethical action, on the other hand, is always, in one sense of the word, extreme. Where there are issues of right and wrong, standing in the middle and refusing to commit oneself to an all-or-nothing position is apostasy. *I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth. . . .* The judgment pronounced upon the Laodiceans rests upon the ethically lukewarm too.

Modern attempts to use the Mean all perpetuate, in one form or another, the confusion of instrumental and ethical action found in Aristotle's doctrine. They may not be so patently muddled as Honor Tracy's celebrated Irishman who urged his brethren to tread "the straight and narrow path dividing right from wrong", but the effect is much the same. Just how widespread this type of reasoning is, moreover, any one who keeps an eye open for it can soon discover. Perhaps the most characteristic approach to the Mean in our day is *via* statistics. When a Gallup poll or the Kinsey Report has made known its findings, then we think that the Mean has been revealed in its purity: we know the mark at which to aim. Even keeping up with the Joneses is one version of observing the Mean, since the practice rests upon the near-equality of income of households in one housing area. Thus the family next door furnishes a visible standard of expenditure, so that the suburban man of practical wisdom knows what he *ought to buy* (remembering that, in the affluent society, if the exact Mean cannot be attained the extreme of excess is counted more honourable than the extreme of defect).

The statistical Mean has un-Aristotelian overtones, reflecting the fact that our society is egalitarian rather than aristocratic and more impressed by pragmatic values than by traditional ones. Not every appeal to the Mean to-day, however, is tied to our contemporary social situation. A more genuinely Aristotelian use of

the doctrine of the Mean can be found in the common type of argument—ancient but still very much alive—which may be called Justification through Cancelling Criticisms. Aristotle remarks that, to those who have deviated into one extreme, the Mean invariably takes on the appearance of the opposite extreme. So, to the timid, the man of courage seems rash, while to the rash he seems timid. The pseudo-argument of Justification through Cancelling Criticisms appeals to this principle, maintaining that anything attacked on two sides at once must have the perfection belonging to the Mean. There is no substance to such a contention, because there is hardly an act which cannot be represented as a Mean. Every bully assures his victim that he is getting “less than he deserves”, and every tyranny whitewashes its reign of terror by proclaiming that hitherto its treatment of the enemies of the regime has been “foolishly lenient”. Mr. Pecksniff could readily rebut the charge of hypocrisy by invoking the principle of Justification through Cancelling Criticisms. He could reply that, while some had basely imagined his conduct to be motivated by self-interest, others had frequently assured him, with tears in their eyes, that his selfless generosity would be his ruin. Now, the unsatisfactory nature of arguments of this sort may be admitted without an understanding of why they mislead. What makes Justification through Cancelling Criticisms futile is not that the Mean is falsely located but that the criticisms pitted against each other are not true opposites. It is upon this rock that the principle founders.

For instance, in *Orthodoxy* (a book which makes great play with Cancelling Criticisms) G. K. Chesterton sets the charge that orthodox Christianity encourages a slave mentality over against the charge that the Church is full of pomp and pride of power. There is no contradiction here, for it is characteristic of clericalism universally (and clericalism within Christianity is no exception) that it delights in the exercise of power and so discourages independent thought in those over whom its power extends. A good parallel is to be found in the secular religion of Marxism. Possibly the two most prominent evils of Communist rule are (1) its repressive policy aimed at creating artificial equality and (2) the unjust extremes of inequality created by its bureaucratic rule. And these two evils—like the twin evils of clericalism—are not mutually exclusive but inter-related. Confusion has arisen, once again, because of the attempt to make ethical values fit within the framework of quantitative estimates. The false opposites created by Justification through Cancelling Criticisms are false for the same reason that the moral “extremes” cited by Aristotle in the *Ethics* fail to correspond. A timid person often acts very rashly. Similarly, while a shoe cannot be at once too small and too large to permit one to

walk in comfort, a government can be at once too venal and too oppressive to permit one to live in freedom.

Every appeal to the Mean has as its motive the wish to demonstrate how the good is to be recognized and virtue achieved. But it is a wish that can never be given substance. There is no straight and narrow path between right and wrong. No lukewarm middle-way can be found to abolish the demand that we should be either hot or cold: moral choice cannot be made on the basis of Goldilocks' sampling of the three bowls of porridge and rejecting the extremes. Instrumental action is eternally different from action involving ethical evaluation and decision, as we shall understand well enough unless we are dazzled by the false glitter of the Golden Mean.