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BOOK II

MORAL VIRTUE

1. How moral virtue is acquired

VIRTUE, or excellence (*aretê*), then, being of two kinds, intellectual and moral, intellectual excellence owes its birth and its growth mainly to teaching, and so requires experience and time, while moral excellence is the product of habit (*êthos*), and in fact has derived its name, *êthikos*, by a slight variation from that word. Hence it is plain that none of the moral virtues is implanted in us by nature, for no natural property can be changed by habit. A stone, for instance, which has the natural property of falling, can never be habituated to rise, even though we made innumerable attempts to train it by throwing it into the air; nor can fire be habituated to move downwards, nor can anything else that has a natural property of behaving in one way be habituated to behave differently. The virtues, then, are not engendered in us either by nature or in opposition to nature: rather nature gives us the capacity for receiving them, and this capacity is developed through habit.

Moreover, in the case of our natural endowments we first receive a certain power, to which we later give expression by acting in a certain way. The senses offer an illustration of this: they are not acquired as a result of seeing and hearing; on the contrary, instead of being acquired by practice they had first to be possessed before they could be used. The virtues, on the other hand, are acquired by first giving them expression in actual practice, and this is true of the arts as well. To learn an art (*technê*)

it is first necessary to perform those actions that pertain to it: e.g., we become builders by building, and harpists by playing the harp. Similarly we become just by performing just actions, temperate by temperate actions, brave by brave actions. This is confirmed by what goes on in our city-states, where it is by training that legislators make people good; at any rate that is the aim of legislation, and if it is not achieved the legislation is a failure. By such legislation a good constitution is distinguished from a bad.

From the same causes and by the same means that a moral virtue is produced it may also be destroyed. This is equally true of the arts. It is by playing the harp that both good and bad harpists are produced, and so of builders and the rest; for men become good or bad builders according as they practise building well or badly. If this were not so, they would require no instruction, but would all have been born good or bad at their trades. So too in the case of the virtues. It is by our actual conduct in our intercourse with other men that we become just or unjust, and it is by our conduct in dangerous situations, accustoming ourselves there to feel fear or confidence, that we become cowardly or brave. So, too, with our appetites and angry impulses: it is by behaving in one way or another on the appropriate occasions that we become either temperate and gentle or profligate and irascible. In short, a particular kind of 'moral disposition' (*hexis*) is produced by a corresponding kind of activities. That is why we ought to take care that our activities are of the right sort, inasmuch as our moral dispositions will vary in accordance with them. It is no small matter, then, what habits we form even from early youth; rather this is of great, indeed of paramount importance.

ii. On right method

Since our present inquiry has not, like the others, a merely speculative aim (i.e., we are inquiring not merely in order to know what virtue is, but in order to become good, for otherwise the knowledge would avail us nothing), we must investigate the

subject of 'moral actions' (*praxis*) and inquire how they are to be performed; for they, as we have said, determine the kind of 'moral dispositions' (*hexis*) that will be produced. That we are to be guided by 'right principle' (*orthos logos*) is generally admitted, and may be taken as our present starting-point; although we shall have to discuss later¹ what this 'right principle' is and how it is related to the other virtues.

But before proceeding further let us acknowledge that in matters of conduct our theories must be stated inexactly and in outline; for, as we remarked at the outset, we are to demand only so much of any theory as may be appropriate to its subject-matter, and in matters of conduct and expediency there are no fixed laws, any more than in matters of health. And if our general theory is thus inexact, its application to particular cases will be all the more so; for these do not come under the head of any specific art or system of rules, but the agent himself must consider on each occasion what the situation requires, just as in medicine or navigation.

Yet while our present theory is thus necessarily inexact, we must do what we can to help it out. First of all, then, let us observe that the virtues we have been discussing² are destroyed equally by deficiency or by excess. We may see this illustrated in the analogous case of bodily strength and health (for in illustrating what is immaterial we must have recourse to material analogies): strength is as much destroyed by an excess as by a deficiency of bodily exercise, health by too much as by too little food; but both are produced, developed, and preserved by a moderate amount. So with temperance, courage, and the other virtues: the man who flees and fears everything and never stands his ground is a coward, while he who fears nothing at all and is ready to face everything is rash. Similarly, the man who partakes of every pleasure and abstains from none is a profligate, while he who boorishly

¹ See Bk. VI, Chap. xiii, pp. 230-231.

² I.e., moral virtues, as distinguished from intellectual.

shuns all pleasures may be called insensible. Thus temperance and courage are destroyed by excess and deficiency but are preserved by moderation.

Not only are the virtues produced and developed by the same actions and situations as those by which they may also be destroyed; but the resulting conduct, in turn, will find expression in terms of these same situations and actions. We may see this in the case of more readily observable qualities like strength; for strength is produced by eating a great deal of food and doing a great deal of hard work, and it is the strong man, in turn, who is best able to perform these actions. So, too, with the virtues: by abstaining from pleasures we become temperate, and when temperance has been acquired we are best able to abstain. And in the case of courage, similarly, it is by habituating ourselves to despise and stand up to danger that we become brave, and after we have become brave we are able to face dangers all the more readily.

iii. *Pleasure and pain as tests of virtue*

The best index to our dispositions (*hexis*) is found in the pleasure or pain that accompanies our actions. A man who abstains from bodily indulgence and finds enjoyment in doing so is temperate, but he who abstains reluctantly is licentious (*akolastos*); and he who faces danger gladly, or at any rate without pain, is brave, while he who does it with pain is a coward. Thus pleasure and pain are matters that deeply concern the question of moral virtue. This is evident, first, from the fact that it is pleasure which prompts us to base deeds, and pain which deters us from noble ones; and therefore men ought, as Plato observes,³ to be trained from youth to find pleasure and pain in the right objects—which is just what we mean by a sound education.

Again, each particular virtue is a matter of actions and feelings, and these are in every case accompanied by pleasure or pain—

³ *The Laws*, Bk. II, pp. 653A, ff.

a further proof that pleasures and pains are the concern of virtue.

Again, punishment is inflicted through the medium of pains, by reason of their curative property; and a cure must naturally be the opposite of the disease to which it is applied.⁴

Again, as we have said before, every disposition of the soul realizes its nature through being related to and concerned with those things that influence it for better or worse. But it is through pleasures and pains that our dispositions are corrupted—i.e., through pursuit or avoidance of pleasures and pains of the wrong sort, or at the wrong time, or in the wrong manner, or wrongly in some other specific respect. This is why some people⁵ go so far as to define the virtues as states of quietude without feeling; but they make a mistake when they use these terms in an absolute sense instead of qualifying them by adding, 'in the right or wrong manner,' 'at the right or wrong time,' etc.

We may conclude, therefore, that virtue of a moral sort makes us do what is best in matters of pleasure and pain, while vice has the opposite effect. And the following considerations offer further evidence of the same point.

There are three sorts of thing that move us to choice, and three

⁴ Whence it follows that the original disease must have been pleasure: a third proof that moral virtue (which is presumably the end of punishment) is concerned with pleasures and pains. Andronicus' paraphrase throws light on this passage:—"This truth is further evident from the punishments which are inflicted in states. Lawgivers cause trouble to fall upon such as take pleasure in vicious courses, and thus try to induce them to hate what is evil, and to find their pleasure rather in a virtuous life. Thus it is, by the moral discipline which they inculcate, that lawgivers instill into men's minds the pleasure which is consequent upon virtue. Legal punishments thus fill a position analogous to medical remedies toward those who are diseased in their social relations. Just as the diseases are opposed to the remedies which cure them (if, for instance, we see a physician employing a cold method of cure, we know at once that the disease has been brought on by heat), so also we know from the painful nature of punishments that the vices which those punishments are designed to cure, arise from pleasure." (Hatch's translation, *op. cit.*, of the paraphrase attributed, perhaps erroneously, to Andronicus of Rhodes; concerning whom, see Introduction, p. xxii).

⁵ Probably the Cynics. Afterwards this notion of virtue became a part of the Stoic doctrine.

that move us to avoidance: on the one hand, the 'nobly beautiful' (*kalos*), the advantageous, and the pleasant (*hédys*); on the other their opposites, the basely ugly, the injurious, and the painful. The good man is apt to go right and the bad man to go wrong about all of these, but especially about pleasure: for pleasure is experienced by men and animals alike; also it is an accompaniment of all objects of choice; and, as a matter of fact, even the nobly beautiful and the advantageous may be regarded as in a sense pleasant.

Again, a love of pleasure has been fostered in all of us from infancy, and thus has become so thoroughly engrained in our lives that it can hardly be eradicated.⁶ And even in the judging of actions we all of us tend, to a greater or less degree, to make pleasure and pain our standard. Here, then, is still another reason why pleasure and pain are matters with which our whole inquiry must be concerned; for the actions we perform depend a good deal on whether we are pleased and pained in the right or the wrong way.

Moreover, it is harder, as Heraclitus says, to fight against pleasure than against wrath; and virtue, like art, is always concerned with what is harder, for good actions are made all the better by being hard to achieve. Here, then, is still another reason why the whole subject both of moral virtue and of statecraft is bound up with the question of pleasures and pains; for if a man employs these well he will be good, if badly bad.

Hence we may take it as established: (1) that moral virtue has somehow to do with pleasures and pains; (2) that the same actions that have produced it will also develop it, or, if performed differently, will destroy it; and (3) that it finds eventual expression in activities of the same kind as those by which it was produced.

⁶ Grant supposes this metaphor to have been suggested by the passage in Book IV of Plato's *Republic* (429 D), where the effects of right education are compared to a dye with which the mind is to be imbued so deeply that pleasure and pain will be unable to eradicate it. If so, Aristotle has reversed the original analogy.

iv. *Virtue and virtuous action*

At this point the question might be raised, what we mean by saying that men become just and temperate only by doing just and temperate acts; for if men do just and temperate acts they must be just and temperate already—in the same way that if a man writes sentences or plays music he must already be literate or a musician.

In reply we may first of all challenge the validity of this objection even with respect to the arts. A man may possibly form sentences by chance, or at another's prompting; he will be literate, however, only if he does this in a literate way—that is, through having a literate man's knowledge of what he is about. But in any case the virtues are not entirely like the arts in this respect. In the arts the outward result is something good in itself, and its quality therefore is all that matters; but in the case of the virtues the character of a man's acts does not mean that he has acted justly or temperately, unless he is also in a certain state of mind during their performance. To act justly or temperately a man must, first of all, know what he is doing; secondly, he must choose it, and choose it for its own sake; thirdly, it must be the expression of a firm and stable character. Of these conditions only the first is included among the prerequisites of the various arts; whereas for the attainment of virtue knowledge alone is of little avail, and the other two conditions, which can only come as a result of repeatedly behaving in a just and temperate manner, are of great, indeed of supreme importance. Thus while acts are called just or temperate when they are such as a just or temperate man would perform, the agent is called just or temperate only when he does them in the spirit of a just or temperate man.

Hence we are correct in asserting that a man becomes just by doing just acts and temperate by doing temperate acts, and that without doing them he has no prospect of ever becoming good. But most men, instead of following this advice, take refuge in

theories, and suppose that by philosophizing they will be improved—like a sick man who listens attentively to his physician but disobeys his orders. Bare philosophizing will no more produce health in the soul than a course in medical theory will produce health in the body.

v. *The genus of moral virtue*

Our next task is to inquire just what virtue is. Every state of the soul is one of three things: a feeling (*pathos*), an 'ability or faculty' (*dynamis*), or a 'developed disposition, i.e., a state of character' (*hexis*). By 'feelings' I mean appetite, anger, fear, confidence, envy, joy, 'friendly affection' (*philia*), hatred, longing, emulation, pity, and in general whatever is accompanied by pleasure or pain; by 'faculties' I mean the capacities by which we are said to be capable of any of these feelings—the ability, for instance, to feel anger or pity or pain; and by 'dispositions' I mean the possession of a certain attitude, whether good or bad, with reference to the passions—e.g., we are badly disposed with respect to anger if our angry feelings are either too violent or too slack, well disposed if they are moderate, and similarly in the case of the other feelings.

Now the virtues and vices cannot be feelings. For, in the first place, we are called good or bad in respect of our virtues or vices, whereas we are not called so in respect of our feelings. Then too, we are praised and blamed for our virtues and vices, but not for our feelings: it is not simply for being frightened or angry that a man is praised, nor is it for that alone that he is blamed, but for being so in a particular way. Furthermore, fear and anger are not the result of 'deliberate choice' (*proairesis*), but the virtues are a kind of choice, or at any rate are impossible without it. Finally, in the case of feelings we are said to be 'impelled,' while in the case of virtues and vices we are not said to be impelled but to be 'disposed' in a certain way.

The same considerations show that the virtues cannot be facul-

ties: we are not called good or bad for being merely *capable* of feeling, nor are we praised or blamed for this. And further, while faculties are given to us by nature, we are not made good or bad by nature—a point already treated of.⁷

Consequently, as the virtues are neither feelings nor faculties, the only thing that remains for them to be is dispositions; and therein we have stated what virtue is in respect of its genus.

vi. *Differentia of moral virtue: doctrine of the mean*

But to say that virtue is a disposition is not enough; we must specify what kind of a disposition it is.

The 'virtue or excellence' (*aretê*) of anything must be acknowledged to have a twofold effect on the thing to which it belongs: it renders the thing itself good, and causes it to perform its function well. The excellence of the eye, for instance, makes both the eye and its work good, for it is by the excellence of the eye that we see well. Likewise the proper excellence of horse at once makes a particular horse what he should be, and also makes him good at running and at carrying his rider and at facing the enemy. Hence, if this is universally true, the virtue or proper excellence of man will be just that 'formed disposition' (*hexis*) which both makes him good and enables him to perform his function (*ergon*) well. We have already indicated how this is accomplished; but we may clarify the matter by examining wherein the nature of virtue consists.

Of everything that is both continuous and divisible it is possible to take a greater, a less, or an equal amount;⁸ and this may be true either objectively with respect to the thing in question or else relatively to ourselves. By 'equal' (*ison*) I mean that which is a mean (*meson*) between excess and deficiency. By the objective mean I denote that which is equidistant from both extremes,

⁷ In Chap. i of the present Book.

⁸ These three words, *pleion*, *elaton*, *ison*, carry also secondary connotations: 'too great,' 'too little,' 'fair.'

and this will always be the same for everybody. By the mean that is relative to ourselves I denote that which is neither too much nor too little,⁹ and this is not one and the same for everybody. For instance, if ten is many and two is few, then six is the mean considered in terms of the object; for it exceeds and is exceeded by the same amount, and is therefore the mean of an arithmetical proportion. But the mean considered relatively to ourselves cannot be determined so simply: if ten pounds of food is too much for a certain man to eat and two pounds is too little, it does not follow that the trainer will prescribe six pounds, for this may be too much or too little for the man in question—too little for Milo,¹⁰ too much for the novice at athletics. This is equally true of running and wrestling.

So it is that an expert in any field avoids excess and deficiency, and seeks and chooses the mean—that is, not the objective mean, but the mean relatively to ourselves. If, then, every sort of skill (*epistémê*) perfects its work in this way, by observing the mean and bringing its work up to this standard (which is the reason why people say of a good work of art that nothing could be either taken from it or added to it, implying that excellence is destroyed by excess or deficiency but is preserved by adherence to the mean; and good artists, we say, observe this standard in their work), and if furthermore virtue, like nature, is more exact and better than any art, it follows that virtue will have the property of aiming at the mean. I am speaking, of course, of moral virtue, for it is moral virtue that has to do with feelings and actions, and it is in respect of these that excess, deficiency, and moderation are possible. That is to say, we can feel fear, confidence, desire, anger, pity, and in general pleasure and pain, either too much or too little, and in either case not well; but to feel them at the right times, with reference to the right objects, toward the right people,

⁹ The verbal forms, connoting 'to superabound' and 'to fall short [of a goal or standard]' are used here.

¹⁰ A famous wrestler.

with the right motive, and in the right manner, is to strike the mean, and therein to follow the best course—a mark of virtue. And in the same way our outward acts admit of excess, deficiency, and the proper mean. Now virtue has to do with feelings and also with outward acts; in both of these excess and deficiency are regarded as faults and are blamed, while the mean amount is both praised and regarded as right—palpable signs of virtue. Virtue, then, is a kind of moderation (*mesotês*), in that it aims at the mean (*meson*). This conclusion is further confirmed by the fact that while there are numerous ways in which we can go wrong (for evil, according to the Pythagorean figure of speech, belongs to the class of the unlimited, good to that of the limited), there is only one way of going right. That is why the one is easy, the other hard—easy to miss the mark, but hard to hit it. And this offers further evidence that excess and deficiency are characteristic of vice while hitting the mean is characteristic of virtue: "for good is simple, badness manifold."

We may conclude, then, that virtue is an habitual disposition with respect to choice, the characteristic quality of which is moderation judged relatively to ourselves according to a determinate principle, i.e. according to such a principle as a man of insight would use. The quality of moderation belongs to virtue in a double sense: as falling between two vices, the one of which consists in excess, the other in deficiency; and also in the sense that while these vices respectively fall short of and exceed the proper standard both of feelings and of actions, virtue both finds and chooses the mean. Hence, in respect of its essence and according to the definition of its basic nature, virtue is a state of moderation; but regarded in its relation to what is best and right it is an extreme.

Accordingly it is not every action nor every feeling to which the principle of the mean is applicable. There are some whose very names imply badness: e.g., malevolence, shamelessness, envy, and among actions, adultery, theft, and murder. These and everything else like them are condemned as being bad in themselves

and not merely when in excess or deficiency. To do right in performing them is therefore impossible; their performance is always wrong. Rightness or wrongness in any of them (e.g., in adultery) does not depend on the rightness or wrongness of person and occasion and manner, but on the bare fact of doing it at all. It would be absurd to distinguish moderation, excess, and deficiency in action that is unjust or cowardly or profligate; for we should then have moderation of excess and deficiency, excess of excess, and deficiency of deficiency. The truth of the matter is that just as there can be no excess and deficiency of temperance and courage (for the proper mean is, in its own way, an extreme), so these opposite kinds of conduct likewise do not admit of moderation, excess, and deficiency; they are always wrong, no matter how they are done. . . .

vii. Species of the moral mean

But to make general statements like these is not enough; we must next apply them to particular virtues and vices. For while general statements cover more ground, they have less content of truth than particular propositions. Conduct has to do with particulars; it is important, therefore, that our statements when tested by them should be found to hold good. Let us take our particular virtues and vices from the following table.

In respect of fear and confidence, observance of the mean is called courage. Of the people who go to excess, those who exceed in fearlessness are given no name (as often happens), but those who exceed in confidence are rash; while those who exceed in fear and are deficient in confidence, are craven.

In respect of pleasures and pains—not all of them, however, and to a less extent in the case of pains—the mean is temperance, excess is profligacy. But persons deficient in respect of pleasures, as they are not often found, have received no name: let us call them 'insensible.'

In respect of the giving and taking of money, the mean is gen-

erosity, excess and deficiency are prodigality and stinginess. These two vices both exceed and fall short at once, but in contrary ways: the prodigal man exceeds in spending and falls short in taking, while the stingy man exceeds in taking but falls short in spending.¹¹

There are also certain other dispositions in respect of money: a mean which is magnificence (the magnificent man differs from the merely generous man, in that he deals with large sums, the other with small), an excess which is bad taste and vulgar display, and a deficiency which is niggardliness. This pair of contrary vices differs from the corresponding pair of vices opposed to generosity; the manner of difference to be explained later.

In one's attitude toward public opinion, the mean is proper pride (*megalopsychia*), excess may be called vanity, and deficiency—pettiness (*mikropsychia*). And just as generosity was said to be related to magnificence, differing only in the smallness of the sums with which it deals, so too there is a virtue related to magnanimity and differing only in being concerned with small rather than great honors. It is possible to desire the right amount of honor, or more than the right amount, or less; and the man who carries this desire to excess is called ambitious, while he who is deficient in it is called unambitious, and he who is intermediate between these has no name. The corresponding dispositions too are nameless, except that of the ambitious man, which is called ambition. Hence it is that persons who occupy the extremes lay claim to the middle place: in fact, we ourselves refer to the moderate man sometimes as ambitious, sometimes as unambitious; and sometimes it is the ambitious man that we praise, sometimes the unambitious. The reason for this will be explained later; for the present let us speak of the remaining states of character according to the plan already proposed.

Excess and deficiency and moderation are found also in respect

¹¹ Aristotle's gloss, incorporated in the Greek text: "For the present it is our purpose to give merely an outline or summary; afterwards [from Bk. III, Chap. vi, to the end of Bk. IV] these states will be defined with more accuracy."

of anger. Although the dispositions have no well-recognized names, yet as the man who occupies the intermediate state is called gentle, we may give his character the name of gentleness; and of those who occupy the extremes, let the one who exceeds be called irascible, and his vice irascibility, while the deficient man may be called apathetic and his vice apathy.

There are also three other respects, mutually related yet distinct, in which one may observe a mean. All of them have to do with intercourse in speech and action, but they differ in that one is concerned with the truth of intercourse, the other two with its pleasantness; and of these latter, one has to do with pleasantness in matters of amusement, the other with pleasantness in any situations that life may offer. We must accordingly include these in our account, in order to see more plainly how in all things moderation is praiseworthy, while going to extremes is neither praiseworthy nor right, but an object of censure. Incidentally, most of these qualities too are without names; which means that we must undertake, here as elsewhere, to coin names ourselves, so that our discourse may be clear and easy to follow.

In respect of truth, then, the moderate man may be called a truthful sort of person, and his moderation truthfulness. Pretence which takes the form of exaggeration is boastfulness, and its possessor is a boaster; in the form of understatement it is self-depreciation¹² and its possessor self-depreciatory.

In respect of pleasantness in amusing others, the moderate man may be called witty and the corresponding disposition wittiness; excess may be called buffoonery, and its possessor a buffoon, while the man who falls short may be called boorish, and his disposition boorishness.

In respect of pleasantness in the other affairs of life, he who is pleasant in the right way is friendly and his moderation is friend-

¹² *Eiróneta*: refers to the attitude of mock modesty, or ironical self-depreciation, by which Socrates was wont to provoke his opponents to make positive statements.

liness; he who exceeds is obsequious if he has no ulterior motive, or a flatterer if he is looking to his own advantage; and he who falls short and in every situation makes himself disagreeable is a peevish and surly sort of person.

In our feelings, too, and in conduct that pertains to them, there are ways of observing the mean. Shame, for instance, is not a virtue, but modesty receives praise. For in these matters also we speak of one man as observing the mean, and of another, viz. the sheepish man whom everything throws out of countenance, as overstepping it; while he who is deficient in this feeling, or entirely lacks it, is called shameless. The term 'modest,' on the other hand, is reserved for him who observes the mean.

Again, 'righteous indignation' (*nemesis*) is the mean state between envy and malice—all of these having to do with the pain and pleasure that are felt at the fortunes of our neighbors. The righteously indignant man is pained by undeserved good fortune; the envious man goes further and is pained by all good fortune; while the malicious man falls so far short of being pained that he actually rejoices [at his neighbors' misfortunes].

But there will be another opportunity to discuss these matters. As for justice, since it has not one simple meaning, we shall, after treating of the other dispositions, distinguish its two kinds and show in what way each of them represents an observance of the mean. After that we shall treat in a similar manner of the rational virtues.

viii. Various relations of extremes and mean

Thus there are three kinds of disposition: two of them vices, marked by excess and deficiency respectively, and one of them, observance of the mean, a virtue. Each of them may be regarded as, in a sense, the opposite of both others; for the extreme states are opposites both of the middle state and of one another, while the middle state is opposite to both the extremes. Just as an amount that is equal to some other amount is greater when compared with

a less and less when compared with a greater amount, so it is that moderate dispositions, whether in feelings and in action, are excessive as compared with deficient dispositions and deficient as compared with excessive ones. The brave man, for example, seems rash as compared with a coward and cowardly as compared with a daredevil; likewise the temperate man seems profligate as compared with a man who is insensible to pleasures, and insensible as compared with a profligate; while the generous man seems prodigal as compared with a miser and stingy as compared with a prodigal. For this reason people whose dispositions are at one extreme try to dislodge the moderate man from his position by representing him as an extremist of the opposite sort: the coward calls the brave man rash, the rash man calls him coward, and so in the other cases.

But while all three states are thus opposed to one another, the most marked contrariety is that which subsists between the two extremes, rather than between either of them and the mean; for the extremes are farther from each other than from the mean, just as the great is farther from the small and the small from the great than either one is from the equal. Again, certain extremes bear a kind of resemblance to the mean, as rashness to courage and prodigality to generosity, while between the extremes themselves there is the greatest possible unlikeness. Opposites, moreover, are defined as the things that are farthest away from each other; hence things must be more opposite according as they are farther apart.

In some cases it is the deficiency, in others the excess that is the more opposed to the mean. For example, it is not rashness, which is excess, but cowardice, which is deficiency, that stands the more opposed to courage; while to temperance, on the other hand, it is not insensibility, the deficiency, but profligacy, which is excess, that stands the more opposed. The reasons for this are two. One is the reason drawn from the nature of the subject-matter: since one extreme is in actual fact nearer and more similar to the mean, we choose not this but its contrary to oppose to the mean. Thus, as rashness seems nearer and more similar to courage, cowardice

more dissimilar, we tend rather to oppose cowardice to it—for that which is farther away from the mean may be regarded as the more opposed to it. This, then, is one reason, drawn from the nature of the subject-matter. Another may be found in ourselves, in that the things to which we are naturally more attracted appear more opposed to the mean: since we incline naturally toward pleasures, for instance, we are more prone to profligacy than to an orderly way of life. We describe as opposed to the mean those things in which we are more prone to over-indulgence; and thus profligacy, which is excess, is more opposite to the mean than its corresponding deficiency is.

ix. Difficulties of attaining the mean

We have now sufficiently shown that moral virtue consists in observance of a mean, and in what sense this is so: in the sense, namely, of holding a middle position between two vices, one of which involves excess and the other deficiency, and also in the sense of being the kind of a disposition which aims at the middle point both in feelings and in actions. This being the case, it is a hard thing to be good, for it is hard to locate the mean in particular instances, just as to locate the mean point [i.e. the center] of a circle is not a thing that everybody can do, but only the man of science. So, too, anyone can get angry—that is easy—or spend money or give it away; but to do all this to the right person, to the right extent, at the right time, with the right motive, and in the right manner, is not a thing that everyone can do, and is not easy; and that is why good conduct is at once rare and praiseworthy and noble.

Accordingly, whoever aims at the mean should first of all strive to avoid that extreme which is more opposed to it, as in Calypso's advice to "keep the ship well clear of that foaming surf."¹⁸ For of

¹⁸ Odysseus' order to his steersman (*Odyssey*, xii, 219-220), quoting the advice earlier given by Circe (not Calypso) to steer rather toward the monster Scylla, who will devour only a few of the men, than toward the whirlpool Charybdis, which will engulf them all.

the two extremes one will be more of an evil, the other less; therefore, as it is hard to hit the exact mean, we ought to choose the lesser of the two evils and sail, as the saying goes, in the second best way,¹⁴ and this is accomplished most successfully in the manner stated. But we must bear in mind as well the errors to which we personally are prone. These will be different for different individuals, and each may discover them in his own case by noting the occasions on which he feels pleasure or pain. Having discovered them, let him bend himself in the opposite direction; for by steering wide of error we shall strike a middle course, as warped timber is straightened by bending it backwards. Especially and in all cases we must guard against pleasure and what is pleasant, because we cannot estimate it impartially. Hence we ought to feel toward pleasure as the elders of the people felt toward Helen, and on every occasion repeat their saying,¹⁵ for if we dismiss pleasure thus we are less likely to go wrong.

Such, then, in outline, is the course by which we shall best succeed in hitting the mean. But the task is a hard one, we must admit, especially in particular cases. It is not easy to determine, for instance, how and with whom and on what provocation and how long one ought to be angry; and in fact we sometimes praise those who fall short in this respect, and call them gentle, while sometimes we praise those of harsher temper, calling them manly. We do not, however, censure the man who deviates slightly from goodness, whether on the side of excess or deficiency, but only the man whose error is too considerable to escape notice. To be sure, it is not easy to determine rationally at what point or at what degree of error a man becomes blameworthy; but then, matters that fall within the scope of perception can never be so determined, for they depend upon particular circumstances, and our judgment of them depends upon our perception.

¹⁴ A popular expression, which meant taking to the oars when becalmed.

¹⁵ "She is wondrously like the immortal goddesses to look upon. But be that as it may, let her depart on the ships, rather than be left here as a bane to us and our children after us." (*Iliad*, Bk. III, 158-160.)

So much, then, is clear: that in all departments of conduct it is the intermediate disposition that is laudable; but that we must sometimes incline toward the excess, sometimes toward the deficiency, since in this way we shall most readily hit the mean and thus attain to worthy conduct.