

## The Lesser of Two Evils:

### Aristotle on Why Some Vices Are Worse than Others

Aristotle famously identifies moral virtue as a mean between two vices (μεσότης δὲ δύο κακιῶν, *Nicomachean Ethics* (NE) 1107a2)—one of excess (ὑπερβολῆς), the other of deficiency (ἐνδείας at NE 1104a11, later ἔλλειψις at NE 1106b34). Therefore, there are at least twice as many ways to go astray as there are to be virtuous. Additionally, as there exists a spectrum between virtue and its corresponding vices in either direction, we find that, once degree of vice is taken into account, there might be infinitely many ways to go wrong, for “in everything continuous and divisible we can take more, less, and equal amounts” (NE, 1106a27). Indeed, “there are many ways to be in error—for badness is proper to the indeterminate, as the Pythagoreans pictured it, and good to the determinate” (NE, 1106b31). This imagery of a mean between two extremes appearing on a spectrum seems helpful at first; for a person can be more or less cowardly, but one who is courageous has achieved a fixed virtuous state. Furthermore, he who is more cowardly than another who is less so is the worse of the two, as his character deviates from the mean to a greater extent.

Unfortunately, Aristotle complicates matters, adding that, though each extreme vice is opposed both to virtue and the other, one vice is typically *more* opposed to virtue than the other. In other words, despite the fact that Aristotle describes objective virtue as “a point equally distant from either extreme (ἐκατέρου τῶν ἄκρων), which is one and the same for everybody” (NE 1106a30-31), the extreme vices are not equally bad. For instance, the vice of rashness, though a vice, is less bad than the vice of cowardice. Precisely what qualifies one vice as “worse” is mysterious; sometimes it is the excessive vice, others, the deficient (NE 1109a1-5).

How one understands Aristotle's conception of the lesser and greater evils depends on one's interpretation of the *doctrine of the mean*. For example, some scholars view this model skeptically, as if it were *purely* metaphorical. Rosalind Hursthouse famously balked at the notion that Aristotle held exactly one pair of extreme vices corresponding to each virtue (Hursthouse, 1980-81). Some (Urmson, 1973 and Curzer, 1996) take the quantitative aspect literally, whereas others (Losin, 1987 and Broadie, 1991) follow Hursthouse in dismissing the mathematical spirit of Aristotle's discussions. Furthermore, whether one takes the doctrine of the mean to describe situations (Curzer, 1996), individuals (Leighton, 1992), or human nature in general (Brown, 1997) can inform how one faces this apparent difficulty in comprehending opposing vices where one is *worse* than its opposite.

In this presentation, I conduct an exhaustive survey of individual vice pairs, paying close attention to which of a pair Aristotle deems worse and why. It is revealed that there may be several reasons (forming a disjunctive account of viciousness) accounting for the difference in moral worth between vices. Still, these reasons are related and provide further support for the interpretation that the doctrine of the mean is about a mean relative to human nature. For instance, I argue that the appetitive animalistic vices are worse because they threaten to stunt our moral growth. At the very least, appetitive animalistic vices distract from reason. While rational vices are bad, they do not threaten rationality *per se*. One's reason is both what grounds one's humanity and distinguishing mark. In addition, we are most our reason (compared to the other two aspects of soul: *appetite* and the *nutritive* part). In fact, some errors are bad but not truly vicious. They are less bad on account of the fact that they still involve sophisticated cognition. In contrast, certain vices (in particular, intemperance (cf. Kontos, 2009) and injustice) are foundational to the vicious character and permeate the lower part of our nature

(i.e., *appetite*, which we share in common with all animals). That is to say, while insensitivity is a vice and ought to be avoided, intemperance is characteristic of extreme vice insofar as it is animalistic and interferes with rational behavior.

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