

QUESTION 64

The Mean of the Virtues

Next we have to consider the properties of the virtues: first, the mean of the virtues (question 64); second, the connectedness of the virtues (question 65); third, the equality of the virtues (question 66); and, fourth, the duration of the virtues (question 67).

On the first topic there are four questions: (1) Do the moral virtues stand in a mean (*sint in medio*)? (2) Is the mean of a moral virtue a mean that belongs to the things or a mean of reason? (3) Do the intellectual virtues consist in a mean? (4) Do the theological virtues consist in a mean?

Article 1

Do the moral virtues consist in a mean?

It seems that the moral virtues do not consist in a mean (*non consistat in medio*):

Objection 1: What is ultimate or a limit (*ultimum*) is incompatible with the character of a mean. But it is part of the character of virtue that it is a limit; for *De Caelo* 1 says, “A virtue is the limit of a power.” Therefore, a moral virtue does not consist in a mean.

Objection 2: What is maximal (*maximum*) is not a mean. But certain virtues tend toward something maximal, in the way that, as *Ethics* 4 says, magnanimity has to do with the greatest honors, and magnificence has to do with the greatest expenditures. Therefore, not every virtue lies in a mean.

Objection 3: If it were part of the character of a moral virtue to exist in a mean, then a moral virtue would have to be corrupted and not perfected by tending toward an extreme. But certain moral virtues are perfected by tending toward an extreme, in the way that virginity, which abstains from every sort of sexual pleasure, both embraces an extreme in this way and is also the most perfect sort of chastity. Likewise, to give everything away to the poor is the most perfect form of mercy or liberality. Therefore, it seems that it not part of the nature of a moral virtue to exist in a mean.

But contrary to this: In *Ethics* 2 the Philosopher says, “A moral virtue is an elective habit that stands in the middle (*in medietate existens*).”

I respond: As is clear from what was said above (q. 55, a. 3), by its nature a virtue orders a man toward the good. Now a moral virtue properly perfects the appetitive part of the soul with respect to some determinate subject matter, and the measure and rule of an appetitive movement with respect to what is desirable is reason itself. But the good of anything that is measured and regulated consists in its being conformed to its rule, just as the good in the case of artefacts is that they measure up to the rule of their craft (*ut consequantur regulam artis*). As a result, what is bad in these matters is for something to depart from its rule or measure. This happens either by its *going beyond* the measure or by its *falling short* of it, as is manifestly obvious in all things that are regulated and measured.

And so it is clear that the good of a moral virtue consists in its conformity to reason’s measure (*consistit in adaequatione ad mensuram rationis*). But it is evident that the mean or middle (*medium*) is a balance or symmetry between excess and deficiency (*inter excessum et defectum medium est aequalitas sive conformitas*). Hence, it is manifestly obvious that a moral virtue consists in a mean.

Reply to objection 1: A moral virtue has its goodness from the rule of reason, and it has passions or operations for its subject matter.

Therefore, if a moral virtue is compared to *reason*, then, insofar as it belongs to reason, it has the character of one extreme (*habet rationem extremi unius*), viz., a *conformity*, whereas excess and deficiency have the character of the other extreme, viz., a *deformity*.

On the other hand, if a moral virtue is considered in comparison with its *subject matter*, then it has the character of a mean, insofar as it makes a passion conform to the rule of reason (*inquantum passionem reducit ad regulam rationis*). Hence, in *Ethics* 2 the Philosopher says that a virtue is “a mean in its substance,” insofar as the rule of the virtue is posited with respect to its proper subject matter,

whereas “with regard to the best and the good, it is an extreme,” viz., because of its conformity to reason.

Reply to objection 2: It is in accord with diverse circumstances that the mean and the extremes are thought of in the case of actions and passions, and thus nothing prevents something from being an extreme for a given virtue in one circumstance and yet a mean in other circumstances, because of its conformity with reason. And so it is in the case of magnificence and magnanimity. For if one considers the *absolute quantity* of what the magnificent individual or the magnanimous individual tends toward, it will be called an extreme and a maximum, but if one instead considers this quantity *in relation to the other circumstances*, then it has the character of a mean. For these virtues tend toward such a quantity in accord with the rule of reason, that is, *where* it is right and *when* it is right and for the right *end*. By contrast, it would be an excess if one tended toward this maximum *when* it was not right, or *where* it was not right, or for an *end* that was not right, whereas it would be a deficiency if one did not tend toward this maximum *when* it was right to do so or *where* it was right to do so. And this is just what the Philosopher says in *Ethics* 4, viz., that “the magnanimous individual is, to be sure, extreme with respect to the magnitude, but he observes the mean in doing what is right.”

Reply to objection 3: The same line of reasoning that applies to magnanimity applies to virginity and poverty. For virginity abstains from all sexual pleasures, and poverty abstains from all riches, for the sake of what is right and insofar as it is right—according to God’s command and for the sake of eternal life.

However, if virginity or poverty were undertaken in a way that was not right, e.g., because of some illicit superstition or even for the sake of vainglory, then that would be an *excess* (*superfluum*). On the other hand, if they were not undertaken when it was right to undertake them, or if they were not undertaken in the right way, then that would be a vice through *deficiency*, as is clear in the case of those who break the vow of virginity or the vow of poverty.

Article 2

Is the mean of a moral virtue a mean that belongs to the things or a mean of reason?

It seems that the mean of a moral virtue is a mean that belongs to the things and not a mean of reason (*non sit medium rationis sed medium rei*):

Objection 1: The good of a moral virtue consists in its being a mean. But as *Metaphysics* 4 says, the good exists in the things themselves. Therefore, the mean of a moral virtue is a mean that belongs to the things.

Objection 2: Reason is an apprehensive power. But a moral virtue consists not in a mean among apprehensions, but in a mean among operations and passions. Therefore, the mean of a moral virtue is a mean that belongs to the things and not a mean of reason.

Objection 3: A mean that is an arithmetical or geometric ratio is a mean that belongs to the things. But as *Ethics* 5 says, this is what the mean of justice is like. Therefore, the mean of a moral virtue is a mean that belongs to the things and not a mean of reason.

But contrary to this: In *Ethics* 2 the Philosopher says, “A moral virtue consists in a mean that is relative to us, and it is determined by reason (*virtus moralis in medio consistit quoad nos determinata ratione*).”

I respond: There are two ways in which ‘mean of reason’ can be understood:

In one way, insofar as a mean exists *in the very act of reason*, in the sense that the act of reason itself observes a mean (*quasi ipse actus rationis ad medium reducatur*). And in this sense, since a moral virtue perfects an act of an appetitive power and not an act of reason, the mean of a moral virtue is not a mean of reason.

In a second way, ‘mean of reason’ can be used for a mean that is *posited by reason in some subject matter* (*id quod a ratione ponitur in aliqua materia*). And in this sense the mean of a moral virtue is a mean of reason. For, as has been explained (a. 1), a moral virtue is said to consist in a mean because of its conformity to right reason (*per conformitatem ad rationem rectam*).

However, it sometimes happens that a mean of reason is also a mean that belongs to the things, and in such a case the mean of the moral virtue has to be a mean that belongs to the things; this occurs in the case of [the virtue of] justice. On the other hand, sometimes the mean of reason is not a mean that belongs to the things, but is instead taken from its relation to us; this occurs in the case of all the other moral virtues.

The reason for this is that justice has to do with operations, which consist in exterior things and in which, as was explained above (q. 60, a. 2), what is right has to be established absolutely speaking and in itself (*simpliciter et secundum se*). And so in the case of justice the mean of reason is the same as the mean that belongs to the things; for justice gives to each individual what is owed to him—no more and no less. By contrast, the other moral virtues have to do with the interior passions, in which what is right cannot be established in the same way, because men are related in diverse ways to their passions. And so the rectitude of reason within the passions has to be established in relation to us, who are affected by our passions.

Reply to objection 1 and objection 2 and objection 3: This makes clear the replies to the objections. For the first two arguments go through with respect to the mean of reason that is found in the very act of reason. And the third argument goes through for the case of the mean of justice.

Article 3

Do the intellectual virtues consist in a mean?

It seems that the intellectual virtues do not consist in a mean:

Objection 1: The moral virtues consist in a mean insofar as they are conformed to the rule of reason. But the intellectual virtues exist in reason itself, and so they do not seem to have a higher rule. Therefore, the intellectual virtues do not consist in a mean.

Objection 2: The mean of a moral virtue is determined by an intellectual virtue; for *Ethics 2* says, “Virtue consists in a mean determined by reason, in the way that someone wise would determine it” (*prout sapiens determinabit*). Therefore, if an intellectual virtue once again consists in a mean, that mean would have to be determined by some other virtue. And in this way there would be an infinite regress among virtues.

Objection 3: As the Philosopher says in *Metaphysics 10*, a mean properly lies between contraries. But there does not seem to be any contrariety in the intellect, since even contraries themselves are not contrary insofar as they exist in the intellect; rather, they are understood together, as with *white* and *black*, and *healthy* and *sick*. Therefore, there is no mean in the intellectual virtues.

But contrary to this: As *Ethics 6* says, an art or craft (*ars*) is an intellectual virtue, and yet, as *Ethics 2* points out, there is a mean that belongs to an art. Therefore, even an intellectual virtue consists in a mean.

I respond: As has been explained (a. 1), the good of each thing consists in a mean, insofar as it is conformed to a rule or measure that it is possible to exceed and possible to fall short of. Hence, insofar as the good of an intellectual virtue involves some measure, it involves the character of a mean.

Now the good of an intellectual virtue is the true. The good of a speculative intellectual virtue is, as *Ethics 6* says, the true absolutely speaking, whereas the good of a practical intellectual virtue is the true as regards its conformity to right appetite.

Now when the true that belongs to our intellect is considered absolutely speaking, then it is, as it were, measured by the things. For as *Metaphysics* 10 says, the real thing is the measure of our intellect, since truth exists in an opinion or in speech because the thing is or is not such-and-such.

So, then, the good of a speculative intellectual virtue consists in a certain mean through its conformity to the thing itself, i.e., insofar as the intellect asserts to exist what in fact exists, or asserts not to exist what does not exist (*secundum quod dicit esse quod est vel non esse quod non est*)—which is what the nature of the true consists in. On the other hand, *excess* has to do with a false affirmation, by which what does not exist is asserted to exist, whereas *deficiency* has to do with a false negation, through which what exists is asserted not to exist.

Now when the true that belongs to a practical intellectual virtue is compared to the things, then it has the character of what is measured. And so in this sense the mean involves being conformed to the thing in the practical intellectual virtues as well as in the speculative intellectual virtues.

However, with respect to the appetite the mean has the character of a rule and measure. Hence, the same mean, viz., the rectitude of reason, that belongs to a moral virtue also belongs to prudence itself, but it is a mean that belongs to prudence insofar as prudence regulates and measures, whereas it is a mean that belongs to a moral virtue insofar as the moral virtue is measured and regulated. Similarly, *excess* and *deficiency* are taken in diverse ways in the two cases.

Reply to objection 1: As has been explained, even an intellectual virtue has its own measure, and a mean is involved in such a virtue through its conformity to that measure.

Reply to objection 2: An infinite regress among virtues is not necessary, because the measure and rule of an intellectual virtue is the thing itself and not any other genus of virtue.

Reply to objection 3: The contrary things themselves do not have contrariety in the soul, since the one contrary is the explanation for the cognition of the other (*quia unum est ratio cognoscendi alterum*). Yet there does exist in the intellect a contrariety of affirmation and negation, which are contraries, as is explained in the last chapter of *De Interpretatione*. For even though *to be* and *not to be* are contradictory opposites and not contraries if one thinks about the things signified insofar they exist in the things—for a being is one thing and what is purely a non-being is another—still, if they are referred back to an act of the soul, then they both posit something. Hence *to be* and *not to be* are contradictories, but the opinion by which we think *What is good is good* is contrary to the opinion by which we think *What is good is not good*. And an intellectual virtue is a mean between contraries of this sort.

Article 4

Does a theological virtue consist in a mean?

It seems that a theological virtue consists in a mean:

Objection 1: The good of the other virtues consists in a mean. But a theological virtue exceeds the other virtues in goodness. Therefore, *a fortiori*, a theological virtue exists in a mean.

Objection 2: ‘Mean of a virtue’ is taken in such a way that the mean of moral virtue has to do with our appetite being regulated by reason and the mean of intellectual virtue has to do with our intellect being measured by the things. But as was explained above (q. 62, a. 3), theological virtues perfect both the intellect and the appetite. Therefore, theological virtues likewise consist in a mean.

Objection 3: Hope, which is a theological virtue, is a mean between despair and presumption. Similarly, as Boethius points out in *De Duabus Naturis*, faith advances means between contrary heresies; for instance, the fact that we confess in Christ one person and two natures is a mean between the heresy of Nestorius, which claims that there are two persons and two natures, and the heresy of Eutychus, which claims that there is one person and one nature. Therefore, theological virtues consist in a mean.

But contrary to this: In all the cases in which a virtue consists in a mean it is possible to sin by excess as well as by deficiency. But one cannot sin by excess with respect to God, who is the object of a theological virtue. For Ecclesiasticus 43:33 says, “Blessing the Lord, exalt Him as much as you can; for He is above all praise.” Therefore, theological virtues do not consist in a mean.

I respond: As was explained above (a. 1), ‘mean of a virtue’ is taken for a virtue’s conformity to its rule or measure, insofar as it is possible to exceed this measure or to fall short of it. Now there are two possible measures of a theological virtue:

One sort of measure has to do with the *very character of the virtue (secundum ipsam rationem virtutis)*. And in this sense the measure and rule of a theological virtue is God Himself. For our faith is regulated by God’s truth, whereas our charity is regulated by His goodness and our hope is regulated by the greatness of His omnipotence and kindness. And this measure exceeds every human power; hence, a man can never love God as much as God should be loved, and he can never believe in Him or hope in Him as much as he ought to. Hence, *a fortiori*, there cannot be an excess here. And the good of such a virtue does not consist in a mean; instead, the closer the virtue gets to the maximum (*ad summum*), the better it is.

By contrast, the other sort of rule or measure of a theological virtue is *on our part*, since even if we cannot be moved toward God as much as we ought to be, we nonetheless should be moved toward him by believing, hoping, and loving in accord with the measure of our condition. Hence, there can, *per accidens*, be a mean and extremes in a theological virtue, on our part.

Reply to objection 1: The good of the intellectual and moral virtues consists in a mean through conformity to a rule or measure that it is possible to exceed. But as has been explained, this is not so in the case of the theological virtues, speaking *per se*.

Reply to objection 2: The moral and intellectual virtues perfect our intellect and appetite in relation to a created measure and rule, whereas the theological virtues perfect them in relation to an uncreated measure and rule. Hence, the arguments are not parallel.

Reply to objection 3: Hope is a mean between presumption and despair, *on our part*, viz., insofar as someone is said to be presumptuous because he hopes for a good from God that exceeds his condition, or he despairs by not hoping for what he is able to hope for, given his condition. However, there cannot be too much hope *with respect to God (non potest esse superabundantia spei ex parte Dei)*, since His goodness is infinite.

Likewise, faith also provides a mean between contrary heresies—not through a comparison to its object, which is God, whom one cannot believe in too much, but insofar as a human opinion is itself a mean between contrary opinions. This is clear from what was said above (a. 3).