

BOOK II

- 1** VIRTUE being, as we have seen, of two kinds, intellectual and moral, intellectual virtue is for the most part both produced and increased by instruction, and therefore requires experience and time; whereas moral or ethical virtue is the product of habit (*ethos*), and has indeed derived its name, with a slight variation of form, from that word.^a And therefore it is clear that none of the moral virtues is engendered in us by nature, for no natural property can be altered by habit. For instance, it is the nature of a stone to move downwards, and it cannot be trained to move upwards, even though you should try to train it to do so by throwing it up into the air ten thousand times; nor can fire be trained to move downwards, nor can anything else that naturally behaves in one way be trained into a habit of behaving in another way. The virtues^b therefore are engendered in us neither by nature nor yet in violation of nature; nature gives us the capacity to receive them, and this capacity is brought to maturity by habit.
- 4** Moreover, the faculties given us by nature are bestowed on us first in a potential form; we exhibit their actual exercise afterwards. This is clearly so

Bks. II-V.
The Moral
Virtues.
cc. i-vi;
Nature of
Moral
Virtue.
c. i. Moral
Virtue a
Habit of
right action,
formed by
acting
rightly.

^a 'goodness of character,' *i.e.* virtue in the ordinary sense of the term.

NICOMACHEAN ETHICS, II. i. 4-7

with our senses : we did not acquire the faculty of sight or hearing by repeatedly seeing or repeatedly listening, but the other way about—because we had the senses we began to use them, we did not get them by using them. The virtues on the other hand we acquire by first having actually practised them, just as we do the arts. We learn an art or craft by doing the things that we shall have to do when we have learnt it^a : for instance, men become builders by building houses, harpers by playing on the harp. Similarly we become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by
5 doing brave acts. This truth is attested by the experience of states : lawgivers make the citizens good by training them in habits of right action—this is the aim of all legislation, and if it fails to do this it is a failure ; this is what distinguishes a good
6 form of constitution from a bad one. Again, the actions from or through which any virtue is produced are the same as those through which it also is destroyed—just as is the case with skill in the arts, for both the good harpers and the bad ones are produced by harping, and similarly with builders and all the other craftsmen : as you will become a good builder from building well, so you will become
7 a bad one from building badly. Were this not so, there would be no need for teachers of the arts, but everybody would be born a good or bad craftsman as the case might be. The same then is true of the virtues. It is by taking part in transactions with our fellow-men that some of us become just and others unjust ; by acting in dangerous situations and forming a habit of fear or of confidence we

NICOMACHEAN ETHICS, II. i. 7—ii. 3

become courageous or cowardly. And the same holds good of our dispositions with regard to the appetites, and anger; some men become temperate and gentle, other profligate and irascible, by actually comporting themselves in one way or the other in relation to those passions. In a word, our moral dispositions are formed as a result of the corresponding activities. Hence it is incumbent on us to control the character of our activities, since on the quality of these depends the quality of our dispositions. It is therefore not of small moment whether we are trained from childhood in one set of habits or another; on the contrary it is of very great, or rather of supreme, importance.

ii As then our present study, unlike the other branches of philosophy, has a practical aim (for we are not investigating the nature of virtue for the sake of knowing what it is, but in order that we may become good, without which result our investigation would be of no use), we have consequently to carry our enquiry into the region of conduct, and to ask how we are to act rightly; since our actions, as we have said, determine the quality of our dispositions.

Right action conforms with Right Principle.

2 Now the formula 'to act in conformity with right principle' is common ground, and may be assumed as the basis of our discussion. (We shall speak about this formula later,^a and consider both the definition of right principle and its relation to the other virtues.)

3 But let it be granted to begin with that the whole theory of conduct is bound to be an outline only and not an exact system, in accordance with the rule we laid down at the beginning,^b that philosophical theories must only be required to correspond

Science of conduct necessarily inexact.

NICOMACHEAN ETHICS, II. ii. 3-7

- to their subject matter; and matters of conduct and expediency have nothing fixed or invariable about them, any more than have matters of health.
- 4 And if this is true of the general theory of ethics, still less is exact precision possible in dealing with particular cases of conduct; for these come under no science or professional tradition, but the agents themselves have to consider what is suited to the circumstances on each occasion, just as is the case
- 5 with the art of medicine or of navigation. But although the discussion now proceeding is thus necessarily inexact, we must do our best to help it out.
- 6 First of all then we have to observe, that moral qualities are so constituted as to be destroyed by excess and by deficiency—as we see is the case with bodily strength and health (for one is forced to explain what is invisible by means of visible illustrations). Strength is destroyed both by excessive and by deficient exercises, and similarly health is destroyed both by too much and by too little food and drink; while they are produced, increased and
- 7 preserved by suitable quantities. The same therefore is true of Temperance, Courage, and the other virtues. The man who runs away from everything in fear and never endures anything becomes a coward; the man who fears nothing whatsoever but encounters everything becomes rash. Similarly he that indulges in every pleasure and refrains from none turns out a profligate, and he that shuns all pleasure, as boorish persons do, becomes what may be called insensible. Thus Temperance and Courage are destroyed by excess and deficiency, and preserved by the observance of the mean.
- Virtue impaired by excess or deficiency in action.

NICOMACHEAN ETHICS, II. ii. 8—iii. 3

8 But ^a not only are the virtues both generated and fostered on the one hand, and destroyed on the other, from and by the same actions, but they will also find their full exercise in the same actions. This is clearly the case with the other more visible qualities, such as bodily strength: for strength is produced by taking much food and undergoing much exertion, while also it is the strong man who will be able to eat most food and endure most exertion.

Virtue exercised in the actions by which it was formed.

9 The same holds good with the virtues. We become temperate by abstaining from pleasures, and at the same time we are best able to abstain from pleasures when we have become temperate. And so with Courage: we become brave by training ourselves to despise and endure terrors, and we shall be best able to endure terrors when we have become brave.

iii An index of our dispositions is afforded by the pleasure or pain that accompanies our actions. A man is temperate if he abstains from bodily pleasures and finds this abstinence itself enjoyable, profligate if he feels it irksome; he is brave if he faces danger with pleasure or at all events without pain, cowardly if he does so with pain.

Pleasure and pain the test of Virtue.

In fact pleasures and pains are the things with which moral virtue is concerned.

For (1) pleasure causes us to do base actions and pain causes us to abstain from doing noble actions.

2 Hence the importance, as Plato points out, of having been definitely trained from childhood to like and dislike the proper things; this is what good education means.

8 (2) Again, if the virtues have to do with actions and feelings, and every feeling and every action is

NICOMACHEAN ETHICS, II. iii. 3-7

attended with pleasure or pain, this too shows that virtue has to do with pleasure and pain.

4 (3) Another indication is the fact that pain is the medium of punishment; for punishment is a sort of medicine, and it is the nature of medicine to work by means of opposites.^a

5 (4) Again, as we said before, every formed disposition of the soul realizes its full nature ^b in relation to and in dealing with that class of objects by which it is its nature to be corrupted or improved. But men are corrupted through pleasures and pains, that is, either by pursuing and avoiding the wrong pleasures and pains, or by pursuing and avoiding them at the wrong time, or in the wrong manner, or in one of the other wrong ways under which errors of conduct can be logically classified. This is why some thinkers^c define the virtues as states of impassivity or tranquillity, though they make a mistake in using these terms absolutely, without adding 'in the right (or wrong) manner' and 'at the right (or wrong) time' and the other qualifications.

6 We assume therefore that moral virtue is the quality of acting in the best way in relation to pleasures and pains, and that vice is the opposite.

7 But the following considerations also will give us further light on the same point.

(5) There are three things that are the motives of choice and three that are the motives of avoidance; namely, the noble, the expedient, and the pleasant, and their opposites, the base, the harmful, and the painful. Now in respect of all these the good man is likely to go right and the bad to go wrong, but

from passions or emotions, first appears as an ethical ideal of the Stoics.

NICOMACHEAN ETHICS, II. iii. 7—iv. 1

05 especially in respect of pleasure; for pleasure is common to man with the lower animals, and also it is a concomitant of all the objects of choice, since both the noble and the expedient appear to us pleasant.

8 (6) Again, the susceptibility to pleasure has grown up with all of us from the cradle. Hence this feeling is hard to eradicate, being engrained in the fabric of our lives.

(7) Again, pleasure and pain are also^a the standards by which we all, in a greater or less degree, 9 regulate our actions. On this account therefore pleasure and pain are necessarily our main concern, since to feel pleasure and pain rightly or wrongly has a great effect on conduct.

10 (8) And again, it is harder to fight against pleasure than against anger (hard as that is, as Heracleitus^b says); but virtue, like art, is constantly dealing with what is harder, since the harder the task the better is success. For this reason also therefore pleasure and pain are necessarily the main concern both of virtue and of political science, since he who comports himself towards them rightly will be good, and he who does so wrongly, bad.

15 11 We may then take it as established that virtue has to do with pleasures and pains, that the actions which produce it are those which increase it, and also, if differently performed, destroy it, and that the actions from which it was produced are also those in which it is exercised.

iv A difficulty may however be raised as to what we mean by saying that in order to become just men must do just actions, and in order to become temperate they must do temperate actions. For Virtue, how formed by acting virtuously.

NICOMACHEAN ETHICS, II. iv. 1-4

if they do just and temperate actions, they are just and temperate already, just as, if they spell correctly or play in tune, they are scholars or musicians.

2 But perhaps this is not the case even with the arts. It is possible to spell a word correctly by chance, or because some one else prompts you; hence you will be a scholar only if you spell correctly in the scholar's way, that is, in virtue of the scholarly knowledge which you yourself possess.

3 Moreover the case of the arts is not really analogous to that of the virtues. Works of art have their merit in themselves, so that it is enough if they are produced having a certain quality of their own; but acts done in conformity with the virtues are not done justly or temperately if they themselves are of a certain sort, but only if the agent also is in a certain state of mind when he does them: first he must act with knowledge^a; secondly he must deliberately choose the act, and choose it for its own sake; and thirdly the act must spring from a fixed and permanent disposition of character. For the possession of an art, none of these conditions is included, except the mere qualification of knowledge; but for the possession of the virtues, knowledge is of little or no avail, whereas the other conditions, so far from being of little moment, are all-important, inasmuch as virtue results from the repeated performance of just and temperate actions.

4 Thus although actions are entitled just and temperate when they are such acts as just and temperate men would do, the agent is just and temperate not when he does these acts merely, but when he does them (unconscious or accidental), and knowledge of moral principle (he must know that the act is a right one).

NICOMACHEAN ETHICS, II. iv. 4—v. 3

in the way in which just and temperate men do
 5 them. It is correct therefore to say that a man
 becomes just by doing just actions and temperate
 by doing temperate actions; and no one can have
 the remotest chance of becoming good without
 6 doing them. But the mass of mankind, instead of
 doing virtuous acts, have recourse to discussing
 virtue, and fancy that they are pursuing philosophy
 and that this will make them good men. In so
 doing they act like invalids who listen carefully to
 what the doctor says, but entirely neglect to carry
 out his prescriptions. That sort of philosophy will
 no more lead to a healthy state of soul than will
 the mode of treatment produce health of body.

v We have next to consider the formal definition
 of virtue.

A state of the soul is either (1) an emotion, (2) a
 capacity, or (3) a disposition; virtue therefore must
 2 be one of these three things. By the emotions, I
 mean desire, anger, fear, confidence, envy, joy, friend-
 ship, hatred, longing, jealousy, pity; and generally
 those states of consciousness which are accompanied
 by pleasure or pain. The capacities are the faculties
 in virtue of which we can be said to be liable to the
 emotions, for example, capable of feeling anger or
 pain^a or pity. The dispositions are the formed
 states of character in virtue of which we are well or
 ill disposed in respect of the emotions; for instance,
 we have a bad disposition in regard to anger if
 we are disposed to get angry too violently or not
 violently enough, a good disposition if we habitually
 feel a moderate amount of anger; and similarly in
 respect of the other emotions.

3 Now the virtues and vices are not emotions

Moral
 Virtue
 defined:
 (a) generic
 ally it is
 a Habit or
 fixed dis-
 position.

NICOMACHEAN ETHICS, II. v. 3—vi. 2

because we are not pronounced good or bad according to our emotions, but we are according to our virtues and vices; nor are we either praised or blamed for our emotions—a man is not praised for being frightened or angry, nor is he blamed for being angry merely, but for being angry in a certain way—but we are praised or blamed for our virtues
4 and vices. Again, we are not angry or afraid from choice, but the virtues are certain modes of choice, or at all events involve choice. Moreover, we are said to be 'moved' by the emotions, whereas in respect of the virtues and vices we are not said to be 'moved' but to be 'disposed' in a certain way.

5 And the same considerations also prove that the virtues and vices are not capacities; since we are not pronounced good or bad, praised or blamed, merely by reason of our capacity for emotion. Again, we possess certain capacities by nature, but we are not born good or bad by nature: of this however we spoke before.

6 If then the virtues are neither emotions nor capacities, it remains that they are dispositions.

Thus we have stated what virtue is generically.

vi But it is not enough merely to define virtue generically as a disposition; we must also say what
2 species of disposition it is. It must then be premised that all excellence has a twofold effect on the thing to which it belongs: it not only renders the thing itself good, but it also causes it to perform its function well. For example, the effect of excellence in the eye is that the eye is good *and* functions well; since having good eyes means having good sight. Similarly excellence in a horse makes it a good horse, and also good at galloping, at carrying its rider,

(b) Specifically, Moral Virtue is a Habit of choosing the relative mean in actions and emotions.

NICOMACHEAN ETHICS, II. vi. 3-7

3 and at facing the enemy. If therefore this is true
of all things, excellence or virtue in a man will be
the disposition which renders him a good man and
also which will cause him to perform his function
4 well. We have already indicated ^a what this means ;
but it will throw more light on the subject if we
consider what constitutes the specific nature of
virtue.

Now of everything that is continuous ^b and divisible,
it is possible to take the larger part, or the smaller
part, or an equal part, and these parts may be larger,
smaller, and equal either with respect to the thing
itself or relatively to us ; the equal part being a
5 mean between excess and deficiency.^c By the
mean of the thing I denote a point equally distant
from either extreme, which is one and the same
for everybody ; by the mean relative to us, that
amount which is neither too much nor too little,
and this is not one and the same for everybody.
6 For example, let 10 be many and 2 few ; then one
takes the mean with respect to the thing if one takes
7 6 ; since $6 - 2 = 10 - 6$, and this is the mean according
to arithmetical proportion.^d But we cannot arrive
by this method at the mean relative to us. Suppose
that 10 lb. of food is a large ration for anybody
and 2 lb. a small one : it does not follow that a

' to take an equal part relatively to us,' means to take what
is a fair or suitable amount. The former is a mean as being
exactly in the middle between all and none—if the thing
in question is represented by a line, this is bisected at a
point equidistant from its two ends ; the latter is a mean
in the sense of being the right amount for the recipient, and
also of lying somewhere between any two other amounts
that happen to be too much and too little for him.

^e We should rather call this an arithmetical progression.

NICOMACHEAN ETHICS, II. vi. 7-12

trainer will prescribe 6 lb., for perhaps even this will be a large ration, or a small one, for the particular athlete who is to receive it; it is a small ration for a Milo,^a but a large one for a man just beginning to go in for athletics. And similarly with the amount
8 of running or wrestling exercise to be taken. In the same way then an expert in any art avoids excess and deficiency, and seeks and adopts the mean—the mean, that is, not of the thing but
9 relative to us. If therefore the way in which every art or science performs its work well is by looking to the mean and applying that as a standard to its productions (hence the common remark about a perfect work of art, that you could not take from it nor add to it—meaning that excess and deficiency destroy perfection, while adherence to the mean preserves it)—if then, as we say, good craftsmen look to the mean as they work, and if virtue, like nature, is more accurate and better than any form of art, it will follow that virtue has the quality of
10 hitting the mean. I refer to moral virtue,^b for this is concerned with emotions and actions, in which one can have excess or deficiency or a due mean. For example, one can be frightened or bold, feel desire or anger or pity, and experience pleasure and pain in general, either too much or too little, and in both cases
11 wrongly; whereas to feel these feelings at the right time, on the right occasion, towards the right people, for the right purpose and in the right manner, is to feel the best amount of them, which is the mean amount—and the best amount is of course the
12 mark of virtue. And similarly there can be excess, deficiency, and the due mean in actions. Now feelings and actions are the objects with which

NICOMACHEAN ETHICS, II. vi. 12-17

virtue is concerned; and in feelings and actions excess and deficiency are errors, while the mean amount is praised, and constitutes success; and to be praised and to be successful are both marks of
13 virtue. Virtue, therefore, is a mean state in the
14 sense that it is able to hit the mean. Again, error is multiform (for evil is a form of the unlimited, as in the old Pythagorean imagery,^a and good of the limited), whereas success is possible in one way only (which is why it is easy to fail and difficult to succeed—easy to miss the target and difficult to hit it); so this is another reason why excess and deficiency are a mark of vice, and observance of the mean a mark of virtue:

Goodness is simple, badness manifold.^b

15 Virtue then is a settled disposition of the mind Definition of Moral Virtue. determining the choice^c of actions and emotions, consisting essentially in the observance of the mean relative to us, this being determined by principle, that is,^d as the prudent man would determine it.

16 And it is a mean state between two vices, one of excess and one of defect. Furthermore, it is a mean state in that whereas the vices either fall short of or exceed what is right in feelings and in actions,
17 virtue ascertains and adopts the mean. Hence while in respect of its substance and the definition that states what it really is in essence virtue is the observance of the mean, in point of excellence and rightness it is an extreme.^e

^a A variant reading gives 'determined by principle, or whatever we like to call that by which the prudent man would determine it' (*vide* Taylor, *Aristotle*, p. 77).

^b Cf. III. iv. 8.

NICOMACHEAN ETHICS, II. vi. 18—vii. 1

18 Not every action or emotion however admits of the observance of a due mean. Indeed the very names of some directly imply evil, for instance malice,^a shamelessness, envy, and, of actions, adultery, theft, murder. All these and similar actions and feelings are blamed as being bad in themselves; it is not the excess or deficiency of them that we blame. It is impossible therefore ever to go right in regard to them—one must always be wrong; nor does right or wrong in their case depend on the circumstances, for instance, whether one commits adultery with the right woman, at the right time, and in the right manner; the mere
19 commission of any of them is wrong. One might as well suppose there could be a due mean and excess and deficiency in acts of injustice or cowardice or profligacy, which would imply that one could have a medium amount of excess and of deficiency, an excessive amount of excess and a deficient amount
20 of deficiency. But just as there can be no excess or deficiency in temperance and justice, because the mean is in a sense an extreme,^b so there can be no observance of the mean nor excess nor deficiency in the corresponding vicious acts mentioned above, but however they are committed, they are wrong; since, to put it in general terms, there is no such thing as observing a mean in excess or deficiency, nor as exceeding or falling short in the observance of a mean.

Some actions and emotions necessarily vicious.

vii We must not however rest content with stating this general definition, but must show that it applies to the particular virtues. In practical philosophy, although universal principles have a wider applica-

Table of Moral Virtues as means between Vices of excess and defect.

NICOMACHEAN ETHICS, II. vii. 1-6

tion,^a those covering a particular part of the field possess a higher degree of truth; because conduct deals with particular facts, and our theories are bound to accord with these.

Let us then take the particular virtues from the diagram.^b

- 2 The observance of the mean in fear and confidence is Courage. The man that exceeds in fearlessness is not designated by any special name (and this is the case with many of the virtues and vices); he that exceeds in confidence is Rash; he that exceeds in
- 3 fear and is deficient in confidence is Cowardly. In respect of pleasures and pains—not all of them, and to a less degree in respect of pains^c—the observance of the mean is Temperance, the excess Profligacy. Men deficient in the enjoyment of pleasures scarcely occur, and hence this character also has not been assigned a name, but we may call it In-
- 4 sensible. In regard to giving and getting money, the observance of the mean is Liberality; the excess and deficiency are Prodigality and Meanness,^d but the prodigal man and the mean man exceed and fall short in opposite ways to one another: the prodigal exceeds in giving and is deficient in getting, whereas the mean
- 5 man exceeds in getting and is deficient in giving. For the present then we describe these qualities in outline and summarily, which is enough for the purpose in hand; but they will be more accurately defined later.
- 6 There are also other dispositions in relation to class of action or feeling. This is developed in detail in Bk. III. vi.-end and Bk. IV.

^c This parenthesis looks like an interpolation from III. x. 1.

^d The Greek word is the negative of that translated Liberality, but 'illiberality' and 'illiberal' we do not usually employ with reference to money.

NICOMACHEAN ETHICS, II. vii. 6-10

money, namely, the mode of observing the mean called Magnificence (the magnificent man being different from the liberal, as the former deals with large amounts and the latter with small ones), the excess called Tastelessness or Vulgarity, and the defect called Paltriness. These are not the same as Liberality and the vices corresponding to it; but the way in which they differ will be discussed later.

7 In respect of honour and dishonour, the observance of the mean is Greatness of Soul, the excess a sort of Vanity, as it may be called, and the deficiency,
8 Smallness of Soul. And just as we said that Liberality is related to Magnificence, differing from it in being concerned with small amounts of money, so there is a certain quality related to Greatness of Soul, which is concerned with great honours, while this quality itself is concerned with small honours; for it is possible to aspire to minor honours in the right way, or more than is right, or less. He who exceeds in these aspirations is called ambitious, he who is deficient, unambitious; but the middle character has no name, and the dispositions of these persons are also unnamed, except that that of the ambitious man is called Ambitiousness. Consequently the extreme characters put in a claim to the middle position, and in fact we ourselves sometimes call the middle person ambitious and sometimes unambitious: we sometimes praise a man for being ambitious, sometimes for being unambitious.
9 Why we do so shall be discussed later; for the present let us classify the remaining virtues and vices on the lines which we have laid down.

10 In respect of anger also we have excess, deficiency,

NICOMACHEAN ETHICS, II. vii. 10-13

and the observance of the mean. These states are virtually without names, but as we call a person of the middle character gentle, let us name the observance of the mean Gentleness, while of the extremes, he that exceeds may be styled irascible and his vice Irascibility, and he that is deficient, spiritless, and the deficiency Spiritlessness.

- 11 There are also three other modes of observing a mean which bear some resemblance to each other, and yet are different; all have to do with intercourse in conversation and action, but they differ in that one is concerned with truthfulness of speech and behaviour, and the other with pleasantness, in its two divisions of pleasantness in social amusement and pleasantness in the general affairs of life. We must then discuss these qualities also, in order the better to discern that in all things the observance of the mean is to be praised, while the extremes are neither right nor praiseworthy, but reprehensible. Most of these qualities also are unnamed, but in these as in the other cases we must attempt to coin names for them ourselves, for the sake of clearness and so that our meaning may be easily followed.
- 12 In respect of truth then, the middle character may be called truthful, and the observance of the mean Truthfulness^a; pretence in the form of exaggeration is Boastfulness, and its possessor a boaster; in the form of understatement, Self-depreciation, and its possessor the self-depreciator.
- 13 In respect of pleasantness in social amusement, the middle character is witty and the middle disposition Wittiness; the excess is Buffoonery and other shades of meaning correspond very closely to that of its English derivative *irony*.

NICOMACHEAN ETHICS, II. vii. 13-16

its possessor a buffoon ; the deficient man may be called boorish, and his disposition Boorishness. In respect of general pleasantness in life, the man who is pleasant in the proper manner is friendly, and the observance of the mean is Friendliness ; he that exceeds, if from no interested motive, is obsequious, if for his own advantage, a flatterer ; he that is deficient, and unpleasant in all the affairs of life, may be called quarrelsome and surly.

14 There are also modes of observing a mean in the sphere of and in relation to the emotions. For ^a in these also one man is spoken of as moderate and another as excessive—for example the bashful man whose modesty takes alarm at everything ; while he that is deficient in shame, or abashed at nothing whatsoever, is shameless, and the man of middle character modest. For though Modesty is not a virtue, it is praised, and so is the modest man.

15 Again, Righteous Indignation is the observance of a mean between Envy and Malice,^b and these qualities are concerned with pain and pleasure felt at the fortunes of one's neighbours. The righteously indignant man is pained by undeserved good fortune ; the jealous man exceeds him and is pained by all the good fortune of others ;^c while the malicious man so far falls short of being pained that he actually feels pleasure.

16 These qualities however it will be time to discuss in another place. After them we will treat Justice,^d distinguishing its two kinds—for it has more than one sense—and showing in what way each is a mode

^a It is difficult not to think that some words have been lost here, such as 'and the righteously indignant man is pained by the undeserved misfortune of others.'

^d Bk. VI.

NICOMACHEAN ETHICS, II. vii. 16—viii. 5

of observing the mean. [And we will deal similarly with the logical virtues.^a]

viii There are then three dispositions—two vices, one of excess and one of defect, and one virtue which is the observance of the mean; and each of them is in a certain way opposed to both the others. For the extreme states are the opposite both of the middle state and of each other, and the middle state is the opposite of both extremes; since just as the equal is greater in comparison with the less and less in comparison with the greater, so the middle states of character are in excess as compared with the defective states and defective as compared with the excessive states, whether in the case of feelings or of actions. For instance, a brave man appears rash in contrast with a coward and cowardly in contrast with a rash man; similarly a temperate man appears profligate in contrast with a man insensible to pleasure and pain, but insensible in contrast with a profligate; and a liberal man seems prodigal in contrast with a mean man, mean in contrast with one who is prodigal. Hence either extreme character tries to push the middle character towards the other extreme; a coward calls a brave man rash and a rash man calls him a coward, and correspondingly in other cases.

4 But while all three dispositions are thus opposed to one another, the greatest degree of contrariety exists between the two extremes. For the extremes are farther apart from each other than from the mean, just as great is farther from small and small from great than either from equal. Again ^b some

gives a second test of opposition, viz. unlikeness. However, unlikeness and remoteness are blended together in § 7.

Opposition
of Virtues
and Vices.

NICOMACHEAN ETHICS, II. viii. 5-8

extremes show a certain likeness to the mean—for instance, Rashness resembles Courage, Prodigality Liberality, whereas the extremes display the greatest unlikeness to one another. But it is things farthest apart from each other that logicians define as contraries, so that the farther apart things are the more contrary they are.

6 And in some cases the defect, in others the excess, is more opposed to the mean; for example Cowardice, which is a vice of deficiency, is more opposed to Courage than is Rashness, which is a vice of excess; but Profligacy, or excess of feeling, is more opposed to Temperance than is Insensibility,
7 or lack of feeling. This results from either of two causes. One of these arises from the thing itself; owing to one extreme being nearer to the mean and resembling it more, we count not this but rather the contrary extreme as the opposite of the mean; for example, because Rashness seems to resemble Courage more than Cowardice does, and to be nearer to it, we reckon Cowardice rather than Rashness as the contrary of Courage; for those extremes which are more remote from the mean
8 are thought to be more contrary to it. This then is one cause, arising out of the thing itself. The other cause has its origin in us: those things appear more contrary to the mean to which we are ourselves more inclined by our nature. For example, we are of ourselves more inclined to pleasure, which is why we are prone to Profligacy [more than to Propriety].^a We therefore rather call those things the contrary of the mean, into which we are more inclined to lapse; and hence Profligacy, the excess, is more particularly the contrary of Temperance.

NICOMACHEAN ETHICS, II. ix. 1-4

- ix Enough has now been said to show that moral virtue is a mean, and in what sense this is so, namely that it is a mean between two vices, one of excess and the other of defect; and that it is such a mean because it aims at hitting the middle point in feelings and in actions. This is why it is a hard task to be good, for it is hard to find the middle point in anything: for instance, not everybody can find the centre of a circle, but only someone who knows geometry. So also anybody can become angry—that is easy, and so it is to give and spend money; but to be angry with or give money to the right person, and to the right amount, and at the right time, and for the right purpose, and in the right way—this is not within everybody's power and is not easy; so that to do these things properly is rare, praiseworthy, and noble.
- 2
- 3 Hence the first rule in aiming at the mean is to avoid that extreme which is the more opposed to the mean, as Calypso advises ^a—

Practical rules for hitting the mean.

Steer the ship clear of yonder spray and surge.

- 35
1109
- 4 For of the two extremes one is a more serious error than the other. Hence, inasmuch as to hit the mean extremely well is difficult,^b the second best way to sail,^c as the saying goes, is to take the least of the evils; and the best way to do this will be the way we enjoin.

The second rule is to notice what are the errors to which we are ourselves most prone (as different men are inclined by nature to different faults)—and

^b Or 'to hit the mean is extremely difficult.'

^c A proverb, meaning to take to the cars when the wind fails.

NICOMACHEAN ETHICS, II. ix. 4-9

we shall discover what these are by observing the
5 pleasure or pain that we experience—; then we must
drag ourselves away in the opposite direction, for
by steering wide of our besetting error we shall
make a middle course. This is the method adopted
by carpenters to straighten warped timber.

6 Thirdly, we must in everything be most of all on
our guard against what is pleasant and against
pleasure; for when pleasure is on her trial we are
not impartial judges. The right course is therefore
to feel towards pleasure as the elders of the people
felt towards Helen,^a and to apply^b their words to
her on every occasion; for if we roundly bid her
be gone, we shall be less likely to err.

7 These then, to sum up the matter, are the pre-
cautions that will best enable us to hit the mean.
But no doubt it is a difficult thing to do, and especi-
ally in particular cases: for instance, it is not easy
to define in what manner and with what people and
on what sort of grounds and how long one ought
to be angry; and in fact we sometimes praise men
who err on the side of defect in this matter and call
them gentle, sometimes those who are quick to
8 anger and style them manly. However, we do not
blame one who diverges a little from the right course,
whether on the side of the too much or of the too
little, but one who diverges more widely, for his error
is noticed. Yet to what degree and how seriously
a man must err to be blamed is not easy to define on
principle. For in fact no object of perception is easy
to define; and such questions of degree depend on
particular circumstances, and the decision lies with
perception.

9 Thus much then is clear, that it is the middle

NICOMACHEAN ETHICS, II. ix. 9

disposition in each department of conduct that is to be praised, but that one should lean sometimes to the side of excess and sometimes to that of deficiency, since this is the easiest way of hitting the mean and the right course.